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## Buried in Translation

When translation is discussed, it is usually in the context of literary works, and canonical ones at that. A new translation of a nineteenth-century French, German or Russian novel always stirs unexpected emotions, unsettles readers, polarizes critics and robs us of our illusion that the translation is the same as the original, only in another language. But how does translation affect texts that are not literary? Generally we do not think it does; or perhaps it would be truer to say that the question rarely arises. Philosophical or religious works might be exceptions to this, but discussion of them is limited to a relatively small number of experts and has no impact on the general public. Otherwise, we assume that the translation of non-literary texts is just a matter of getting the facts right, and that a professional translator can be trusted to handle this relatively undemanding task. What matters in a non-literary work is normally at the level of fact, and we do expect the facts to be presented in a clear way. Thus we play down the importance of translation, forgetting that the language in which the facts are presented may in itself be worthy of our critical attention. The much-canvassed case of Jan Tomasz Gross's book about the murder of Polish Jews in Jedwabne shows how the inadequate translation of factual information encoded in language can bias the interpretation of historical events in a much wider context.

In the summer of 2000 a small Polish publishing house, Pogranicze (Borderlands), published a piece of research by a history professor in New York, Jan Tomasz Gross. The title of the book is *Neighbors* (*Sasiedzi* in the original), and it describes the appalling mass murder of the Jewish inhabitants of a small town in eastern Poland by the Polish population.<sup>1</sup> As the author proves by documentary evidence, 1,600 Jews were burned alive and killed in other gruesome ways by their Polish neighbours over a period of three days in July 1941 (after Hitler broke his pact with Stalin and his army moved into the Polish territories previously annexed by the Soviet Union). Over twenty perpetrators were tried and convicted of this crime in 1949 and 1953, although a few years later they were all released. The victims of the murder were commemorated by a monument erected many years after by the Communist authorities, but this monument stated that on the contrary it was members of the Gestapo and Nazi forces who burned the 1,600 Jews of the town alive.

It was not only the Communist authorities who were to blame for this Polish variety of *omerta* – to borrow the Italian term for a conspiratorial silence around a crime. Gross's book is also revealing about the reasons why the case was kept out of public awareness until 1998, when a Polish TV reporter, Agnieszka Arnold, produced a documentary called *Where Is My Older Brother Cain?* The importance of the book cannot be overestimated in a country where many old prejudices and lies were kept intact throughout the whole period of Communist domination, and one cannot but wonder what the long-term consequences of Jan Gross's book will be. What I want to look at in this essay, though, is what happened when *Neighbors* was published last year in the United States. I am deliberately trying to avoid the phrase 'published in translation', because there are no formal indications that the American *Neighbors* is a translation, apart from the occasional footnote reference by the author to documents he has himself translated. In the copyright notes we read that the book was originally published in 2000 as *Sasiedzi: historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* (Neighbours: a history of the destruction of a Jewish shtetl), but the full English title reads *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. However, a careful study of the two texts shows that this is indeed a translation, although there are a number of editorial differences, and the American *Neighbors* has additional chapters on the political background to the events of July 1941. We can also assume that the author was sufficiently competent both in Polish and English to have turned the Polish text into English himself, but this is only an assumption and not a publicly acknowledged fact.

*Neighbors* was published in April 2001, but a preview appeared in *The New Yorker* some weeks earlier. One of the first British reviews, aptly entitled *Murder Most Foul*, appeared in the *TLS*, also before publication.<sup>2</sup> The author of the review, Abraham Brumberg, briefly presented the book, its reception in Poland, and his own views on Polish anti-Semitism and Polish perceptions of the Holocaust. *Neighbors* did not get much discussed as a book or piece of historical research, but it served instead as a springboard to a heated discussion of the very vexed and complicated relations between Jews and Poles before the Second World War. Such cruel mass murders as the one in Jedwabne unquestionably raise many painful issues, and in the book Gross himself tries to link the specific and particular event with the wider context of Polish-Jewish relations. Unfortunately, Gross tries to pose and answer too many questions

simultaneously, and does not show much skill in moving from the particular to the general; while Brumberg has the same methodological difficulties as the author. Nevertheless, what followed that first review came as a surprise.<sup>3</sup> In subsequent issues of the *TLS*, Polish, British, Jewish, Latvian and Greek academics became engaged in a highly emotionally charged debate, not so much about the book in its Polish or English version, as about who or what was responsible for the Holocaust. Each week brought new and heavy charges, including those of subjectivity, partiality and distortion, and many cans of worms were suddenly opened to public display. The issues were only very loosely connected to the murder in Jedwabne and the discussion fell into what has become a standard pattern – a bitter quarrel about the behaviour of the Poles and Jews under Nazi occupation. Eventually, and predictably, the discussion degenerated to the level of point-scoring for quoting incorrect dates and the wrong number of Jews and Poles killed in the war.

All those involved in the discussion used *Neighbors* as a chance to express publicly the views they express whenever the opportunity arises and, sadly, Holocaust studies seem to be attracting a high number of researchers with pathologically difficult personalities, ambitious to present an all-encompassing theory of the Holocaust. However, before we dismiss this debate as symptomatic but irrelevant, we need to establish if the quarrel has arisen from antipathy alone, or perhaps from the way Gross interpreted and presented the events in Jedwabne.

At the beginning of the book Gross states: ‘The best sources for a historian are those that provide a contemporaneous account of the events under scrutiny’.<sup>4</sup> He uses many of these, but the most important are the following: the testimony of a survivor, Samuel Wasserstein, deposited with the Jewish Historical Commission in Bialystok; the protocols of the depositions of the 1949 and 1953 trials; and the subsequent letters of appeal that the accused sent to the president of the Polish People’s Republic and the Ministry of Justice. For a historian, the most important issue is what the documents say; this is what Gross concentrates on. A thorough and sensitive analysis of the facts allows him to establish beyond doubt that the Jews of Jedwabne were murdered by the Polish population, with the encouragement, but without the active participation, of the German police and army.

The problem begins when Gross tries to answer the question of motive. There are many circumstances he takes into consideration: Polish antisemitism, the effect of two occupations on the morale of the Polish inhabitants of Jedwabne, and simpler motivations such as greed and revenge. All these factors point Gross in the right direction but, even so, he does not seem wholly satisfied. Was Jedwabne an anachronism or a product of modernity? Was it a singular case of cruelty unconnected to the previous history of Polish-Jewish relations, or the logical conclusion of Polish-Jewish relations between the two world wars? At the beginning of the chapter entitled ‘Anachronism’ Gross writes: ‘One cannot shake [off] the impression that by some evil magic peasant mobs stepped off the pages of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s national saga of seventeenth century wars, *Trilogy*, into the soil of Białystok voivodeship in the summer of 1941’.<sup>5</sup> He never goes beyond expressing this supposition, because it looks so unlikely, but my view is that this is where he loses the thread, or proves that the repertoire of a traditional historian can only take us so far. The difficulty of finding ‘evidence’ for an outbreak of ‘evil magic’ prevents him from following up the hypothesis.

*Neighbors* contains testimonies by surviving witnesses, and even more importantly, by those who committed the crimes. All these testimonies present what we normally call facts, but with the passage of time the statements themselves have become facts of historical importance. Claude Lanzmann’s documentaries *Shoah* and *Sobibor* are prime examples of how the recounting of the past can itself become evidence of past events.<sup>6</sup> Lanzmann uses camera work and language interpretation to show how past events and narrative about the past combine into what we can call historical truth. The first-person narratives in *Neighbors* afford a similar opportunity: we can view them not only as a source of information about the past, but as a key to the understanding of that past.

The people who made the statements were inhabitants of Jedwabne and its surroundings – ‘mostly small farmers, and seasonal workers, /.../ two shoemakers, a mason, a carpenter, two locksmith, a letter carrier, and a former town-hall receptionist’.<sup>7</sup> Jedwabne is called in the English text a ‘little town’, ‘a small East European town’, a ‘market town’, and on one occasion a ‘city’, but none of these denote the same reality as the original expressions in Polish - ‘miasteczko na

wschodzie Polski' [a small place in the East] or 'zydowskie miasteczko' [a small Jewish place], or the Yiddish word 'shtetl'. The Polish terms are strongly marked, carrying the message of remoteness, backwardness and underdevelopment. Jedwabne is in a part of Poland often called Poland B or 'the Eastern wall' even today - the area that was a part of the Russian empire until the First World War, where rural serfdom came to an end only in 1861. Perhaps the most adequate description of the place can be found in Eva Hoffman's book *Shtetl*: 'Polish shtetls were usually made up of two poor, traditionalist, and fairly incongruous subcultures: Orthodox Jews and premodern peasants. Morally and spiritually, the two societies remained resolutely separate, by choice on both sides. Yet they lived in close physical proximity and, willy-nilly, familiarity'.<sup>8</sup>

\* [insert a photograph with the following inscription: *Jedwabne, view from the Jewish cemetery* ]

This problem of terminology and its implications is minor in comparison with the way Gross presents, interprets and translates the main historical evidence. A careful analysis of the language of the statements deposed, both by the witnesses and the agents of the crime, tells us a great deal about who perpetrated the murder. The following elements of discourse are particularly conspicuous: the inability to construct standard, grammatical sentences, problems with spelling, malapropisms, and the mixing of a colloquial style with elements of the bureaucratic language of the communist era.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, there are marked differences between the statements taken by the police investigators and the court clerks, so that at one point Gross remarks, 'I am at a loss to explain the discrepancies. It seems to me that a court document, filed publicly, is more reliable than a secret police report in this respect. In the end, this may be just one more indication that the trial of the Jedwabne accused was a routine, slapdash job for the security police, who were therefore not overly attentive to details.'<sup>10</sup> In some cases, there is clear evidence that a statement was edited by the person taking it down. Samuel Wasserstein's account, for instance, has this footnote: 'Witness Szmul Wasersztajn, written down by E. Sztejman; chairman of the Vojvodship Jewish Historical Commission, M. Turek; freely translated from the Yiddish language by M. Kwater.'<sup>11</sup> As a result, the survivor Wasserstein's statement, written in the good standard Polish he did not speak, differs considerably from the rest. Paradoxically, on the one hand this 'sanitisation' puts Wasserstein apart from the other witnesses; and

on the other hand it transforms a Yiddish-speaking Jew into a Polish-speaking witness with no distinguishing features. In English, Wasserstein seems even farther removed from the scene of the crime, so that we can hardly recognise his real status as a haunted victim and a lucky survivor. Although the depositions of the accused Poles may also have been edited by the investigators or court clerks, their style still bears heavy markers of the speakers' peasant origins, lack of education, and social deprivation. However, these witnesses are very skilful in the way they minimise their responsibility by trying to show that they belong to and approve of the new social order in Stalinist Poland. As I will show, their language itself makes it much easier to understand why these people were capable of cruel mass murder, and why other places in Eastern Poland witnessed similar events on a smaller scale.

However, the question that needs to be addressed first is whether this level of interpretation is available to the readers of the American *Neighbors*, and whether the reception of the book in the *TLS* had anything to do with problems of linguistic and cultural mediation. The issue of translation is explicitly addressed only once, when Gross says: 'Throughout my translations I try to preserve the linguistic and orthographic awkwardness of the original documents being quoted'.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some original features are preserved, like the consistent lack of capitalisation in the words 'Jewish' and less frequently in the words 'German' and 'Polish'. Occasionally the syntax of the English sentences is awkward, but on the whole, Gross has no coherent strategy for dealing with the peculiarities of the original text, and what is more, there is no sign that he regards the language itself as evidence that could help us to understand the events in Jedwabne. What has not been translated reveals many truths about the inhabitants of Jedwabne and helps us to understand the attack on Jews took such a violent turn.

One of the cruellest of the murderers, for instance, describes the beginning of the madness in this way. I give the Polish original, followed by Gross's translation:

„i w 1941 r. przyjechało **taksówką** czterech czy też pięciu gestapoowców i zaczęli w magistracie rozmawiać, lecz **co oni tam rozmawiali**, tego ja nie wiem. Po jakimś czasie **Karolak Marian** powiedział do nas **polaków** żeby zewezać **ob.** Polskich do zarządu Miejskiego, po zavezwaniu ludności

polskiej nakazał nam iść naganiać **żydów** na rynek **pod hasłem do pracy** co i ludność uczyniła, ja w tym czasie również brałem udział w spędzaniu **żydów** na rynek. (p.52)

*...and in 1941 four or five gestapo men came in a taxi and started talking in the city hall; what they talked about I don't know. After a certain time Karolak Marian told us Poles to call Polish citizens to the town hall. After calling in the Polish population, he ordered them to round up the Jews to the square, presumably to work, and this was done. At that time I also participated in herding the Jews onto the square. (p.74)*

This is standard American English, and what we get from it is sufficient to form only a partial impression of the speaker. He wants to imply that what happened was something very ordinary, and absolutely painless--one might even say modern. He was part of a group that was asked to call the Polish 'citizens' to the town hall; then the Poles were ordered to 'round up' the Jews to the square 'presumably' to work; and 'this was done'. The accused also 'participated in herding the Jews onto the square'. It is only by putting this statement alongside other statements describing the cruelty with which the actions were carried out, that we can really see the level of shrewd but primitive obfuscation here. But the Polish original tells us much more both about the events and the narrator. The men who came in a 'taxi', 'taksowka', actually came in a car. 'Taxi' was a characteristic usage for peasants or uneducated Poles, because a taxi was the only car they had experience of until the early 1960s. (I remember myself how widespread the term was in my youth). 'Co oni tam rozmawiali' is a grammatical solecism, 'what they talked'; it should be 'o czym rozmawiali', 'what they talked about'. The name Karolak Marian is properly Marian Karolak: Karolak is the surname. The reversed order of names arrived with the Communists, for whom the family name was essential for the purpose of immediate identification. The abbreviation ob. for 'obywatel', citizen, has a similar origin in the re-ordered reality of Communism. After 1945 the customary form Pan/Pani (sir/madam) had to be replaced with 'citizen' in all official contexts. Poles and Jews are spelled with small letters; this problem with capitals is present throughout the documents. Most often 'Poles' are capitalized, while 'Jews' are not, which may reflect the attitude of the Polish population to their Jewish neighbours. Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish

whether this spelling reflects the speaker's intention, the court clerk's interpretation of his intention, or is simply a spelling mistake. 'Pod haslem pracy' (translated as 'presumably to work') is a particularly sinister expression meaning 'under the banner of' work. Again, this is an element of Communist newspeak being eagerly employed by the speaker. It is certainly very far removed from the colourless English word 'presumably'. The Polish text clearly shows how by a careful choice of expressions, the speaker tries to minimise his responsibility. He wants to be seen as part of the new Communist order, and to emphasise that he played only a small part in events that were ordinary, anyway. It is done, of course, by means suited to the intellectual level of the speaker, but with what one is tempted to call peasant 'guile'.

The majority of statements looked at by Gross betray similar features, but most of them are lost in the process of translation. In a few instances he does attempt to draw our attention to not only what the witnesses say, but also what their language tells us; but these attempts are half-hearted, and in some cases serve rather to deepen the level of obscurity. A good illustration would be the clemency petition written by the main instigator, Karol Bardon, after he was sentenced to death (a sentence that was subsequently commuted):

Po wkroczeniu Armii Radzieckiej do **woj.** Białostockiego i ustalenia **Władz Radzieckich** w październiku 1939 roku wróciłem do reperacji **zygarów** i dorywczo do 20 kwietnia 1940 roku wykonywałem **jusz** mi powierzone roboty w **mojem** fachu w N.K.W.D. i innych **Urzędach Władz Radzieckich**. Tu otwierałem kasy bo nie było kluczy do nich, przerabiałem zamki, dorabiałem klucze, remontowałem maszyny do pisania i.t.d. Od 20 kwietnia 1940 roku zostałem majstrem jako mechanik i kierownikiem warsztatu mechanicznego w M.T.S. Tu remontowałem traktory kołowe i gąsiennicze, maszyny rolnicze i samochody dla pewnych **Kołkozów** i **Sowhozów**. W **tem że** ośrodku **maszynowem** byłem i **brygadierem** pierwszej brygady montażowej i **technicznem** kontrolerem. Jednocześnie **byłem deputatem gor. Sowietu** (podkreślenie moje) miasta Jedwabne, **pow.** Łomżyńskiego. (p. 78)

*Following the Red Army's entrance into Bialystok voivodeship, and after Soviet authorities were established in October of 1939, I returned to mending clocks, and occasionally, until April 20, 1940, I also carried out various commissioned jobs in my field of expertise for the NKVD and other Offices of Soviet Authorities [capitals in original]. Here I was opening safes because keys were missing; I changed locks, made new keys, repaired typewriters, etc. On April 20, 1940, I became a supervisor [majster] as a mechanic and head of the repair shop at the MTS [Mechanical Tractor*

*Station]. I repaired tractors on wheels and on tracks, agricultural machinery, as well as cars for various kolkhozes and sovkhozes. In this mechanical center I was a brigade leader of the first brigade and a technical controller. At the same time I was a deputy to the city soviet [gorsoviet] of the town of Jedwabne in Lomza County. (p. 114)*

In this letter Bardon is emphasizing the fact that he served the Soviet authorities faithfully from the first moment they appeared in Jedwabne. It is important to know, here, that violence against Jews in 1939-1941 has been often explained by Polish antisemites as justifiable revenge for Jewish collaboration with the occupying Soviet army. The accusation is also used today to justify the rise of antisemitic feeling among the Poles in Jedwabne in 1941. Bardon, who himself happily collaborated with the Soviets, knew that in Communist Poland after 1945 such collaboration was interpreted as a patriotic duty, and he takes advantage of this change of climate to save his skin. Gross draws our attention to the capitalizing of the name of the Soviet Authorities, which shows the writer's respect for the new order. The word 'majster' in brackets is probably highlighted to show that Bardon was promoted by the Soviets because they trusted him. Another bracketed word, 'gorsoviet', is simply a Russian word for the city council; perhaps Gross intends to show that Bardon's use of the Russian term in his letter underlines his ideological convictions. Unfortunately, the highlighted elements are left without explanation, and leave the reader more puzzled than enlightened. The project is incomplete anyway, because Bardon's letter reveals much more to us than Gross indicates. As in the previous case, the text is a hybrid of different styles and registers, vividly characterising the canny author. It also contains a cocktail of spelling mistakes and morphological problems, as in 'zygarow' (properly 'zegarow), 'jusz' (juz), 'mojem' (mojim), 'tem ze' (tymze), and 'technicznem' (technicznym). These signs of a lack of formal education contrast strongly with the mastery of the bureaucratic language of the new social order. 'Woj.' and 'pow.' are newly-invented forms referring to administrative units - county and district - while 'brygadier' is an earlier military term now used in an industrial context. The whole phrase 'deputatem gor. sowietu' (deputy to the city soviet) is Soviet newspeak; and 'kolkhoz' (collective farm), 'sovkoz' (cooperative) are actually spelt the Russian rather than the Polish way. These, and 'Wladz Radzieckich' (Soviet Authorities) are also capitalized, and there is no doubt that this is meant to convey an attitude of respect to all things Soviet. One more phrase worth noticing is 'ustalenia Wladz

Radzieckich', ('the establishment of Soviet authority') which Gross translates as 'Soviet authorities were established'. Bardon is trying to avoid anything that could remotely imply 'invasion', or a forced imposition of power. The term 'wyzwolenie' ('liberation') was reserved for the second Soviet arrival in Poland in 1944-45, so he comes up with an impersonal form of the verb 'to establish', 'ustalic', which clearly does not belong in his usual linguistic repertoire. The English verb is a close linguistic equivalent, but it does not show the political nuance lurking in the Polish.

The fact that in this passage Gross has decided to pay some attention to specific linguistic and cultural issues is probably motivated by his need to show the complexity of the issue of collaboration and its role in the whole affair. But this is the exception rather than the rule. One or two glimpses of a more colloquial idiom appear in the English text, but generally, it is hard to avoid thinking that all these people lived, not in Polish shtetls, but in quiet English market towns, speaking slightly odd but on the whole acceptable English. It is difficult to judge whether this disconcerting cultural shift results from the fact that Gross did not consider the style of the narratives as important, or should be attributed to a lack of skill in the translator.

In defence of the translator, it is fair to say that even if the thought of looking at the language had occurred to him, it would have been extremely hard to do anything with this knowledge at the practical level--apart from providing extensive explanations of the nature of the problem, as I have just tried to do. The linguistic difficulty he is up against results from the vast historical and cultural gap that divides our world from the pre-modern social organisation of Poland's borderlands between the wars. The very word 'peasant' in English, and even more in American English, has quite different connotations than in Polish, Italian, Spanish or French. If the associations are not negative, they are outlandish or pastoral, most often evoking the pages of Thomas Hardy's novels.<sup>13</sup> But Hardy's peasants spoke a highly stylised English adapted to what his readers imagined peasants must have been like. What possible solutions are on offer?

Given that *Neighbors* is a piece of research and not fiction, one could simple append the necessary explanation, as Madeline Levine did when she translated a novel about life in war-time Warsaw, *Bread for the Departed* by Bogdan Woydowski,<sup>14</sup> and

described the various natures of the languages spoken. Alternatively, one could look for an equivalent contemporary language expressing a similar level of social deprivation. Irvin Walsh's *Glue* comes immediately to mind – but can a Polish peasant speak like a member of the Scottish lumpenproletariat?<sup>15</sup> These are academic questions, however, because there is no evidence that the author of *Neighbors* perceived the way in which language may constitute both an opportunity and a problem. As a result, his book leaves us with a morally highly-charged question that is impossible to answer in the context - 'How could these people kill their neighbours?'

But if we agree that a more careful analysis of the text tells us a lot more about the social context of the murder, then the question is easier to answer, and it does not necessarily diminish the horror of the deed. The claim that I want to return to is that the murder had what we might call 'pre-modern' roots—an idea made all the harder to entertain because it is so difficult for us to imagine the life of this mysterious entity, the 'peasant', in war-torn Poland. It is also difficult for good liberals to assume a natural link between criminality and deprivation. But as I said above, Gross himself entertained the same thought for a while, though he felt incapable of pursuing it to a conclusion. There is anthropological research by William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki that would seem to support this line of explanation. In their monumental work *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, they made a thorough analysis of Polish rural communities at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> Their research confirms the fact that, whatever the appearances, Polish Jews and Polish peasants did not see eye to eye at the best of times, and showed mutual hostility at any time of economic or political crisis. (vol 1, pp.130-140, vol.2, 1241-1245). (One witness in *Neighbors* claims that before the war the relations between Jews and Poles were friendly, but this is a single voice, and there is nothing in the book to confirm this statement.) Their differences were both economic and religious, and were fomented by right-wing political parties and the Catholic clergy.

Several Polish authors have also written about the enduring presence of antisemitic sentiments in the Polish folk tradition, which one critic calls 'the imagination of hatred'.<sup>17</sup> The question is, of course, how much it takes to transform a long-simmering antipathy into a pogrom or a massacre. D.J. Goldhagen in his widely-publicized book *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, has tried to show how the 'murderous

imagination' was turned into action in Germany, but critics found his thesis unconvincing, and Germany has always been considered a 'special' case anyway. The study of peasant cultures allows us to by-pass the issue of uniqueness. The peasants of Jedwabne, and Polish peasants generally, were not unique in the way they constructed their social universe. A fascinating study of Italian peasants undertaken as recently as the 1960s confirms that, given an unfortunate set of circumstances, an eruption of rural violence is quite a common phenomenon. The following poignant statement was quoted in illustration:

'Where there are hunger, grief, and uncertainty you can be sure that there is also carnage (carneficina) and not just among strangers, but also among friends and relatives. And mind you: things are getting worse. The young people are getting proud, demanding, and impatient. They get angry quickly and fall out with any one. In my youth I never heard of any one who killed his own father or brother with an axe. You would club a neighbour, alright.'<sup>18</sup>

Given the circumstances created by the Nazi and Soviet armies in Jedwabne between 1939 and 1941, we should perhaps not be surprised that hundreds of people were killed with clubs and axes, or burned alive in a barn. But what can be deduced from source texts in the original languages, does not necessarily appear transparent in translation. As a result, readers depending on often inadequate translations have no access to certain types of evidence that could help them to understand the combination of circumstances leading to horrific events. Perhaps this is why the Holocaust as well as other cases of mass murder are often described as events that defy description, and go beyond the limits of the imagination. But this sense of helplessness and revulsion, although fully justified, does not lead to a deeper understanding. The fact that these atrocities happen elsewhere, and the victims as well as the murderers speak unfamiliar languages, does not mean that their experience is utterly inaccessible to us. A patient and imaginative study of past events can help us to understand that no human action is beyond human comprehension. The explanation will not remove the odium from the murderers--and the truth of the events will not get buried in translation.<sup>19</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Jan Tomasz Gross, *Sasiedzi. Historia zagłady żydowskiego misateczka*. Pogranicze. Sejny 2000  
Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors. The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- <sup>2</sup> Abraham Brumberg, ‘Murder most foul’. *TLS*, March 2, 2001, pp. 8-9.
- <sup>3</sup> Letters by Jan Nowak and Czesław Karkowski, *TLS*, March 16, 2001, p. 17  
Letter by Abraham Brumberg, *TLS*, March 23, 2001, p.17  
Letters from Norman Davies and Werner Cohn, *TLS*, March 30, 2001, p.21  
Letters by Vaiva Pukite, Tony Judt, Abraham Brumberg, *TLS*, April 6, 2001, p. 17  
Letter by Abraham Brumberg, *TLS*, April 27, 2001, p.17  
Letters by Norman Davies and Marek Jan Chodkiewicz, *TLS*, May 4, 2001, p.17  
I am grateful to Ms Vera Bolton for following up the publication of this correspondence for me.

<sup>4</sup> *Neighbors*, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Neighbors*, pp. 122-123.

<sup>6</sup> The script of the film is available in print: Claude Lanzman, *Shoah. An Oral History of the Holocaust*. Pantheon Books, New York 1985.

<sup>7</sup> *Neighbors*, p. 14

<sup>8</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Shtetl*. Secker and Warburg, London 1998, p. 12.

<sup>9</sup> Some mis-spellings should be attributed to the court clerks and policemen taking down the statements.

<sup>10</sup> *Neighbors*, p. 215

<sup>11</sup> *Neighbors*, p. 210

<sup>12</sup> *Neighbors*, p.210

<sup>13</sup> It is instructive to compare contemporary definitions of ‘peasant’ in different Polish and English dictionaries. Equally interesting is the ambiguity around the words ‘peasant’ and ‘farmer’. In the same week in June 2001 *Guardian Weekly* published two articles on rural China. In one of them the inhabitants were called ‘peasants’, in the other ‘farmers’. It seems that the only difference was that one article dealt with rural poverty, and the other with the shortage of water in the countryside. In the first case the word ‘peasant’ meant a poor farmer, while in the other article the word ‘farmer’ designated just a type of rural occupation.

<sup>14</sup> ‘The reader of *Bread for the Departed* is asked to bear in mind that one of the most striking stylistic features of this novel – its multilayered linguistic complexity – is necessarily obscured in translation. *Bread for the Departed* is in a large measure an auditory novel, a novel of voices recorded in dialogues and snatches of overheard speech. In the scenes involving the children’s gangs, the smugglers, the provincial Jews whose first language is Yiddish, Wojdowski employs a complex and ingenious blend of standard Polish, Warsaw dialect, thieves’ argot, Yiddish and Hebrew words and phonemes. Bogdan Wojdowski, *Bread for the Departed*. Tr. By Madeline L. Levine. Northwestern University Press. Evanstone, 1997, p. XI.

<sup>15</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Glue*, Jonathan Cape, London 2001.

<sup>16</sup> William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Dover Publications Inc., New York 1958. (vol 1, pp.130-140) (vol.2, 1241-1245).

<sup>17</sup> Maria Janion’s book *Do Europy*. Warszawa 2000 contains several chapters on popular anti-Semitism in Poland.

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Lopreato. ‘How would you like to be a peasant?’ In: J. M. Potter et al., *Peasant Society. A Reader*. Little Brown and Company, Boston 1967, p. 426.  
G. Foster’s essay in the same volume may also help to explain greed as the motive for murder by the peasant concept of ‘limited good’ (there is not enough land to go round).

<sup>19</sup> The investigation of the murder in Jedwabne was reopened last year by a specially-appointed team of investigators. In the summer 2001 a monument with a new inscription was erected near the ruined Jewish cemetery. However, the local council prevented the mayor, Krzysztof Godlewski, from repairing and improving the road leading from the church square to the cemetery [see photo], claiming that as an ‘outsider’ he was siding with the Jews (he was not born in Jedwabne). As a result, Godlewski resigned from office. (*Polityka*, no.32, 2001)