

BOOK REVIEW

**It's Different in Poland**

Book review by  
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*Imaginary Neighbors: Mediating Polish-Jewish Relations after the Holocaust* Ed. Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zylinska, University of Nebraska Press, 2007, 337 pp.

Following the recent death of Polish President Leszek Kaczyński and numerous members of his administration in a plane crash over Smolensk, Vladimir Putin allowed Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyń* to be shown on Russian TV. The film depicts the massacre of upwards of 20,000 Polish officers in 1940 at the hands of the Soviet army and the subsequent cover-up of the crime, which pinned it on the Nazis until official recognition by the Russian government in 1990. The script of the film is based on a fiction, a historical novel depicting real events. Wajda's own father perished in the Katyń massacre and the opening credits end with the dedication, "moim rodzicom". For my parents. Kaczyński and the other victims of the crash were on their way to commemorate the massacre when the plane crashed. The film appears on Russian television, but Putin's administration continues the refusal to treat the victims as victims of Stalinist repression and thus to grant them formal posthumous rehabilitation. Poles continue to speculate whether the officials' deaths were actually accidental. All of this combines to form what we might call, following Joanna Zylinska, the "event Katyń."

When it comes to the war and the propaganda machines at work after the war, the Polish social imaginary offers a rather spectacular example of the problematics of memory. The collection *Imaginary Neighbors* comes in response to the publication of Jan Tomasz Gross's notorious book *Neighbors* (2000), which details the massacre of hundreds of Jews at the hands of their Polish neighbors in the village of Jedwabne on July 10, 1941. The conversation unfolding over the past eight years, however, dramatically transcends Jedwabne as a historico-geographical location, taking up major themes in contemporary political

philosophy that, however fruitful, have remained overly abstract. Joanna Michlic writes in her chapter that

the debate about *Neighbors* signaled an important moment in the Polish interrogation of Poland's dark past. The debate was the most profound of any discussions of Polish-Jewish relations after World War II. It resulted in a major inquiry into the dominant representations of Polish-Jewish relations in World War II as well as into the Polish national self-image and identity. (26)

Gross's second book on this subject, *Fear* (2007), discusses Polish anti-Semitism after the war and makes the speculative (and damning) claim that the post-war events in question serve as direct evidence of Polish complicity in the Holocaust. Both works by Gross have been deeply criticized by scholars, and yet they continue to inspire heated, ongoing controversy.<sup>1</sup> So what exactly is the controversy about, if the facts and numbers offered in Gross's work have been shown to be inflated and false? Clearly, what is at stake is not getting the facts and numbers "right," but something else. This "something else" is what *Imaginary Neighbors* invites us to think through.

Polish debates, inquiries, (self-)interrogations, and (self-)defenses continue against a specific backdrop, in which strong philo-Semitic sentiments and practices exist side-by-side with a virulent anti-Semitism. The very successful right-wing, Catholic, nationalistic youth group Młodzież Wszechpolska flourishes alongside the equally successful annual Festival of Jewish Culture in Kraków, and Judaic Studies programs are cropping up at most major universities, with the enrolled students (primarily non-Jewish Poles) walking around cities whose walls are spattered with anti-Semitic soccer graffiti (70-72). The fact that the spotlight has shifted from Gross's first book to his second makes *Imaginary Neighbors* even more timely and urgent. Debates around the Polish-Jewish problematic are becoming increasingly institutionalized and linked ever more intimately to imaginaries of nation and neighborliness as they are currently deployed in Polish political discourse and cultural formation.

"It seems to us that Polish attitudes towards the Jews and Jewish conceptions of Poles and Poland have remained largely *untheorized*" (9), write Dorota Glowacka and Joanna Zyliska in their introduction. It could be just as easily articulated from the other side: topics

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<sup>1</sup> See Marek Jan Chodakiewicz, *Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Before, During, and After* (East European Monographs, 2005) and *The Chesterton Review*, volume XXXIII, Nos. 1 & 2, 2007, Polish Issue, particularly Dermot Quinn's essay "In Search of Polish Anti-Semitism" and James Thompson's review of *Fear*.

like cultural memory, witnessing, forgiveness, and trauma have been heavily theorized among continental philosophers for a while now, but this important work has remained largely *unsituated*. In response, this collection is the first to seriously put contemporary Continental philosophy to work in the service of this very concrete and situated problematic of community, difference, and memory. Ewa Plonowska Ziarek's chapter turns to psychoanalysis to "diagnose the 'pathology'" of Polish collective memory of this relationship (314), Glowacka's chapter extensively calls on philosophers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida on the topics of forgiveness and witnessing, Zylinska's own chapter is housed in Derrida's work on hospitality, and Geoffrey Hartmann invokes Maurice Blanchot's *Writing of the Disaster* as a model for how to read Gross. Other chapters robustly explore multilayered concepts like "postmemory," "cultural appropriation as false witness," "messianic nationalism," and the "event," as in Zylinska's newly coined "event Jedwabne" (279), while interrogating and rearticulating these notions in light of the events under discussion. Thus, extending far beyond the question of Polish-Jewish relations, this project is important for any community struggling with issues of cultural memory across identity divides (and what community isn't?), and with the epistemological questions around the task of framing the struggle, articulating the problems, and thinking critically about answers, solutions, and reparations.

But location and context remain at the forefront of the volume. Continental philosophy is only one of the disciplines represented here, and there are several chapters which place us unmistakably in what might be called Polish studies. The book includes a foray into film theory in Terri Ginsberg's analysis of Wajda's film "Korczak." Marita Grimwood and Alina Molisak offer fascinating surveys of literature by the "Second Generations," Jewish and Polish, respectively, exploring how each second generation imagines Poland as a site of this relationship. And Zeb Garber and Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkineł both offer detailed accounts of the complex religious dimensions of the debates.

Perhaps most importantly, however, there is more theory to be "done" in response to much of the work presented here. In addition to the very strong chapters that put Continental philosophy to such good "use," the more autobiographical, ethnographic, and literary chapters invite—or even demand—to be engaged theoretically. I have in mind particularly Eva Hoffman's contribution, which takes the form of a play set in Jedwabne. Hers is the only chapter to introduce a significantly different way of speaking, taking this

collection beyond interdisciplinarity to the transcendence of genre itself. Andrew Jakubowicz's chapter on the Jews of Łódź speaks to me personally—as a Łódź native, I recognize so much of the unique urban space he describes (including the ubiquitous anti-Semitic soccer graffiti) as both my own and foreign. The more prosperous and aesthetically attractive Kraków and Warsaw now lead the way in commerce and tourism, including the increasingly popular “Jewish itineraries,” while the economically depressed Łódź, once a diverse, bustling center of Jewish life and Polish-Jewish interaction, is more and more easily passed over. This makes Jakubowicz's contribution all the more valuable.

But perhaps it is novelist Janina Bauman's intimate piece “Living with Anti-Semitism,” striking in its brevity and tone of deep estrangement, that is the subtle centerpiece of this project. The author begins the 1.5 page-long essay by claiming that she does not really “belong” in this collection. She then performs a double gesture, identifying as unquestionably Polish (as opposed to belonging “to two cultures,” as Polish Jews have often been described) and simultaneously explaining why she will never return to Poland to live. Although she has encountered deep and consistent anti-Semitism in England, Bauman writes, “It's different in Poland. There it hurts me, it wounds me to the core. That's why I can't return. Because I would have nowhere to run if I ever heard that I was a stranger, that I was unwanted in my native country” (64-65). Her refusal to write herself into this, alongside her refusal to return, even as she—precisely—writes herself into this, which is itself a kind of return, a deep vulnerability and inability to truly *leave* once and for all, transports the reader to the very edge of the wound itself.

Together, all of the chapters comprise a rich, demanding, interdisciplinary work, which provokes multiple conversations among existing bodies of literature and will certainly inspire major new work in this area. It is the editors, however, who are clearly most invested in responding to the controversies provoked by Jan Tomasz Gross, for whom the crime of Jedwabne is all that much more unthinkable precisely because it was committed by neighbors, “a failure in the ethics of neighborly hospitality” (286). In response to this, Zylinska performs an analysis of neighborliness itself, and specifically the “premodern ‘multicultural’ neighborliness” at work in Poland. She suggests that the strange, ritualistic, almost sacrificial nature of the killings—read by Gross as unadulterated sadism—is in fact symptomatic of certain social order, a direct result of the specific nature of Polish-Jewish neighborliness, which “encompassed a whole spectrum of conflicting and not always

accounted-for emotions: from hate through to contempt, indifference, envy, obsession, desire, and even love” (277). Such intelligent responses to Gross, as well as deep skepticism about his work, are possible. Indeed, they are necessary, even as Poles continue to practice self-interrogation and honest self-criticism, and continue to experience mourning as well as, in Glowacka’s words, “deep shame” (269). These chapters offer alternatives from the usual responses to the Jedwabne narrative, which do one of three things: discredit Gross’s research, turn to the facts of suffering under the Nazi terror in order to contextualize actions by Poles, or offer the Polish tradition of philo-Semitism as something that somehow mitigates the anti-Semitic narrative.

For the editors, this book is about the future, and they rightly place the question of Polish-Jewish relations at the very center of the discussion concerning Poland’s cultural and political future. Zylinska poses the question—as question mark and as demand—of a future neighborliness (or a neighborliness oriented towards a future?), one “that could be enacted in the political landscape of the twenty-first century, with its ‘crises’ over asylum and immigration, its as-yet unresolved Israel-Palestine conflict, and its European Union which ‘welcomes’ new members while strengthening its borders against ‘aliens’ and ‘illegal immigrants’” (281-82). Indeed, how could a new model of neighborliness intervene in a Poland that so enthusiastically participated in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and continues to celebrate its position as one of the nations leading this international military occupation?

“*Katyn*” and the discussion around Gross are both occasionally represented as examples of a new freedom to tell the truth, a truth uncontaminated by politics or ideology. Such fetishization of “the facts” offers a haven from difficult questions concerning the ethics of witnessing and testimony. In contrast, this book reminds us that all memory is mediation and that telling “what really happened” is an enormous and bottomless responsibility. Glowacka writes,

If both forgiveness and witnessing are open-ended processes in which responsibilities are continually reevaluated, never accomplished, and thus always on the verge of collapse, it is only through willingness to expose ourselves to the risk of the unknowable that we can engage the possibility of a new beginning, the promise of a future. (270)

Michlic describes two camps that formed in response to Gross, one “self-critical” and the other “self-defensive” (27). Yet however much they differ, both camps

acknowledge the facts and deploy the knowledge about them in the service of a narrative of the new nation. *Imaginary Neighbors* presents the Polish-Jewish problematic and its central events in new and more productive terms, terms which interrogate the commitment to knowability and its political effects. Glowacka's "possibility of a new beginning" is not to be confused with today's popular investment in a new, self-determined Poland, free of invaders, communists, and other propagandists, free to tell the truth and return to its original, uncontaminated self. The futurity explored by the editors and the spirit of the collection as a whole depends on a national identity in question and in flux, on the permeability of boundaries and impurity of blood, on radical vulnerability to an other who may be a guest or an enemy (because one never knows, after all, when opening the door). In other words, what Poland has always been. And in contrast to a futurity which never looks back, the dedication of this book reads simply *Rodzicom* "For our parents".

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