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*Response to Sawomir Kapralski*

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## *Response to Sławomir Kaprański*

I would like to thank Sławomir Kaprański for his response to my article, and I hope both articles will provide a stimulating discussion on the problematics of collective memory. However, a crucial misreading of my views needs addressing. I did not claim that there was “genuine communal recollecting” of the massacre in Jedwabne. If that were the case, long before the publication of Jan Gross’s book, the old inscription on the monument commemorating the murdered Jews would have been replaced by one stating openly that Poles had perpetrated the massacre. In fact when I referred to “genuine communal recollecting” I did so in the context of Kurkowska-Budzan’s descriptions of instances of spontaneous communal commemoration of the tragedy in Jedwabne. Since these spontaneous commemorations have not so far helped the people of Jedwabne to openly acknowledge the responsibility for the massacre, I questioned whether such mythologized remembering can be relevant to the present-day inhabitants of the town (p. 173).

The memory project I referred to was not a complete recipe for “genuine communal recollecting” accepted by all Jedwabnians but an undertaking by a group of people to help the inhabitants of Jedwabne openly acknowledge who had murdered the Jedwabne Jews and to commemorate the tragic end of the Jewish community in the area (pp. 157–58). It is true that the project was headed by only a few people and subsequently did not have large popular support. However, there is strong evidence that the process was undermined by various factors and the few people of good will in Jedwabne were denied the time and space needed to develop the project, to involve different parts of the community in it and to build support for the specific plan of action that had been agreed upon at the meeting of 8 May 2000 in Jedwabne.

Sławomir Kaprański claims that the “official strategy” of how to deal with the Jedwabne debate—although “manipulative” and partly subordinated to “the Polish *raison d’état*”—“helped, as far as it could, to reveal the truth” (p. 188). I would argue that the truth about the massacre was not revealed by the official commemorations in July 2001

but by the IPN's investigation, which was completed a year after President Kwaśniewski's apology. As for "the manipulative official strategy," it was certainly not successful when it came to "deepening the historical consciousness of Polish society" (p. 188). In an opinion poll taken after the official apology and after the completion of the IPN's investigation, 50 percent of the respondents were unable to say who they thought had committed the massacre. Among those respondents who had an opinion, the majority believed that the Germans had been more responsible for the killing than the Poles, although the latter had also been involved in the massacre.<sup>1</sup> Kapralski explains such responses as defense reactions "against the unpleasant truth because it may threaten a positive image of the group" (p. 191). This explanation—true for any national group implicated in shameful behavior—cannot be contested. However, is this the sole reason why Poles cannot, 60 years after the war, acknowledge their dishonorable past?

I would suggest that the "official, manipulative strategy" of how to deal with the Polish-Jewish past is a major contributing factor. The long tradition of exploitation of Polish-Jewish relations, or the memory of these relations, has had consequences for Polish historical consciousness. Since 1918, when Poland was striving for independence,<sup>2</sup> through World War II,<sup>3</sup> the formation of a communist government, the power struggle in the communist party<sup>4</sup> and the economic crises of the 1980s,<sup>5</sup> to the present, as Poland seeks to be a partner and ally of the West, Polish-Jewish relations have been used by groups in power to facilitate their domestic and international political aims. In 2001, in the long tradition of "manipulative strategy," both the former anticommunist opposition and the former supporters of the communist regime used the Jedwabne debate as an opportunity to stigmatize political opponents and integrate their own electoral bloc. The dishonesty of the political establishment and the contradictory signals sent by religious and intellectual elites could not prevent Poles' authentic remembering but certainly did not aid the difficult process of reexamining the Polish-Jewish past. Even a wholehearted supporter of the president's apology could not have failed to notice that Kwaśniewski (in the past a prominent Communist) and the main political advocates of his apology, the postcommunist SLD party, had already conveniently forgotten why the relatives of the victims had had to wait over 50 years for a proper investigation into the massacre.<sup>6</sup>

The first step in helping Poles to look more honestly at their historical past would be to disengage debates on the Polish-Jewish past from its political exploitation in a domestic and international arena. Objective historical research on the Polish-Jewish past, new textbooks encompassing the forgotten aspects of the Holocaust, and energetic educational programs reaching beyond the generation currently at school are probably the answer to the country's attempts to reckon with the past. And, it is in this sphere that state financial and organizational contribution is needed and should be welcomed.

*Ewa Wolentarska-Ochman*

## NOTES

1. See the public opinion poll conducted by CBOS (Polish Public Survey Agency) on 23–25 Nov. 2002, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 Dec. 2002; and “Trend Reports Poles’ Opinions about the Crime in Jedwabne—Changes in Social Consciousness,” *Polish Sociological Review*, no. 1 (137) (2002): 117–28.

2. See George J. Lerski, “Dmowski, Paderewski and American Jews,” *POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* 2 (1987): 95–116.

3. See Krystyna Kersten, *Polacy, Żydzi, Komunizm, Anatomia półprawd 1939–1968* (Poles, Jews, communism, an anatomy of half-truths, 1939–1968) (Warsaw, 1992), 15–16 and 91–101.

4. For a concise but highly informative text on the Jewish question in postwar Poland, see Łukasz Hirszczyk, “The Jewish Issue in Post-War Polish Communist Politics,” in Chimen Abramsky, Maciej Jachimczyk and Antony Polonsky, eds., *The Jews in Poland* (Oxford, 1986), 199–208. See also Krystyna Kersten and Jerzy Szapiro, “The Contexts of the So-Called Jewish Question in Poland after World War II,” *POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies* 4 (1989): 255–68.

5. See Łukasz Hirszczyk, “Poland’s Jewish Policies under Martial Law,” *IJA Research Report*, no. 3 (May 1982); and idem, “Documents: Anti-Semitism in Today’s Poland,” *Soviet Jewish Affairs* 12, no. 1 (1982): 55–65.

6. One can be skeptical about the the SLD’s “historical consciousness” since only two years before the apology, 60 SLD MPs, together with their leader, Leszek Miller, had voted in parliament for a resolution expressing appreciation for Roman Dmowski’s work for the Polish state. Dmowski, the leader of the National Democrats before the war, had been internationally renowned for his propagation of anti-Semitic ideology. See Andrzej Walicki, “The Troubling Legacy of Roman Dmowski,” *East European Politics and Societies* 14, no. 1 (2000): 43–46.