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Imaging Jedwabne
The Symbolic and the Real

In the course of the past year, the name of Jedwabne—a town at the end of the world, and a place about which its residents had commented that economic stagnation and a fall into oblivion had left it only good for "plowing under"—has now permanently entered the dictionary of historical iconry.

At the beginning of May 2000, in an article heralding the publication of the Polish edition of Jan Tomasz Gross' *Neighbors*, a journalist from *Rzeczpospolita*, Andrzej Kaczyński mentioned Jedwabne for the first time on the pages of a Polish nationwide, daily newspaper.[1] After a few months of silence on the subject, subsequent articles appeared in the press which familiarized readers with the geographic location of the town and its surroundings as well as the historical setting of the tragedy of 1941. Concurrently, as the debate broadened in its thematic fields, so, too, the concept of "Jedwabne" extended in meaning.

As the name of a place as well as an adjective it began to "play" in the Polish language. Reaching now for the first thing on the shelf, suffice it to recall the cover of the Jewish monthly *Midrasz* of February 2001—the issue entitled "Woolen, Cotton, Silken."[2] Soon afterwards, jokes emerged in everday language and popular culture such as the one about the "Jews' favorite ties—silken ones."

It seems to me that Jedwabne—despite the fact that it has occupied a specific space at a certain latitudinal and longitudinal point for about half a millennium—has as if dematerialized, becoming instead a symbol in the discussion about Polish-Jewish relations, about responsibility, and about the Holocaust. The word "Jedwabne" now appears beside Oświęcim and Kielce. Not wanting to delve here into the semantic details of the contents of this concept, I only wish to pose a question: from the point of view of a resident of this local and quite small (under 2000 inhabitants) community, is Jedwabne "no less than" a symbol, or "only" a symbol?

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[1] A. Kaczyński, "Całopalenie" [The Holocaust], *Rzeczpospolita*, 5 May 2000.

[2] *Midrasz*, February 2001, 2(46), "Wełniane, bawełniane, Jedwabne." The cover presents bolts of fabric; under a navy woolen and greyish-blue cotton one, lies the silken (Jedwabne) one in red and white—the Polish national colors.

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Jedwabiniacy—because that is how the residents of this town are called in the area—read articles in which intellectuals, scholars, and journalists speak of the murder in Jedwabne operating with the terms "the Sielawa barn," "the Laudański brothers," and "the market square in Jedwabne." For the discussants these are building blocks in an academic, multidimensional—spatial and temporal—puzzle all of which comprise nonmaterial elements.

For the Jedwabnians, "the Laudański brothers" mean personalities, emotions, a complicated net of genealogical connections and social relationships. Each new, and even the most random and abstract interpretational context in which "the Laudański brothers" appears on the pages of nationwide periodicals has, in the real Jedwabne, a somewhat different meaning. Here in Jedwabne it is read literally and has immediate effects on the current social scene. Here Jan Tomasz Gross' book is read not to find out what happened 60 years ago, and not to find out what the author has to say on the subject, but so as to read in black and white the names of the murderers. Those few lines on page 19 of the Polish edition of *Neighbors* were for many, and especially for the older generation, the essence of the book.

The murder of the Jews was not unknown. What had always stirred local society was talk of those whose "hands were stained with Jewish blood" and burdened by the "Jewish curse." Rumors and gossip had run through the town and its surrounding area for many years, but what "people say" does not have the same effect as what is in print. A person whose name crops up on the pages of Gross' book is, for most readers, one of many who exist against the backdrop of Jedwabne which the author described and only with regards to the tragedy in which that individual was a witness or perpetrator. A name appears (I hope this is the case) only because the narrative would be hard to follow without it.

In the real Jedwabne, however, live that person's children and grandchildren—quite likely bearing the same surname, his or her closer and more distant relatives, friends and acquaintances, and neighbors. For these people *Neighbors* is a book with one main character. For them each word written on their subject has consequences in everyday reality. Tomorrow perhaps people will look upon them differently—even if the author of the book has made an error in his assignations and everyone knows that that is the case, and even if a journalist has written something which was merely his or her clear and evident speculation.

Naturally, many of those who write "from afar" saw the Laudańskis, the mass grave of the murdered, or Jedwabne's market square "with their own eyes"—on photographs in the press, or perhaps even during a visit to Jedwabne itself (actually more the case with journalists than university intellectuals). Finally, Agnieszka Arnold's film *Neighbors* which Polish television showed in April 2001 visualized the scene of the crime for a broad viewing audience. We could all enter the narrow streets of the small town, see the faces of the few remaining witnesses and survivors, and gaze into the eyes of today's residents of Jedwabne and nearby Radziłów.

Yet has Jedwabne been returned to reality in this way, or quite the contrary—has the "scene of this crime," filmed artistically, with a musical background, been engraved into the visual memory of viewers as the symbol of persecution and torture

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of Jews committed at the hands of their Catholic neighbors? Why is it that when we refer to this work, we usually speak of "the film about Jedwabne" although the author dealt almost equally with a similar tragedy in Radziłów? Having spoken with many persons who carefully and attentively watched this film, I find that they are incapable of differentiating which of the events relayed in the accounts took place in Jedwabne and which in Radziłów. Of course, if we accept that it is the eloquence of these tragic facts which matters, then this lack of clarity is insignificant. If, however, we ask about the uniqueness of the murders in Jedwabne, then it is even highly significant. Then to the list of massacres committed against Jewish Poles in which non-Jewish Poles took part we would add, for instance, Radziłów and Wąsosz and then Jedwabne ceases to be such an alarming exception.

Returning again to the "real Jedwabne," did the Jedwabnians see and recognize on television, in Agnieszka Arnold's film, their place of residence? The market square in the "real Jedwabne" is about a dozen homes, a church, and a few tree-lined streets—a relatively small space in which each square meter counts. Here more weight is on precise delineation of the spot where the Jewish woman holding a child in her arms was killed. Long after the war, the weeds between the cobblestones here grew in the shape of a cross. If this phenomenon had appeared a few meters further away, people from all over the area would not gather before it in propitiatory prayer.

The frozen pond covered by a sheet of ice in the film is not the waterhole about which we read in *Neighbors* where two Jewish women drowned with their children during the pogrom[3] though that is was the cinematographer's images suggests. That waterhole no longer exists. For the viewer perhaps it does not matter where those two women perished so tragically, but the owners of the property behind which it was once found most certainly react differently to the account of Shmuel Wassersztajn about this event.

In contrast, for Jedwabnians, the pond visible today is connected with a very different story which became the source of that pool's own dark legend—about the Jewish man who being drowned by participants in the massacre called out to heaven, "Mary! Saint Joseph! Stand by me!" When the perpetrators attempted to pull the corpse out so as to rob it of expected jewelry and clothing, a "real miracle happened," as people tell it: "the Jew was as naked as God had created him." Since that time all those who dove into the pond in search of lost Jewish gold met with divine punishment—they all drowned.

For those who know Jedwabne, its residents, and its situation as a place deeply marked by the mythologized memory of a tragic event, the nationwide Polish debate in which the most important aspects—morality, responsibility, and punishment—are being discussed is taking place somewhere off to the side of the real Jedwabne. Or it is even building a new Jedwabne, though through the very same concepts which shape a real community. That is why, apart from the already infamous "Committee for the Defense of the Good Name of Jedwabne" which a handful of local "politicians"

[3] J. T. Gross, *Sąsiedzi: Historia zagłady żydowskiego miasteczka* [Neighbors.The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne]. Sejny: Pogranicze, 2000, p. 12.

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founded, Jedwabnians remain rather passive observers of the conscience reckoning being effected for Jedwabne.

In their eyes the ceremony of 10 July 2001 and the new monument—the unquestionable meritorious outcomes of the nationwide debate—are a material expression of that symbolic, "alien" Jedwabne, the one that is "only" a symbol. For the Jedwabnians the new monument with its changed inscription is loaded with different emotional meaning than that which it has for that part of society which feels in some sense responsible for that symbolic Jedwabne, for the Holocaust of the Polish Jews, for the attitude of non-Jewish Poles with regards to their Jewish neighbors during and even before the Shoah. For Jedwabnians the monument to the local tragedy is the pond itself or the two square meters of the market square where "miracles" have taken place.

A reckoning of accounts with the past has not yet been completed in the "real" Jedwabne. It began a long time ago—one could even say the morning after the murder—but it is an unfinished process and will most likely remain so for some time still. The mythology of "God's curse" or "the Jewish curse" on Jedwabne continues to live and, as long as it does, the conscience of Jedwabne will grapple with the sin of its past.

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