The professional academic historian suffers in these times from a persistent uncertainty about precisely what he is. — Richard Hofstadter

Polish historians, like Poles in general, have sought consolation in the heroic interpretation of their own history. To this small nation, in its difficult geographic position, stories of heroic struggle pursued until the end against ever-more-powerful goliaths bring not only a sense of comfort but are also a buttress of national identity. The sometimes hysterical reactions to the taboo that Jan T. Gross touched upon (boycotting, public protests, filing legal charges and so on) are a symptom of the fragility of this identity; the fear itself that this dearly-cherished identity is at stake provokes reactions of violent self-defense. Such a socio-psychological dynamic is as understandable as it is unacceptable and it must be abandoned if a more mature Polish identity is to be born. The dynamic itself, as Joanna Tokarska-Bakir has noted, is a sign of life, a symptom of a deep need for a change. What must be decided by historians and by the wider public participating in historical debates is the direction of that change. The tendency to discredit and marginalize Gross, therefore, whether on personal or professional grounds, arguably constitutes a red-herring, while the burgeoning literature in support of Gross’s conclusions has largely been ignored in public discussions.

Gross was, to be sure, until *Neighbors* still a ‘Polish’ historian. His previous works *Polish Society under German Occupation - Generalgouvernement, 1939-1944* (1979) and *Revolution from Abroad. The Soviet Conquest of Poland’s Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (1988), fitted neatly into the framework of national patriotic historiography even while containing incisive critiques of Polish society. It was only the revelation of the Jedwabne massacre that broke the taboo, and suddenly ‘revealed’ Gross as a ‘Jewish sociologist’.

The debates around Gross and the academic disputes over his claims, are ultimately, a struggle about which vision of Poland one ought to inherit and inhabit. Will Poland be a self-critical nation that can look its demons in the eye and say, ‘Yes, this is also us, at worst’? Or will it be ‘only’ a great nation of saviours and martyrs whose virtues are at odds with an immoral Europe? In this context, a funny if crude aphorism by Marshal Piłsudski comes to mind: ‘Poland is a great nation, only her people are . . . whores.’

In this article, I intend to consider to what extent Jan Gross and his recent books have become a ‘whipping boy’ for a historiography that rejects his conclusions. I will also present a brief overview of the newest historical achievements within the field that have been inspired — directly or indirectly — by Gross’s work.

To assess Gross’s influence on the Polish historiography of Polish-Jewish relations we must first consider the state of that literature before the ‘major eruption’ of controversy caused by the publication of *Neighbors*. In the field of Jewish studies, broadly understood, there was Ruta Sakowska’s *Ludzie z dzielnicy zamkniętej*, 1975 [People from the Closed-off District] describing social life and institutions in the Warsaw ghetto and *Dwa Etapy: Hitlerowska polityka eksterminacji Żydow w oczach ofiar*, 1986 [Two Stages, Nazi Policy of Extermination of Jews in the Victims’ Eyes], from which the division of the Holocaust into three phases comes. Alina
Cała’s *Wizerunek Żyda w polskiej kulturze ludowej*, 1987 [The Image of the Jew in Polish Folk Culture] provided a disturbing picture of a Polish countryside clinging to prewar, ‘premodern,’ religious and anti-Jewish prejudices. Sakowska’s books went largely unnoticed, while Cała’s work was read mostly by students of ethnography. That same year (1987) brought Jan Błonński’s now-famous essay in *Tygodnik Powszechny*, ‘Biedni Polacy patrzą na getto,’ [The Poor Poles Look at the Ghetto], which, in spite of a slew of critical and even hostile letters to the *Tygodnik*’s publisher, also evoked a meagre response among scholars.

Barbara Engelking, who published *Zagłada i pamięć: Doświadczenie Holocaustu i jego konsekwencje opisane na podstawie relacji autobiograficznych* in 1994 [Holocaust and Memory: the Experience of the Holocaust and its Consequences: an Investigation Based on Personal Narratives], is the first scholar in Poland to have focused primarily on the experiences of Jewish victims (one might speculate that, perhaps, her background in psychology may be the origin of this focus).² Her work, however, is not widely known. Somewhat more recognition was gained by Krystyna Kersten’s *Polacy, Żydzi, komunizm: Anatomia półprawd 1939-68*, 1992 [Poles, Jews and Communism. An Anatomy of Half-Truths 1939-1968], which juxtaposed ‘Polish’ and ‘Jewish’ truths and dealt honestly with the origins of common stereotypes.


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²Among the current researchers that I have spoken to whose work centers around the Polish Center for Holocaust Research, Engelking is the only one I know of who denies any direct influence of Gross’s work on her academic interests.
Jewish Incidents in Poland, 1935-1937] and Bożena Szaynok’s *Pogrom Żydów w Kielcach, 4 lipca 1946, 1992* [The Pogrom of Jews in Kielce Poland. 4 July 1946], the first monograph on the Kielce pogrom. All of these were also, to some extent, duly ‘overlooked.’ The same must be said about Feliks Tych’s *Długie cienie Zagłady*, 1999 [Long Shadow of the Holocaust], a collection of historical essays that objectively and with respect for both nations’ perspectives, yet courageously, tackled such provocative subjects as: the inability of Polish historiography to utilize primary sources available in Poland to understand the complexities of the attitudes of Polish society on the mass-murder of the Jews; the sterility of educational materials and outright absence of the topic of the Holocaust in history schoolbooks (at the end of the 1990s!) and a source-based analyses of Polish historical awareness of the events of the Holocaust and of Jewish assessments of the Polish behaviour during the war as well as other important topics.. The conclusions reached by Tych do not differ much from those reached later by Gross; yet their cautious formulation did not make them more palatable for either historians or general public. A year later, Dariusz Stola put together a brilliant analysis of the year 1968 in light of newly available documents (*Kampania Antyżydowska w Polsce*, 2000 [The Anti-Zionist Campaign in Poland]. None of these publications has ever made it out of a rather narrow milieu of scholarly circles and into the public consciousness, and that is saying much in a country like Poland, which devours its historical literature.

Admittedly, there was a small-scale discussion following Michał Cichy’s article on the participation of some underground troops in killing the remaining Jews during the Warsaw Uprising (‘Polacy – Żydzi: czarne karty powstania,’ *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 1994; [‘Poles-Jews: Black Pages of the Uprising’]). For some, the ensuing polemic was an attempt to stave off an
unjustified attack on the ‘sanctum sanctorum of the Polish national identity’; as Piotr Paziński noted, it was a ‘dress rehearsal’ before the stormy debate concerning the Jedwabne massacre.

Nothing would compare, however, to the scale of the Jedwabne controversy which included a state-run investigation and the participation of government officials in public commemorations. In the light of the debates that followed, we may ask: Why is Gross’s writing so provocative to Polish self-perception and to Polish historical memory? Why has he become so ‘dangerous’ that, while other historical works tackling sensitive subjects are left to the specialists, Gross is not only widely discussed, but is also the object of vicious ad hominem attacks that detract from the issues he writes about and, instead, turn into a self-defensive tribunal of patriotic justice which seeks to impose a vision of the past purged of any shameful memories?

It may be instructive here to quote Joanna Michlic, who analyzed the debate as follows:

There is no doubt that the aim of Gross’s mode of narration was to elicit direct and immediate empathy for the victims. . . . In postwar Poland the official memory of the Jedwabne massacre was based on a non-truth that explicitly insulted the memory of the victims. Professional historians, not only in Poland but also in the West, overlooked the Jedwabne massacre. A few survivors of the former Jedwabne Jewish community and their children constituted the only social group that kept the memory of the massacre alive. It is in this context that one should understand Gross’s call for affirmative attitudes towards Jewish victims’ testimonies—a call misunderstood by the majority of Gross’s critics, who simply accused him of a biased and non-critical approach toward Jewish testimonies,

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while ignoring the fact that despite various weaknesses, the testimonies nevertheless contain a truthful version of the massacre.  

The indignation with which Gross’s writing has been met may be explained in part by it being primarily, as Bożena Szaynok has pointed out, moral in character. This kind of writing, we must acknowledge, has not been absent in the Polish historiography of Polish-Jewish relations. The ‘problem with Gross’ is that, on this occasion, the moral qualifier ascribed to the Polish nation is a negative one: no one objected to the highly laudatory assessment of Polish behaviour during the war in Bartoszewski’s and Lewinówna’s *Ten jest z ojczyzny mojej: Polacy z pomocą Żydom 1939-1945*, 1969 [He that is from my Fatherland: Poles Helping the Jews, 1939-1945], a book that dealt specifically with Polish rescue of Jews. The moral value ascribed to the Poles in this work was not questioned as ‘unscholarly’ or ‘unobjective,’ or, in Paweł Machcewicz’s words, as an example of ‘engaged history.’ Likewise, the literature on the behaviour of Polish peasants during the occupation focused exclusively on the positive aspects of rescue and sacrifice with a moral judgment made transparent through the choice of language:

> It is impossible to give in a short account a larger number of cases, in which, in our district, Poles put the fulfillment of a moral duty above their own security and that of their families. One can only give examples, which are sufficient, nevertheless, to form a notion of the greatness of the sacrifice.  

Therefore, I would venture to say that it is not the fact of the moralizing in Gross’s work that his critics object to; it is the kind of moral assessment that stems from his analysis which is disturbing and objectionable. Polish historians often appear to see themselves as the moral

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5 J. Michlic, *Coming to Terms with the ‘Dark Past’: The Polish Debate about the Jedwabne Massacre* (Jerusalem, SICSA, 2002) ACTA no. 22, 8.

guardians of memory; the problem is that, as memory becomes more and more multi-layered and unsettling, it also becomes unable to support patriotic claims to moral purity and ‘redemptive’ victimhood. This is how Joanna Tokarska-Bakir, bringing Maria Janion into the discourse responded to Machcewicz:

Janion’s whole book [the recent volume: Bohater, spisek i śmierć; A Hero, Conspiracy, and Death – M.R.] is devoted to the exemplification of the thesis that the condition to find oneself in Polish history is the acceptance of the heroic discourse, in which one way or another ‘things turn out our way.’ But how to inscribe in that discourse stories about the way fire fighters hunt Jews? Or about pulling of teeth from the cadavers? It is precisely because of these facts, and not because of any errors of methodology, that Profesor Machcewicz cannot accept the writings of Jan Tomasz Gross.7

Szaynok,8 emphasizing and distancing herself from the ‘moralizing’ style and purpose of Gross’s books, has argued: ‘During war a society finds itself in a situation that is described differently by a historian and by a moralist. We should not mix these two types of description, since, if we continue to do so, we will not understand much in Polish-Jewish history.’9 In response, one might well ask how much, based on the ‘positivist’ style of writing history deprived of moralizing, has actually been understood in Polish-Jewish history? Is the traditional Polish approach to history still possible? Has it brought us closer to understanding the truth, or has it merely been a prop for patriotic self-congratulation?

Elsewhere, Szaynok emphasizes historical context against the ‘living history, which moves people, crushes their indifference, inspires reflection’ — which Irena Grudzińska-Gross

8 My intention here is not to single out Szaynok as a historian who stands out for her critical approach to Gross; the value of her arguments is that they are rather representative of many others.
defended in an interview.10 The question, however, is not whether the authors of *Golden Harvest* ignore historical context; the *real question* is: what has actually happened in Poland, what was done by Poles, and how will it shape our thoughts about ourselves, as a nation? Furthermore, the context of war and demoralization that Polish historians are raising resembles closely the method of ‘thick description’ that some of them (such as Piotr Gontarczyk) ridicule but cannot themselves escape. The method of ‘thick description,’ applied in ethnography for the first time (but not invented) by Clifford Geertz, seeks to analyze a cultural context of human actions that would otherwise have no apparent meaning. Technically, ‘thick description refers to the detailed account of field experiences in which the researcher makes explicit the patterns of cultural and social relationships and puts them in context’.11 This context can be revealed by describing how and in what situations a given act takes place; common tropes may provide an explanation of the action’s meaning. Most opponents of Gross unwittingly use the method of ‘thick description’ when they explain away either the murder of the Jews or the plunder of their possessions by the context of revenge for Jewish involvement in communism, as a result of moral depravation during war or the consequence of the poverty and xenophobia typical of the Polish countryside. Therefore, again, as is the case with the question of morality, it may be that what is being resisted is not Gross’s failure to provide context so much as the nature of that context.

Polish historiography has not, as yet, produced a social history of the Polish people under the Nazi occupation. There have been attempts, to be sure, and even one by Gross himself, who analyzed the attitude of resistance to Nazi rule of Polish society. Again, we must ask, ‘why?’ Could it be that the period is still too close to allow examination of the diverse responses of

10 B. Szaynok, ‘U nas nie tak się umierało.’ *Tygodnik Powszechny*, 29 March.

Polish society to the brutal machine of an inhuman occupier? Could it be possible that revealing that not all the nation fought uniformly against the Germans and that, indeed, whole segments of the society – the peasants, for example – benefitted from collaborating with Nazi decrees –would ultimately lead Poles to question their self-satisfaction concerning their behaviour during the War?

Here I would like to cite Comer Vann Woodward, one of the most significant historians of the American South, who dared to raise ethical questions when addressing the issue of slavery. In his Presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1969, Woodward observed: ‘Negro history seems to be destined to remain the moral storm center of American historiography. It is hard to see how it could very well be otherwise, at least for some time to come. Slavery was, after all, the basic moral paradox of American history.’ 12 Now, if we substitute the words ‘Jewish history’ for ‘Negro history’ and ‘antisemitism’ for ‘slavery’, we might well conclude that, per analogiam, the history of Polish Jewry IS the moral storm center of Polish historiography. That is why so few historians have dared to approach the subject: we may recall Professor Strzembosz defending himself against the accusation that he never wrote about Polish violence against the Jews in the region that he investigated for decades, which happened to be Podlasie in which was located the town of Jedwabne! That is why there are no debates or ‘scandals’ around the issues of how other nations (such as Ukrainians or Russians) ‘helped’ the NKVD to deport Poles, while the Jews are constantly at the heart of this matter 13 and that is why other painful aspects of Polish history – even relationship with the Ukrainians – are not as


13 A point made recently by Dominika Kozłowska in the monthly Znak (nr 670, March 2011, 11).
inflammatory as the relationship with the Jews. This is also probably why a Christian reconciliation with the Germans seemed possible for the Polish bishops who signed the letter ‘We forgive and ask for forgiveness’ in 1965, but could not make such direct gesture toward the Polish Jews.

Assessing American historiography that consistently ignored moral implications of slavery, Woodward writes: ‘They [the historians Beard and Turner] recognized the Negro’s existence all right, but they either ignored moral conflicts and paradoxes in moral values forced by his existence and status, or they attempted to reduce them to other morally neutral categories of explanation. Referring to Beard, W.E.B. Du Bois remarked that one has the “comfortable feeling that nothing right or wrong is involved”. . . . Neither the invisible-man solution nor the moral neutrality approach is any longer acceptable. Moral engagement ranging upward to total commitment now predominates.’ What Woodward himself suggests is ‘an infusion of soul’ which involves a degree of empathy (although he does not use the word) resulting in a ‘corrective’ historiographical method that would describe Negro history on its own terms, without paternalizing impositions and without the temptation to rewrite history with a racial qualification. This method would involve putting oneself in the shoes of the subject, as ‘those who have undergone an experience are best qualified to understand that’ (with some obvious restrictions). ‘Since white historians have written most of American history, including the part assigned to the Negroes, it was inevitable that they should have determined the concepts, priorities, values and interpretations of American historiography and that the values of the white

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man should have generally prevailed over those of the black man.'16 What Woodward calls for is part of the decolonization process, of freeing the subjects of history from the confines of the historian’s own world and prejudices. It is this which is being strongly resisted in Polish historiography because, as Tokarska-Bakir has pointed out, what Polish historians desire above all else is to be ‘serious’, and ‘serious’ in Poland means ‘uncontroversial.’17

Here I will again refer to the analysis of Tokarska-Bakir, who distinguishes four techniques that Polish historians employ in order to undermine the effect of breaking the taboo of innocence that Gross’s books necessarily caused. These are:

1. The reification of the subject under study, in order to keep it at a maximum distance.

2. The elimination of the victims’ voices: these are characterized as too biased, too close to be able accurately to understand the enfolding events.

3. A preference for ‘self-explanatory’ testimonies left by the perpetrators.18

4. (part of 3): focusing on the perpetrators.19:

Without going into detail so as to prove each particular point, one may nevertheless see all of these techniques being employed in the debates on Gross’s recent books. What I would like to point out is rather that the new research which is now appearing adopts a diametrically

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16Woodward, ‘Presidential address...,’ Stern 485.


18This preference is also somewhat selective. One may recall here how Bardoń’s self-incriminating confessions during the Jedwabne trial were dismissed as allegedly forced by the UB investigation.

opposite point of view – it is primarily concentrated on the experiences of survivors and on giving us their (so far neglected) perspective. This is done precisely in order to understand the prevailing practices of the time, the prevalent attitudes which emerge through a ‘thick description’ as a result of which we can come closer to understanding what was in fact socially acceptable among the Polish population toward Jews. One way this can be done is to employ Polish and Jewish testimonies which reveal Poles’ fear of each other (rather than Germans) when taking the risk of hiding Jews. One of the most extreme cases is given in Neighbors: a peasant woman was able to assuage the hostility and fear of her co-villagers (in her own account) only by pretending she had drowned two Jewish children whom she had been hiding, thus ending a possible, but not inevitable, threat to the whole village.\textsuperscript{20} It is clear from such accounts that Germans were not the real threat but one’s neighbors, who in addition might have used threats and extortion for their own gain. That theme continues and is probably most visible in Golden Harvest.

What Gross has made the focus of his books – the victims’ perspective – has been picked up by Polish historians and other scholars of the humanities who are now offering a completely new Polish historiography of Polish-Jewish relations. Although the spectrum of the new research is very broad – it concerns literature, philosophy, and the history of Christian-Jewish relations\textsuperscript{21} –

\textsuperscript{20}Not necessary, because the whole village might know about underground activities and partisans, yet fear of denunciation of this ‘crime’ that was also punishable by death, did not stop people from rendering assistance to the underground.

\textsuperscript{21}The new directions of investigation include: the role of the blue police, the Baudienst, night watches, voluntary organizations like firemen, surviving in forests, victim-rescuer dynamics, but also research into Jewish texts (phenomenal yearly publication Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały publishes the newest, cutting-edge research by
I will mention here only two recent books that have been brought into the limelight thanks to discussion around *Golden Harvest*: Barbara Engelking’s *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień. Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945* [It’s such a beautiful, sunny day . . . . The fate of Jews seeking help in the Polish countryside, 1942—1945], and Jan Grabowski’s, ‘*Judenjagd. ’ Polowanie na Żydow 1942-1945. Studium dziejów pewnego powiatu*’ [‘Judenjagd’: The hunt for Jews, 1942—1945: A study of events in one county].

Engelking’s work describes Jewish attempts to find shelter in the countryside, during the third phase of the Holocaust, when most Jews had already been murdered by the Germans and when almost only Polish intervention could give them away as Jews. Reading through hundreds of accounts and memoirs written during and after the war, as well as the trial reports in accordance with the decree of 31 August 1944 which made provision for the prosecution of fascist collaborators and criminals against Polish nation, Engelking tries to understand what the victims went through. Turning upside-down traditional Polish historiography which has been concentrated on the experiences of Catholic Poles, Engelking writes her emphatic narrative

the scholars of Centrum Badań nad Zagładą Żydów in Warsaw, which should be presented and assessed separately, but which quality could not be overestimated. Memoirs, or fragments of testimonies published often for the first time reveal sometimes uncomfortable side of the Jewish victims and bring the understanding of the victims and representation of the Holocaust into the whole new level, quite unexplored within Polish scholarship). The most developed now is a combined project to understand and describe the behaviour of Polish peasants during the occupation. One of the first, groundbreaking articles proving beyond necessity that killing of the Jewish survivors was an everyday-matter for the peasants, for which no one felt morally responsible, was Alina Skibińska’s and Jakub Petelewicz’s ‘*Udział Polaków w zbrodniach na Żydach na prowincji regionu świętokrzyskiego*’ [‘The Participation of Poles in Crimes Against Jews in the Świętokrzyskie Region’] (in:) *Zagłada Żydów. Studia i Materiały*, vol. 1, R. 1, 2005. The publication went unnoticed.
looking into and through the eyes of men, women, and – in a particularly wrenching way – Jewish children who were betrayed, and sometimes gratuitously killed out of the fear (or indeed, the alleged fear) of denunciation. In her narrative, we can ‘hear’ the voices of the Jewish victims recaptured by Polish and Jewish witnesses. Engelking presents every possible ‘scrap of speech’ - of the dying victims in order to restore their human dignity and uniqueness, which had been lost because of depersonalizing records and a selective memory. Is writing history from the victims’ perspective problematic for Polish historiography? Or is the victims’ perspective problematic only when the victims are Jewish? The Gulag accounts of Polish deportees are still widely read and, although they sometimes raise problematic methodological issues, no one disqualifies their veracity on the basis that they reflect the ‘bias of the victim’.

Grabowski’s most recent book follows a stricter methodological model – the ‘triangulation of memory’ in which the perspective of the victims is put alongside available legal proceedings (mostly in accordance with the ‘August decree’), and which are then compared with legal documents from trials in Germany.²² Such a perspective has been recently used by Christopher Browning²³ who attempted, thereby, to recreate a picture from three different perspectives (the victims, the perpetrators, and dry documentary data), and thus to allow readers to come as close to the reconstruction of the events as historically possible.

What is new and unique in the new Polish historiography on Polish behaviour during the Holocaust, is the use of ‘raw’ victims’ narratives. This is not solely Gross’s contribution. Scholars like Andrzej Żbikowski and Joanna Tokarska-Bakir openly admit Gross’s inspiration in

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turning towards the ‘Jewish side of the story,’ while Engelking was pursuing her interest independently before *Neighbors*. According to the method of focusing on the victims – instead of a tidy, clear statements of the the number of victims in a given attack on Jews, we hear victims’ and perpetrators’ descriptions with the full load of unedited expressions by hunted and murdered or murdering human beings.

This is gruesome, disturbing material: a reader has to be ‘strong’ or cold enough to read that, while Polish firemen were keeping guard over a few freshly captured Jews in a shed, they heard their howling throughout the night. One of the Jews begged: ‘Mr Bortman, let us go, let me go if you have God in your heart, on the wounds of Jesus, your God, let us go.’

24 We can attempt to imagine what some of the hunted down Jews felt when they were caught by their Polish neighbours and betrayed: ‘Ester Buchbinder with a baby was stopped in a forest near Kurów by a “blue” policeman and although she kissed his hands to let her go, he took her to the Gestapo in Sącz, and from here she was taken to a cemetery. And she was shot with her baby.’

25 Uszer Szajnber was caught by his classmate, Bonifacy Głuchowski, who said bluntly: ‘Come here, you have lived enough’ and delivered him to the gendarmerie who shot him.

26 Grabowski supports his material with contemporary accounts from the underground press (reports to London, leaflets, *Biuletyn Informacyjny*). In this we read for example, Zofia Kossak-Szczucka’s observation in 1942:

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24 Engelking, B. *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień Losy Żydów szukających ratunku na wsi polskiej 1942-1945* (Warsaw, 2011) 149.


26 Engelking, *Jest taki piękny...,* 164.
Maybe it is true that the Jew is a cursed creature against whom a committed crime goes unpunished. In connection with this, unfortunately, cases of the active collaboration of peasants in the exterminating action of the Germans are multiplying.²⁷

Yet, for the opponents of Gross, these victims’ accounts are tainted by the red herring of ‘un-objectivity’ while official documents that normally would be trusted even by the most conservative historians are simply ignored as incompatible with the vision of Poland one wishes to impart to school children.

How is a historian to approach that disturbing material (and I am not even quoting here the most gruesome details of killings given in those books)? Could it ever be quantified according to traditional methods of assessing the extent of a social phenomenon? Can we ever know, even approximately, how widespread was the ‘active collaboration’ referred to by Kossak-Szczucka? In other words, one must ask whether and to what extent one can answer the question posed by some historians namely, how normative was the plunder and mistreatment of the Jews in Poland? How do we define a norm? From whose perspective? From a perspective of Poles who remained indifferent or even passively hostile to the Jews, yet did not personally engage in the plunder of Jewish property, the answer would probably be that it was not a norm but rather an anomaly on the fringes of society. But, from the perspective preserved in surviving Jewish accounts, this question evokes a generalized answer that Jewish property (or, what was left of it after the plunder by the Germans) was universally taken over by the surrounding Polish population. This may not be a completely just perspective, but it may be one that justice requires be represented in the description of those difficult times. This perspective, which is permeated by the fear experienced by the surviving Jews is deeply disturbing morally. In Engelking’s words:

²⁷Grabowski, ‘Judenjagd...’, 12.
In the third phase of the Holocaust – after resettlements, when everything became clear and nobody had any illusions – the role of Poles, the witnesses of the Holocaust, changed. Before, they could merely passively observe the actions of the Germans, not having any influence on what was happening to the Jews (of course, they could smuggle food to the ghettos, help their acquaintances, etc.). After the main wave of extermination, their witnessing took on a new, different status – they had a real influence on the fate of individual Jews.\textsuperscript{28}

Later, she continues,

The key here is ... that Polish witnesses of the Holocaust had the possibility of choice: they could be afraid and refuse help, but — with the exception of a few cases — they were certainly not forced actively to commit evil; they did not have to give away and murder Jews.\textsuperscript{29}

Engelking illustrates this choice by setting out various actions by Poles – those which brought death upon the Jews and those which saved them (although not in a perfectly balanced way); she also succeeds in showing why the generally negative, fearful Jewish perspective is a rational response to an overwhelmingly oppressive situation. She thus deepens and provides context and nuance for the more uniformly black conclusions offered by Gross, without, however, invalidating his point of view.

Gross’s writing is indeed more than history because his goal is not only to describe ‘how’ but also an attempt to answer ‘why.’ The general inability of Polish historians to see what this discussion is about represents a major failure. We have therefore to ask--which perspective is more consoling, comforting and easier to pass on to the next generation of Poles., that of Gross or that of his opponents? The answer is painfully obvious, and because of its sedative features, should be resisted.

\textsuperscript{28}Engelking, \textit{Jest taki piękny...}, 132.

\textsuperscript{29}Engelking B. \textit{Jest taki piękny...}, 155.