

Hunts for Jews and Golden Harvest

New research on the Holocaust in Poland

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Is it possible to be at the same time a victim, a perpetrator, and a bystander of the Holocaust? What were the different attitudes of the Poles toward their Jewish neighbors before, during, and after the massive deportations of 1942? Relying on new sources, three recent books by American and Polish scholars throw new light on questions that are still hotly debated today.

Reviewed:

Jan Tomasz Gross and Irena Grudzińska-Gross, *Golden Harvests. Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*, Oxford University Press, April 2012, 160p., \$16.95 [English translation of *Złote żniwa. Rzecz o tym, co się udało na obrzeżach zagłady Żydów*, Krakow, Editions Znak, 2011]

Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd. Polowanie na Żydów 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu [Judenjagd. Jew Hunt 1942-1945. Studies on the history of a county]*, Warsaw, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011, 257 p., 34 zlotys.

Barbara Engelking, *Jest jak piękny słoneczny dzień... Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945 [The weather is so nice today. The fate of Jews looking for help in the Polish countryside, 1942-1945]*, Warsaw, Stowarzyszenie Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, 2011, 288 p., 34 zlotys.

After *Neighbors*, in 2000, in which he described the participation of the inhabitants of the Polish village of Jedwabne in the mass murder of their Jewish neighbors, who were burned alive in a barn in the summer of 1941, and *Fear*,¹ in which

¹ Book reviewed in [La Vie des Idées](#).

he attempted to make sense of the pogroms perpetrated by the Poles against Jewish Holocaust survivors after the war, the Polish-American historian and sociologist Jan Gross rocks the boat again with *Golden Harvest*,² his latest book on Polish-Jewish relations.³ The author examines further the participation of Poles in crimes committed against their Jewish neighbors, highlighting their main motive: the lure of gain and potential enrichment through the famous “Jewish gold” – more fantasized than real – a thesis he already proposed in his previous book.

A Despoilment at Every Level

In a short book, which amounts more to an essay than a meticulous monograph, co-authors Jan Gross and the historian of literature Irena Grundzinska-Gross provide an inventory of the various forms of plunder of the property of the Jews – dead or alive – by the Poles, at every stage in the process leading to their extermination. This appropriation of goods starts during the phase of ghettoization, with the movable or immovable property the Jews leave behind, or give to their Polish neighbors for safekeeping. This spoliation of the Jews continues when their possessions become a currency for obtaining food from beyond the walls of the ghetto in which people are dying of hunger, and extends to the glass of water sold at high cost by unscrupulous peasants when freight trains pass by on their way to the death camps. These goods are also the only way to obtain shelter, for the night or for a few months, for the Jews who have passed onto the other side of the barbed wires, or who are trying to hide after the massive deportations that emptied most of the Polish ghettos between the spring and the fall of 1942. These measly possessions – simple clothes, shoes, blankets, or sewing machines – allow them to buy, for a time, the silence of the blackmailers who constantly threaten to denounce the Jews they have identified to the Gestapo.⁴

² English translation: Jan Tomasz Gross, Contributions by Irena Grudzinska Gross, *Golden Harvest. Events at the periphery of the Holocaust*, to be published by Oxford University Press in April 2012, 144p.

³ For a detailed presentation of those discussions, see my preface of the French edition of *Fear: La Peur. L'antisémitisme en Pologne après Auschwitz*, translated from the English by Jean-Pierre Ricard and from the Polish by Xavier Chantry, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2010 [2006], p. VI & VII; and Chapter 13 of Jean-Yves Potel's book, *La fin de l'innocence, la Pologne face à son passé juif*, Editions Autrement, 2009, reviewed in [Books&Ideas](#).

⁴ See Jan Grabowski's previous book on this phenomenon, *Szantazowanie Żydów w Warszawie, 1939-1943* [Blackmailing the Jews in Warsaw, 1939-1943], Institute of Sociology and Philosophy, Polish

This appropriation of goods does not stop there, because the dead are also meticulously stripped, their bodies searched, all the way to their gold teeth that are extracted. Such a macabre harvest took place not just afterwards, once the death camps had stopped operating and their sites were searched – at the end of the war, Treblinka was called “The Polish Colorado”⁵ – but also during the war, on the remains of the Jews who had been captured and murdered, either by the Nazi authorities (in most cases as a result of a denunciation by Poles hoping to obtain the possessions of the dead in return for their efforts), or by the Poles themselves, who would sometimes kill “their” Jews after having hidden them for a while, once they had run out of money.

This inventory, and in particular these episodes of macabre harvest, is meant to show the “indissoluble bond” (p. 18) that existed between the looting of Jewish property and the murder of its owners. “Participating in the murder of Jews entitles you to their property” (p. 77), explain the authors of *Golden Harvest*, thus shedding light on the transactions that took place between the occupying authorities and the local population, the former promising the latter, beside rewards in kind – such as a few kilograms of sugar – the clothes of the Jews that they had helped to capture.

Relying on analyses and results established for the most part by their Polish colleagues, the authors put forward a fundamental explanation for this attitude toward the Jews during the war. If we are to believe the testimonies they have gathered and present in their essay, we come to realize that the looting of Jewish property, as well as the persecution and even the murder of Jews, was considered to be “a social practice rather than a criminal activity or the result of the deviant behavior of some rogue individuals”

Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, 2004. French translation: « *Je le connais, c'est un Juif!* » – *Varsovie 1939-1943. Le chantage contre les Juifs*, translated from the Polish by Xavier Chantry, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2008.

⁵ This expression was used for the first time by Rachel Auerbach, a historian and writer who escaped the Warsaw ghetto, in a report about an inspection of the camp of Treblinka in which she took part in 1945 (Rachel Auerbach, *Oyf di felder fun Treblinka. Reportazh* [In Treblinka's fields. Report – in Yiddish], Warsaw-Lódz-Kraków, Jewish historical Central commission for the CKZP, 1947), because « various kinds of adventurers would come from everywhere in the country to dig the soil and look for treasure ». Curiously, Jan Gross and others commentators of this text assumed that Rachel Auerbach was talking about an “Eldorado”, not Colorado...

(p. 52), a practice reinforced by the language at the time, for instance in the reports that were sent by the interior resistance to the Polish government in exile in London, in which the notion of stripping Jews of their assets rather than leaving them to the Germans was considered as “patriotic behavior” (p. 131)⁶. Moreover, the physical elimination of the Jews, more disturbing on an emotional level, would also have been a “social norm”, because it required, at a minimum, the silent approval of neighbors, if not their cooperation: “Planned extermination of *all* members of a particular group [...] is impossible without the involvement of their neighbors, the only ones who know who is who in a local community” (p. 138).

Finally, between the lines, Jan Gross offers an explanation for this “social practice” (p. 193) of plundering the Jews by every possible mean, from blackmail to murder: “a shift in shared norms concerning acceptable behavior toward the Jews” (p. 128). The inhabitants of the Polish countryside and villages ceased to perceive the Jews as human beings and began to treat them as “the deceased on leave,”⁷ as the historian and archivist of the Warsaw ghetto Emmanuel Ringelblum commented at the time. It was necessary to first dehumanize the Jewish neighbors to allow this type of ultra-violent behavior toward them to take place. Gross is most certainly thinking of the effects of Nazi propaganda, this “bacillus of Nazism”⁸ that had contaminated Polish society and that he considers to be one of the main elements that can help us understand the post-War anti-Semitism he described in *Fear*.

The Motives For the Crime

At this point, we may regret that the authors do not analyze in greater detail the reasons for this shift in social norms that they so acutely describe. In the absence of a solid argument to support their thesis, we might object, along with other authors who

⁶ Concerning these reports, and more generally the attitude of the clandestine Polish State toward the Jews during World War II, see Dariusz Libionka’s article (in French) « L’État polonais clandestin et la ‘question juive’, 1942-1944 », translated from the Polish by Malgorzata Szymanska, in Jean-Charles Szurek and Annette Wiewiorka (ed.), *Juifs et Polonais 1939-2008*, Paris, Albin Michel, pp. 61-77.

⁷ Emanuel Ringelblum, *Stosunki polsko-zydowskie w czasie drugiej wojny swiatowej* [Polish-Jewish Relations during World War II], Warsaw, Czytelnik, 1988, p. 64.

⁸ Expression used by Jan T. Gross in *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*, Random House (p. 66)

have specialized in Polish-Jewish relations and Polish anti-Semitism, that it is difficult to support the thesis that World War II introduced a shift in ways of thinking, that were, in fact, solidly anchored in Polish society for a long time⁹. Of course, the Nazi occupation and the daily spectacle of atrocities committed by the Nazis undoubtedly lead to a “brutalization” of Polish society, a habituation to violence that we notice when we read, for instance, the diary written by Dr. Klukowski, a Polish doctor from the region of Zamość.¹⁰ And yet if we only look at the facts – spontaneous acts of violence committed at the end of World War I or in the 1930’s, and the existence of a radical discourse explaining, as early as 1936, that if the Jews do not leave Poland of their own accord, « they will have to be considered as parasites and, as such, it will be necessary to exterminate them »¹¹ – we must admit that anti-Semitism was indeed deeply rooted in Polish society.

We could therefore conclude, with the historian of literature Maria Janon and the Polish anthropologist Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, that the traditional opposition between a pre-modern form of anti-Semitism, essentially religion-based, that characterized Polish anti-Semitism before the war, and a more modern anti-Semitism, is no longer valid: “Pre-modern anti-Semitism [...] in its symbolic narrative, assigns to the Jews actual ‘places of insecurity’ that can disappear from the surface of the earth at any moment.”¹² In other words, the potential for annihilation is contained as such in anti-Semitism and constitutes its very essence.

⁹ See, for instance, the enlightening analysis and the perspective proposed by some authors who disagree with this thesis in Elżbieta Janicka, « Mord rytualny z aryjskiego paragrafu: o księżce Jana Tomasza Grossa ‘Strach. Antysemityzm w Polsce tuż po wojnie. Historia moralnej zapaści’ » [The ritual crime of Aryan paragraph: on Jan T. Gross’ book, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz*], *Kultura i Społeczeństwo*, t. LII, n°2, 2008, p. 229-252 (to be translated into French).

¹⁰ Zygmunt Klukowski, *Une telle monstruosité... Journal d’un médecin polonais, 1939-1945*, translated from the Polish by Alexandre Dayet, French edition established by Jean-Yves Potel, Calmann-Lévy & Mémorial de la Shoah, 2011.

¹¹ Quotation from Maria Janon, « Spór o antysemityzm. Sprzeczności, wątpliwości i pytania » [Discussions about anti-Semitism. Contradictions, doubts and interrogations] in *Id.*, *Do Europy – tak, ale razem z naszymi umarłymi* [In Europe? Yes, but with our dead], Warsaw, Sic!, 2000, pp. 144-145.

¹² Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, « Żydzi u Kolberga » [Jews at Kolberg] in *Rzeczy mgliste. Eseje i studia* [Shady Matters. Essays and studies], Pogranicze, Sejny, 2004, p. 66-67. Text originally published in *Res Publica Nova*, n° 8-9, 1999. See also the review of her book *Legendy o krwi, antropologia przesądu* [Blood libel myths. Anthropology of a belief], Warsaw, WAB, 2008, in [Books&Ideas](#).

Similarly we can find the remarks made by the authors of *Golden Harvest* about the supposed “Jewish gold” being the main engine for the criminal acts committed by Polish neighbors to be quite contradictory. Many testimonies mentioned in this book confirm that there was a widespread conviction that it was possible to become rich by blackmailing Jews or by looting their possessions after having denounced or murdered them. And yet, the same accounts indicate that the profit from this looting was meager. Indeed, we must remember that the first perpetrators of plunder were the Germans themselves, who only left scraps to the local population... But one could retort that in view of the extreme poverty that existed in the Polish countryside at the time, it was “better than nothing” and that the peasants were well aware of the destitution of their chosen victims, especially in that very countryside where these Jewish neighbors had been well known to them before the war. More than an objective reality, this “Jewish gold” was therefore a cliché, an anti-Semitic fantasy that served as an alibi for hatred.

In fact, we find this contradiction in one of the chapters in which the authors first tell the story of a young Jewish mother who was raped and battered to death, along with her two children aged three and four, by twenty or so peasants who had known her since childhood. As a witness reports, this was an act done “just for pleasure, nobody got anything out of it.”¹³ This terrible anecdote describing a purely gratuitous murder is immediately followed by another anecdote concerning Marian Haba, a Jewish man who was killed by villagers from Cholerzyn, not far from Krakow, because they had learned that he had buried five kilograms of gold.¹⁴ So – purely gratuitous crimes – or crimes motivated by the lure of money? Each report brings its own explanation. We can therefore conclude that an explanation model based strictly on economic causality is an oversimplification.

¹³ In the words of the painter Andrzej Bieńkowski quoted on page 105 of Jan and Irena Gross’s book.

¹⁴ Anecdote told on p. 106, and found in Jan Grabowski « Ratowanie Żydów za pieniądze : przemysł pomocy », *Zagłada Żydów*, n° 4, 2008, p. 103-104. English translation of this article: « Rescue for Money: ‘Paid Helpers’ in Poland, 1939-1945 », Jerusalem, Search and Research Series, Yad Vashem - The International Institute for Holocaust Research, 2008.

Intuition *Versus* Methodology

It is here that the main problem of *Golden Harvest* lies. As in his previous books, Jan Gross is more interested in asking questions and in anecdotes that he develops into an essay. In this case, his starting point is a photograph, probably taken at the site of Treblinka at the end of the war, showing gravediggers searching for gold, either at the end of a day's work or perhaps arrested by the Polish authorities – we are not sure.¹⁵ Using this photograph as a point of departure and the main thread of his narrative, the author manages, at times quite brilliantly, to uncover some of the dark zones and moral dilemmas that existed in Polish society at the time. His hypotheses are perspicuous, and they have often been confirmed in the past. Following the publication of his book *Neighbors*, for instance, the newly established Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) conducted its first major investigation to verify the facts, and, although it slightly reduced the number of victims suggested by Gross, it also revealed that at least another twenty “Jedwabnes” had taken place in Poland in 1941, in all the regions that were successively occupied. And at the time, his book gave a new momentum to the research of Polish academics who finally broached the subject of Polish-Jewish relations during the war and started to look closer at the vast body of sources available to them in their own country: On the one hand, the testimony of the thousands of Jewish survivors recorded by the Jewish historical commissions established after the war; and on the other hand, the postwar trials instigated by the decree of August 1944, which authorized legal proceedings against the perpetrators of acts of “collaboration with the enemy.”¹⁶

Ten years later, the balance has shifted: Jan Gross now uses the innovative research of his Polish colleagues to support his own essays and intuition. And yet for the reader, questions remain. Working on the assumption that the account of a few witnesses

¹⁵ The question of the origin of this photograph, which Jan Gross first noticed when it appeared in a report published by the Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* in January 2008, led to a heated discussion when *Golden Harvest* was first published in Poland. In his introduction, Jan Gross mentions that his essay was commissioned by Oxford University Press for a collection in which researchers were invited to draw on a single photograph, iconic for their field of study, to talk about their discipline (p. 14).

¹⁶ This decree, voted by the Lublin government, which was composed of Communists and their allies, allowed the trial of « traitors to the Nation ». In reality, only a small fraction of the trials that took place by virtue of this decree had to do with acts of denunciation or the murder of Polish Jews, and before long, the law was used to allow the arrest, the trial, and sometimes the execution of non-communist members of the resistance.

is sufficient to paint a general picture of the situation and using the method of “thick description”¹⁷ of human actions placed in their context, Jan Gross claims – quite rightly – that, when it comes to the Holocaust, any attempt to come up with reliable numerical estimates – such as the number of Jews killed by Polish peasants in the Podlasie region, or the mean value of Jewish property taken over by a Polish neighbor in a given area – is impossible, and therefore that it is better to focus on the “fate of specific individuals” to understand this period (pp. 41-42). The problem with this method is that, by selecting different reports, we could reach conclusions that would be in complete contradiction with those Gross has reached himself. If we concentrated on the testimony of the rescuers, for instance, or of those who benefited from their help, the portrait of the Polish countryside would be quite different.

Yet it is the work of his colleagues Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelking – two historians who do not shy away from quantitative methods – that Gross mainly draws from. These two authors had already relied on a representative corpus of several hundred documents to draw the portrait of informers and blackmailers in Poland and Warsaw during the war.¹⁸ In his latest book, published at the same time as *Golden Harvest*, Jan Grabowski proposes this time an estimate of the number of Jews who went into hiding, who were killed, or who survived, in a rural county (or *powiat* in Polish) in southwestern Poland, between 1942 and 1945.

The district in question, Darowa Taenowska, is made up of hundred hamlets and villages and counted 66,678 inhabitants before the war, among whom 4,807 were Jews, according to the 1931 census. Most of them lived in the two market towns where ghettos were established in January 1940, but a significant minority was dispersed in smaller villages. They were able to stay there until their forced relocation to the ghettos in the

¹⁷ An expression used in sociology and anthropology, coined by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz in his essay « Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture » in *Id., The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, pp. 3-30.

¹⁸ See Jan Grabowski, « *Je le connais, c'est un Juif !* », *op. cit.* and Barbara Engelking, *Szanowny Panie Gistapo. Donosy do władz niemieckich w Warszawie i okolicach w latach 1940- 1941* [« Dear Sir Gistapo... » Denunciation to the German authorities in Poland during the years 1940-1941], Warsaw, Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów, Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN, 2003. A summary (in French) of this book with the same title can be found in Jean-Charles Szurek and Annette Wieviorka (ed.), *op. cit.*, pp. 45-59.

summer of 1942, so shortly before their extermination, when the Jews who were still alive were deported to a death camp at Belzec¹⁹. This is when the hunt started for Jews who had escaped ghettoization or the liquidation of the ghettos by hiding in the area around the *powiat*.

The statistics established by Grabowski indicate that out of the 5,500 to 6,000 Jews²⁰ of the *powiat*, only 150 to 200 survived the war, 100 of whom because they had managed to escape to the USSR. We can therefore infer that 50 to 100 Jews, at most, survived by hiding.²¹ Grabowski was able to retrace the journey of 277 Jews who went into hiding, among whom only 38 survived. The death of the 239 others, victims of Jew hunts between 1942 and 1945, is attributed to German gendarmes in 91 cases (among which 87 were the result of Polish denunciation), but in 93 cases (82 following a denunciation), death can be attributed to the “dark-blue police” (*Granatowa policja*).²² The direct participation of peasants concerns 6 cases only, but the actual number is likely to be greater, since 49 deaths remained unsolved.²³ In other words, the Polish police killed at least as many Jews as the Nazis and the indirect participation of the Polish population was massive.

As for the profile of the peasants who were accused of crimes against Jews during the trials brought about by the decrees of August 1944, it appears that, from a total of 135 accused, a majority were men aged 30 and over, mostly comfortably off (judging by the land they owned), and they were not young outcasts, as would be repeated over and over again in the historiography of Communist Poland. In the end, it was the “ordinary

¹⁹ Jan Grabowski, *Judenjagd*, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-50.

²⁰ Including the Jews who had been expelled from the Reich or Kraków and who had lived in the county since the beginning of 1940.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²² Named after the dark blue uniform worn by the Polish police force. We are talking here about the Polish police, mostly composed of officers who had been recruited before the war and selected by the Germans, and whose orders they had to obey. We still know very little about this police force – what we know comes from a dated and incomplete monograph: Adam Hempel, *Pogrobowcy kłęski. Rzecz o policji « granatowej » w Generalnym Gubernatorstwie*, Warsaw, PWN, 1990 – beyond its established collaboration with the Nazi authorities.

²³ *Ibid.*, chart 4 p. 69.

countryside”²⁴ that took part in such crimes, a conclusion similar to the one the author arrived at in a previous book about the city of Warsaw.

The Shoah in the Countryside

This book is important for several reasons. First, it focuses on the situation of the Jews in the countryside, much less studied and less familiar than what happened in the large ghettos, in Warsaw or Łódź. It is also the case that the extermination of the Jews happened very differently in cities and in the countryside. The Jews who lived in medium or large cities found themselves confined in ghettos as soon as the war broke out, and cut off from the rest of society. Suddenly all commercial relations, friendships, and sometimes even family relationships that had connected this Jewish minority to Polish society were severed. One must remember that the policy of locking Jews away became widespread in Poland from the spring of 1940 onward. The ghettos were “conceived as a temporary halt on the road to complete expulsion,”²⁵ but they soon became a reality that took hold of the Polish urban landscape in hundreds of cities. From then on, the Jews became surreptitiously invisible to “Aryans”, even though from time to time some worrying news, a few fugitives, or a group of workers selected for forced labor passed through the fences. The liquidation of the ghettos was not always noticed by Aryan citizens.

In the countryside and in small towns, the situation was very different: in the majority of cases, the Jews were able to stay home, or if they were forced to move to the nearest, small ghetto, they were able to keep some contact with the outside world. Indeed, despite the bans – that were rarely respected in the countryside – it was still possible to trade, to practice one’s craft, to work on a farm. Were these ties that the Jews maintained with the rest of Polish society able to promote good relationships between neighbors and,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, chart 5, p. 92 and quote p. 93.

²⁵ Christopher R. Browning, *The Origins of the Final Solution – The Evolution of Nazi Jewish Policy, September 1939-March 1942*, with contributions by Jürgen Matthäus, Comprehensive History of the Holocaust Series, 2004. French translation: *Les Origines de la Solution Finale. L'évolution de la politique anti-juive des nazis. Septembre 1939 - Mars 1942*, translated by Jacqueline Carnaud and Bernard Frumer, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2007, p. 131.

when the time came, did these ties help them to find shelter? The reading of Jan Grabrowski's book shows that it was not the case.

The Testimony of the Victims

In her book *Jest tak piękny słoneczny dzień* (« The weather is so nice today »), the psychologist Barbara Engelking also focuses on rural society, but this time on the scale of the entire country, and she reaches the same conclusion. Relying on the testimony of Jews who survived the Holocaust – especially those that were collected immediately after the war – and on the proceedings of the trials that followed the decrees of August 1944, she chooses to present the point of view of the Jews who went into hiding – or tried to do so – in the Polish countryside in order to avoid deportation and death, between 1942 and 1945. She underlines the motives behind these attempts to hide, the various strategies adopted, and she does not hesitate to explore the darkest corners of those stories, backing up her argument with numerous quotations, and focusing in particular on the failed attempts, in other words, the cases of the Jews who were denounced and arrested, if not immediately killed.

Although she adopts the point of view of the Jewish victims, which in part determines the construction of her book, Barbara Engelking, as a psychologist, also wonders about the motives of those who hid, and/or denounced, and/or killed Jews. The immense interest of this succession of narratives and her comments is to show how complex the situation was: far from the typical black and white picture – the selfless Righteous *versus* a handful of depraved informers – it is a gradation of grays that we perceive: Jews who were hidden in exchange for goods and often, when they could no longer compensate their host (which sometimes happened very quickly when the amounts required were exorbitant), thrown out at best, and denounced to the Polish police or the German gendarmes at worst, or even killed by the hosts themselves. What emerges between the lines is the picture of a countryside in which doors are closed to the Jews who are looking for shelter, and sometimes just food; where neighbors denounce other neighbors who hide Jews for a whole range of reasons, not always very clear – quarrels between neighbors, jealousy, the feeling of having been treated unfairly to the sight of a

neighbor's becoming rich, the lure of a reward in the case of a denunciation, and, quite often too, the fear of collective retaliation.

The “Jew Hunts” and the Role of Local Polish Authorities

Finally, in their own way, each of these two books focusing on the Polish countryside during the war sheds new light on a phenomenon that is, even today, rarely studied in Poland, the “Jew hunts”, or *Judenjagd*, and highlights in particular the important role of the local authorities in improving the efficiency of these gruesome hunts.

The concept of *Judenjagd*, or “Jew Hunt”, was first introduced by the historian Christopher Browning²⁶ to describe the activities of the Reserve Police Battalion 101 of the German police in Poland, a battalion directly responsible for the death – by shooting – of 38,000 Jews, and indirectly – through arrest and deportation to Treblinka – of another 45,000. The word was coined by the men of Battalion 101 and Browning uses it to designate the third stage in the process of the destruction of the Jews in Poland and in Europe.²⁷ The first stage was the indirect destruction of the Jews who were locked in ghettos where death often occurred from hunger, illness, and forced labor; the second stage was the direct extermination or deportation and mass murder in work and death camps. In the third stage, the goal was to exterminate those who had escaped deportation. We can distinguish two phases during this last stage: the first one, which immediately followed deportation and lasted no more than a few dozen days, was the systematic search conducted by the Germans in and around the liquidated ghettos. The second phase, which lasted until the end of the war, consisted in looking for, arresting, and killing the Jews who were still hiding. It is in this last phase that the help of the local population was especially required to assist the Germans in flushing out the hidden Jews.

²⁶ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, New York: Harper Collins, 1992. [French translation: *Des hommes ordinaires, le 101ème bataillon de réserve de la police allemande et la solution finale en Pologne*, translated by Elie Barnavi with a preface by Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, Collection Histoire, 1994].

²⁷ Ruta Sakowska, *Dwa etapy. Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydów w oczach ofiar. Skicz historyczny i dokumenty*, Wrocław, 1986, quoted in Barbara Engelking, *Jest tak piękny, słoneczny dzień...*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Is it possible to give an estimate of the number of Jews who were the victims of such hunts? Any estimate is problematic. Still, today historians agree that roughly 10% of the 3 millions of Polish Jews attempted to escape deportation. Only 40,000 to 50,000 of them were still alive in 1945, having survived by hiding in the territory of the General Government. We can therefore estimate that there were between 200,000 and 250,000 direct or indirect victims of the hunt for Jews. (some died of cold or starvation in their hiding places)²⁸

The next point that needs to be clarified, particularly in the latest research and in the books focusing on the hunt for Jews in Poland, is the scale of Polish participation in this hunt, or, to put it bluntly: How many of these 250,000 deaths can be directly attributed to the Polish “neighbors”? The particular merit of Jan Grabowski’s work is to show the complexity of this notion of participation in the crime. Was this participation voluntary or was it forced? The study of the role of the various local authorities allows us to better make this distinction.

In the countryside, the traditional role of local government was decisive in the establishment of deadly hunts for Jews. The rural municipality (*gmina*) – subdivided into several hamlets (*wies*) – was typically headed by a mayor (*wójt*) who was elected by the head of the district (*staroste*). When they reached Poland, the Nazis replaced most of the mayors by “loyal ethnic Germans” (*Volksdeutschen*). The role of the mayors was threefold: to mobilize agriculture so that it benefited the German war economy; to find volunteers to work in Germany; and to pass on orders from the Nazis to the local population. At a lower level, the hamlet was ruled by a village chief, or *soltys*, who, on the other hand, often stayed in place, as ordered by the Germans. These *soltys*, who were respected by the citizens who had chosen them, acquired new power and had to execute German orders, in particular when it came to the deportation of Jews (providing carriages

²⁸ As estimated by Saul Friedländer in *The Years of Extermination: Nazi Germany and the Jews, 1939-1945*, HarperCollins, 2007 [French translation : *Les Années d’extermination. L’Allemagne nazie et les Juifs, 1939-1945*, translated by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Paris, Seuil, coll. « L’Univers historique », 2008, p. 704.]

for their transport, recruiting village peasants as guards, etc.). After the liquidation of the ghettos, they became the safe-keepers of Jewish property, movable or immovable. Finally, they had the task of organizing local patrols to improve the so-called self-defense: night patrols (to watch the grain supplies, for instance), volunteer fire brigades, special guards (*dziesięnicy*), whose job was to fight theft, black market, crime, and armed resistance.

It is these particular groups that were the most efficient in the hunt for Jews, whether this hunt was spontaneous or ordered by German decrees transmitted by the *wójt*. Most of the time, however, it was the result of pressure from the occupying forces, who insisted on a certain number of victims and threatened the *soltys* with retaliation. More perverse still, in case of insufficient results from these hunts, was the threat of retaliation against “hostages” previously designated among the villagers, and who were made personally accountable for the security of the surrounding area.

As we can see, the members of these local authorities, and the *soltys* in particular, were caught in a trap when it came to their participation in the crime: if they remained inactive, they could be directly denounced by their fellow citizens to the German authorities, but they also had to deal with the zeal of some of their own citizens who wanted to hunt for Jews themselves (sometimes through fear of German retaliation, but not only). The local police forces played therefore an important role in assisting the German gendarmes and the Polish authorities in the hunt for Jews and their transfer to the authorities: either by making sure that they did not escape or by joining the hunts that were regularly organized. The same is true of civilians, who were regularly ordered to join these hunts and who sometimes chose to do so of their own volition.

So, the peasants and the local authorities found themselves included in the Nazi system and were subjected to terrible retaliation if they refused; but the frightening efficiency of this system – revealed by the statistics established by Grabowski – depended on the zeal and the goodwill of the participants. And this cannot be explained only in terms of fear of retaliation. In fact, we might ask ourselves if the same zeal was

observed when the same local police forces – who were also subjected to retaliation in case of refusal – were ordered to hunt down the Resistance fighters of the *Armia Krajowa* (the Polish internal army) or to recruit villagers for forced labor in the Reich. The testimony of Dr. Klukowski mentioned earlier confirms that this was not the case and that, on the contrary, the occupying forces had a lot of trouble obtaining their quotas of people or farming products to provide for the needs of war.

Hilberg's triad²⁹ is therefore invalid in this case. As Jan Grabowski puts it: "In the Polish countryside, there were no *bystanders*: each inhabitant, man, woman, or child, had a role to play in this terrible theatre of death." The author considers therefore that a witness is never neutral – assuming that this was Hilberg's position – but always engaged, one way or another. Other Polish historians have taken a similar stand, talking about an "informed participant observation" or the "gawkers of the Shoah."³⁰

New Areas of Research?

These innovative books, whose publications in English are most welcome, shed light on lesser-known aspects at the "periphery of the Holocaust" in Poland, and emphasize, among other things, the involvement, forced or voluntary, of the local population. Admittedly, the systematic use of these precious, yet complex sources that are the postwar trials can be problematic: several historians have made this point in the critical discussion that followed the publication of Jan Gross' book in Poland.³¹ These trials mechanically insist on the participation of the Poles in the crime, and we therefore take the risk of granting them too much importance and arriving at sweeping generalizations. As the authors of *Golden Harvest* put it, a single person is needed to kill ten Jews, but ten people are often needed to save a single Jew.

²⁹ Raul Hilberg, *Perpetrators, Victims, Bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe, 1933-1945*, Aaron Asher Books, NY, 1992 [French translation : *Exécuteurs, victimes, témoins. La catastrophe juive, 1933-1945*, translated by Marie-France de Paloméra, Paris, Gallimard, 1994].

³⁰ Expressions used respectively by Elżbieta Janicka, *art. cit.* and by Barbara Engelking, «Polacy – gapie Zagłady» [The Poles, onlookers of the Holocaust] *Więź*, n° 8–9, 2011, pp. 99-102.

³¹ The main voices that were heard when *Golden Harvest* came out were gathered in the volume *Wokół «Złoty chleb»*. *Debata o książce Jana Tomasza Grossa* [On *Golden Harvest*. The debate around Jan T. Gross et Irena Grudzińska-Gross's book], texts selected and introduced by Daniel Lis, Krakow, Znak, 2011.

The statistics established by Grabowski may be questionable, but we cannot deny the facts, and his book calls for other systematic studies that will allow us to draw the most complete picture possible of the attitude of the Polish people toward their Jewish “neighbors” during World War II, both in cities and in the countryside. Finally, all three authors point to a notable absentee in this picture: the Polish Church, whose deafening silence during the war amounts, for Jan Gross in particular, to an assent to what was happening. As long as the ecclesiastical archives remain inaccessible to researchers, the question of what may be the last taboo in the history of Polish-Jewish relations during World War II will remain unresolved.³²

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³² We can mention, however, the work of Dariusz Libionka, who, despite the difficulties, manages to draw a picture (and a rather bleak one) of the attitude of the Church toward the Holocaust. See Dariusz Libionka, « Polish Church Hierarchy and the Holocaust – an Essay from a Critical Perspective », *Holocaust. Studies and Materials*, n° 2, 2010, p. 76-127.