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# In the face of anti-Semitism: thoughts of Polish psychotherapists

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**Summary**

In the presented paper, the authors as members of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Association share their reflections around debate caused by the publishing of the book "Fear" of J.T. Gross, in Poland. The question is which stereotypes around patriotism and the Polish myth are provoked, what kind of defense could be moved and how it could influence contemporary Polish-Jewish relations?

**Polish-Jewish relations / anti-Semitism / Polish patriotism myths**

*… our perception of the Jew, that is, anti (or philo) Semitism, is connected on the intellectual plane with the most fundamental questions about the first cause and the meaning of human existence.*

Leon Poliakov [1, p. 12]

## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

It is hard to talk about a problem when that problem is very personal in nature and will also touch on the individual experiences of other people. Nevertheless, we firmly believe that the issue we wish to discuss is an extremely important one, and inasmuch as it touches on the question of "I – the Other" it is an issue of fundamental significance in today's world. The comments we make here are essentially questions and doubts, and if we do propose any theses, they are far from being unequivocal – more an overture to dialogue than conclusive argument.

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As members of the Polish-Israeli Mental Health Association we feel a duty to study the history of Polish-Jewish relations, to analyse pertinent contemporary issues, and above all, to address anti-Semitism as something to which Poles must not be indifferent.

## A STARTING POINT

For many of us, our motivation for joining this society – though not always conscious from the outset – is the feeling that anti-Semitism is a shame and disgrace. And that this disgrace must somehow be confronted. How to shoulder that responsibility? In what way does our attitude to Jews and anti-Semitism define us as Poles, define each one of us as individuals? How can we access those of our inner parts that confront us with the question of our attitude to Others – Brothers – Neighbours?

In what categories should we analyse and describe this? Guilt? Responsibility? What responsibility? Individual? Applicable to the whole nation? Or perhaps comparison, calibrations are in order: whose sins, whose guilt is greater? Perhaps the problem should be explained in psychological, economic, political, historical terms,

and then these reductionisms applied to an explanation of all the problems? But if we deconstruct the myths of what we are like – we "glorious Poles" – then what will be left? Maybe a national mythology is vital to progress? For where would our identity be without it? Does accepting Zygmunt Bauman's [2] claim that we are living in times of "fluid identity" solve the problem?

As a point of departure for these debates we will examine the reception of two books by Professor Jan Tomasz Gross [2, 3] that directly address this topic: *'Neighbours'* and *'Fear'*. These books have become an important voice in a discussion on Polish-Jewish relations that has continued since the 1980's.

## GROSS AND HIS IMPACT ON SOCIAL DISCOURSE ON ANTI-SEMITISM

Jan Tomasz Gross, a Polish historian living and working in the United States since 1968, has made a major contribution to reflection on the Polish identity with his works, which have presented a profound challenge to the national consciousness. In the year 2000 he published the work *'Neighbours. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland'*, which describes the active part of Poles in the vicious murder of 1.600 Jews in July 1941. Neighbours murdered neighbours. Poles burned Polish Jews alive in a barn.

Gross's publication unleashed a storm in Polish society, and divided Poles into those who received that fact with horror and pain, and those who set about questioning the facts described by Gross in a variety of different ways. Chief among the methods designed to sustain the myth of the Pole as a noble being, impeccable patriot and hero was the charge of bias and "poor professionalism" levelled at the author. This was supported by researchers' subsequent findings that reduced the number of victims: probably not 1,600 but fewer (some 300–400 people perished). It was emphasised that "it wasn't the Poles, it was some hooligans"; the "context" of the crime was explored, in fact a single aspect of it: Jewish collaboration with the Soviet occupant. (The flagship publication of this stream, Marek Wierzbicki's "Poles and Jews in the Soviet Zone" concludes: "One of the key consequences of the occupation of Western Belarus was that relations between the Polish and Jewish populations crumbled remarkably. There were a number of circumstances that were conducive to such a drastic evolution of relationships between Jews and Poles but one led the way. It was, apparently some of the local Jews' reluctance or hostility towards the Polish state, which resulted directly in a growing reluctance or hatred towards Jews among the majority of the Polish population" [4, p. 303]). There were also moves to reduce the impact of the Jedwabne murder with the justification, that it was inspired by Germans (their urging, acquiescence, presence, and in more radical versions: perpetration or order and direct supervision). This circumstance permitted the propagators of this argument to diminish the Polish contribution and retain for the Poles the role of victims of manipulation. This brief synthesis of reactions shows the breadth of defences**: shifting of responsibility, denial, and minimisation**.

Gross's next book, *'Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz. An Essay in Historical Interpretation'*, came out in 2007 (a year earlier in the US) and unleashed another storm. In this work the author described events that occurred directly after World War II and confirmed the fact of anti-Semitism in Polish society: pogroms (in Kielce and Krakòw), looting of property that before the war had belonged to Jews, numerous group and individual murders of Jews returning from the death camps. It criticises in particular the role of the Church in Poland as passive in the face of evidence of anti-Semitism, and on occasion even conducive to anti-Semitism.

This publication polarised the Polish society even more than *'Neighbours'*, and provoked extreme reactions. That polarisation is reflected in sociological research: groups representing anti-Semitic and anti-anti-Semitic views have clearly increased in number. Significantly, the unwillingness to accept these shocking, painful facts was common to both individuals and national institutions. For instance one such state institution, the Institute of National Remembrance, issued a document that attempted to cast doubt on Gross's findings, and the staff of the Institute became his staunchest critics. There was also a rather curious incident, this time an individual initiative: a notification to the public prosecu-

tor of a suspicion that Gross had committed the crime of slander against the Polish nation. (The court rejected the petition. Incidentally, new to the Polish law, this crime was defined in reaction to '*Neighbours*') Polish readers, and in particular Polish Catholics, found it particularly difficult to confront the description of what Gross referred to in the Polish title of the book as "moral disintegration", and in many cases the instinctive reaction was one of denial. Many described Gross as an "anti-Polish extremist", accused him of writing "in keeping with pre-defined assumptions", or "drawing on selected sources to prove his claims". Many refreshed the past stereotypes of "Jewish communists" and a communist inspiration for the most widely known of post-war murders, the pogrom in Kielce.

But this attempt at substituting an officer of the secret police for the figure of the German Nazi in the national mythology no longer had the same power (the secret police, even if they were acting on the inspiration and orders of the Soviets, were Poles). The traditional conception of the national consciousness founded on idealistic myths featuring suffering, heroism and Catholicism had suffered a blow. For '*Fear*' also, as we mentioned above, implicated the Church and the clergy in the guilt of anti-Semitism. This was the first time that such a direct, sharp, unequivocal charge had been levelled publicly at the Church and at that section of society identified as Catholic.

The reaction of the Polish Church and Polish Catholics to '*Fear*' was polarised: at one end of the scale, among some Catholics, there was a marked recognition of guilt, acceptance of responsibility, and confrontation with a painful past. Important elements of the process of exposing contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland have been initiated by some Polish Catholic circles. '*Fear*' and other books and publications describing and analysing Polish anti-Semitism are published by Catholic publishers. At the other extreme, however, the prominent nationalist and anti-Semite Robert Nowak was permitted to appear in churches and parish halls to give lectures in which he directed aggressive polemic at Gross's theses. The official Church – in spite of the firm stance of John Paul II on the issue – essentially remained silent, which sadly has to be treated as its lack of willingness to examine its own conscience on this count. For those of us who consider ourselves members of the Roman Catholic Church this is a deeply painful fact.

In the year 2000 part of Polish society hoped that the Jedwabne murder committed in a small, poor town in the country's periphery was the last grim mystery in Polish-Jewish relations. This hope proved vain, however, for the publication of *Fear* opened what was in a sense an even more terrible chapter. Moreover, '*Fear*' also provoked significant media interest. It intensified the process that could be called a "national examination of conscience". Its dimensions are reflected in the fact that less than six months after the publication of '*Fear*', another book, little short of 400 pages, came out, "*Wokół strachu*", '*Around Fear*', a compilation of important articles, statements and works produced with the inspiration of and as reactions to the book '*Fear*' [6].

So what can we say about the process of building a national identity? There are two tendencies in play here: some seek an unsimplified identity; they are prepared to confront a painful, difficult past. Others still need a mythologised, idealised image. What will be the outcome of the clash of these two narrations? Will Polish citizens of Jewish origin obtain the right to a presence in the Polish national memory?

## THREE DIMENSIONS TO CONSIDER

### I. The socio-historical dimension

Consideration of the social or, more broadly, the socio-historical dimension of this issue requires recourse to the national mythology. In the Polish tradition there is an extremely strong myth of the Poles as a nation of above-average, even unusual patriotism, heroic dedication, and simultaneously as a nation disadvantaged by fate owing to its geographical location, surrounded by imperial neighbours. This myth has a long tradition: reinforced by the more than century-long period of Poland's partition (in the 19th and early 20th centuries), its occupation by Nazi Germany, and, after World War II, and the status of the People's Republic of Poland as vassal to the Soviet Union. The millennial history of Christianity in Poland cements this myth further and adds a religious, often even mystic flavour. The

elements of which this image is composed are on the one hand the construction and perpetration of a narration founded on the myth of positive endurance ("We survived the Swedish deluge, we'll survive the Soviet one too"), the purpose of which is to "uplift hearts", and on the other hand demonstration that "Poland is the Christ of Nations". It has suffered and saved Europe from outsiders: Sobieski turned back the Turkish flood at Vienna in 1683, and Piłsudski frustrated the Soviet attack in 1920. This mythology is accompanied by references to Polish openness (the Arians), the Poles' extraordinary heroism (successive uprisings), and individual icons (often listed in a single breath: Copernicus, Chopin, Skłodowska-Curie, and, for the past quarter-century, John Paul II).

Incidentally, it is important to add at this point that we do not question the existence of a construct such as a national mythology in itself, for we recognise its usefulness (in particular for a nation that for centuries has been forced to fight for its sovereignty). The point of our reflection is simply to show the context in which the universal bacterium of anti-Semitism has found a good breeding-ground in Poland. And at the same time it is hard to confront. For in this mythology about Poland, if we are the ideal nation, then there is no, can be no anti-Semitism, and suggestions that it does exist are treated as slander, and further proof of persecution of the Poles. And if "incidents" such as that in Jedwabne have occurred, then they were the work of hooligans (and thus not necessarily Poles – perhaps if it was hooligans then it wasn't Poles after all?). Attempts at deconstructing these myths are treated as betrayal, a lack of patriotism, or a form of perverse masochism.

A further circumstance here is the discourse surrounding World War II that was dominant in the period 1945–1989. Polish issues were often passed over or marginalised. The years of silence surrounding Stalinist crimes provoked comparisons and an "arithmetic" approach to history ("The Jews had the Holocaust, we had deportations to Siberia" or "Stalin caused many more deaths than Hitler"). And hence a consequence of this that became possible was the rescinding of the exceptional status of the Holocaust crimes, and, in the version that did not fall into this trap, a "historical rivalry". This competition as to who suffered more is one of the most significant blind alleys: it causes the degeneration of personal and existential reflection.

At the same time, for nearly half a century broad swathes of society were denied memory: for instance, it was forbidden to write or speak about the extermination of Poles by the Soviets. Both the memory of extensive groups within society, such as the pre-war Polish intellectual elite (which of course held heterogeneous world views), and the memory essential to individual identity, that handed down from generation to generation, suffered serious damage.

This violation of the Polish identity within families continues to provoke a variety of reactions, a fundamental symptom of which is a closed front against the Other – Different – Alien.

We are part of this context, and the question arises: can we rise above it? And how to talk about it? In a group? Or only with those who are prepared to deconstruct the mythology, or perhaps also with its defenders? Is labelling the latter "anti-Semites" not an oversimplification? A label like that puts an end to dialogue. Should Israelis be part of our Polish-Polish dialogues? And maybe Germans too?

At this stage in our reflections it will be useful to shift the accent from the social or socio-historical to a narrower perspective: first the professional, and ultimately the personal, essentially existential.

## II. The professional dimension

During our first Polish-Israeli conference[1], Professor Dov Aleksandrowicz said that "psychiatrists are experts on difficult matters". Psychiatrists and psychologists are the right people to be addressing threads such as anti-Semitism and post-Holocaust trauma, for who, if not we, is equipped to deal with the issue of exclusion?

What is more, who, if not the psychiatrist, is capable of describing the insidious paths and mechanisms of power, especially an enslaving power that treats its society instrumentally and turns honourable citizens into a blind tool in the service of criminal ideas?

[1]The 1st IMPHA Conference "Myth and Taboo" took place 26–27 September, 1999 in Kraków.

There is one more important question: to what extent can our knowledge of the man be helpful in understanding social processes? We know how difficult and painful it is to seek the truth; we have studied trauma management mechanisms, investigated trauma's treacherous ways, power and significance of defences; we know how to handle therapy. We know the man, but do we also know a society?

If this is the case, if the psychiatrist does know his or her stuff, this is (or can be) the foundation for a social mission, e.g. as a voice to society, an opinion-forming voice, as in other countries, where psychiatrists speak out on social issues and their voice is respected as the voice of neutral experts. So perhaps we do have a certain moral obligation to speak out on this subject? And perhaps we should also "put our money where our mouth is": by this I mean initiate or get involved with action in the community – organising "good trips for young Israelis", helping to bring the two societies together, deconstructing myths, de-falsifying history?

The experience of our group indicates that this is a difficult process. The ambivalence is the relatively closed nature of our group. While we are not averse to accepting new members to the group, for some strange reason this is not happening. It is hard to explain this fully, but it is telling that our group of twenty or so people, in spite of the suggestions that are put forward from time to time, cannot muster the determination to take action on a wider social scale, and decisively open our society up into more an open association than an exclusive club. It is as if we feel that first we need to conclude our internal discussion. Or, as is the case during our Polish-Israeli conferences, in small groups. Looking at this problem from the psychiatric/psychological perspective, one is prompted by the reflection that the inability to let our own truth and our own pain resonate damages our potential to recognise the truth and pain of the Other. And from here it is a very short path to xenophobic attitudes and irrational views.

These difficulties do not alter the course of our work: hence it remains our professional task to analyse, interpret and expose defences, and further, to attempt change, in other – more professional – words: therapy.

**III. The existential dimension.**

This perspective cannot be reduced to circumstances, cannot be measured or calibrated. It is a unique type of "naked" challenge. Talking on this subject is a very personal experience; it is like an internal discourse. Whether it is fear or a friendly interest that dominates in our attitude towards the Other? What gives us the courage to talk about this with each other? What kind of strength do we need to be ready to talk about this?

Those of us who consider it vital to fully deconstruct Polish mythology are, it seems, only a step away from a very strange trap: in encouraging an opening up towards Others – Neighbours, we can start to exclude those who are not yet ready to do so. In other words, advocates of deconstruction of the myth idealising Poland and the Poles (among who are the authors of this paper) sometimes find it hard to be tolerant towards advocates of a traditional Polish mythology. And so the question arises: will those of us who do not consider the idea of deconstructing the Polish mythology a good one shortly become Alien to us? Is this division between what is Ours and Alien not an attempt to handle the Other inside Us? To handle those parts of ourselves which we do not accept, which scare us, which we do not want to admit they exist inside Us because it is easier to place them in the Others – anti-Semites? And what about us orphaned by myths that shaped us, had impact on our lives and accompanied us for years?

Perhaps – and this is the optimistic version – we are people of the "borderlands", proponents of the tradition of the multicultural Polish Republic? As Krzysztof Czyżewski [7] writes in his book "The line of return. Notes from the borderlands", "people of the borderlands" are tolerant people, often with mixed family roots, who are characterised by "empathy, a critical patriotism, an immunity to national phobias, fluency in languages, curiosity about other people and, in combination with an openness to the world, a love of their own small homeland." What can we professionals do to ensure that this heritage is nurtured? What can we do to ensure that patriotism is not steeped in naïve denials or aggressive, arrogant, essentially fearful nationalism? To select from what Jan Józef Lipski [8] distin-

guishes as "two homelands" the one that admits to its moral failures and is not afraid of painful truths?

## A HOPE

Significantly, in the past year the current of retribution on the publishing market has been accompanied by new scientific and popular scientific titles that address the subject of anti-Semitism in Poland critically and perceptively. Among these are some outstanding works: that of Prof. Tokarska-Bakir [9] on blood libel legends (an extensive qualitative study drawing on analyses of the myth) and that of Prof. Janion [10, 11] on anti-Semitic threads in Polish Romantic literature. Since the publication of Gross's contributions, therefore, the scope of society's reflection on anti-Semitism in Poland has been broadened and deepened, and this offers hope that this Polish (not only Polish, of course) disgrace will subside.

In our description of the situation following the publication of Gross's book, we touched on many painful issues. This does not alter our fundamental conviction that the process of creating a mature identity, an identity without denial, and incorporating openness to "Others"' is progressing.

Although in what we have said here we have used the plural form – we have talked about what is relevant to society or a group of people – the final answer to these and other questions posed in this paper can in all likelihood only ever be given in the singular form, as a private, individual, personal answer. It is only "I", each one of us individually, by and for ourselves that can access that answer, and take responsibility for that answer before ourselves.

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