

Survivor Testimonies and Historical Objectivity: Polish Historiography since *Neighbors*

NATALIA ALEKSIUN

In the introduction to his *Neighbors*, Jan Gross argued for centrality of Jewish accounts from the Holocaust as reliable sources for reconstructing the tragic past:

Jewish testimonies about the Shoah have been deliberately written down in order to provide an exact and comprehensive account of the catastrophe ... We should read in these efforts an intuition that one could effectively oppose, indeed frustrate, the Nazis' plan of annihilation of the Jews if only a record of the Nazis' evil deeds was preserved.

Gross raised the bar quite high insisting on the inclusion of Jewish testimonies as a rule rather than an exception. His inclusive methodological position has been criticised in the course of the fierce discourse over his book and his own use of survivors' testimonies presented as a methodological shortcoming. However, despite such voices, a growing consensus among Polish historians did emerge that the experience of the Jewish victims must be explored and that in this effort testimonies often proved the only sources available.

While much has been written about the discussion around *Neighbors*, my essay will focus on the methodological discussion among Polish historians over the last decade both in academic publications and in more popular articles published in Polish journals. I will investigate the ways in which Polish scholars writing about the Holocaust compared the pitfalls and advantages of using eyewitness testimonies when they could hardly be corroborated. I will argue that Polish historiography of the Holocaust has gradually recognised the importance

Natalia Aleksium is Associate Professor of Jewish History at Touro College, New York. She published *Dokąd dalej. Ruch syjonistyczny w Polsce (1944–1950)* and co-edited vol. 20 of *Polin*, devoted to the memory of the Holocaust. She is completing a book manuscript which focuses on Polish Jewish historians before the Holocaust. Her work has been published in *Yad Vashem Studies*, *Polish Review*, *Dapim*, *East European Jewish Affairs*, *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, *Gal Ed*, *East European Societies and Politics and German History*.

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of Jewish accounts as indispensable historical source. Moreover, the use of survivors' accounts helped Polish historians to embrace the advantage of incorporating individual, unique perspective on the Holocaust inherent in such primary sources. In fact, a generation of researchers emerged willing to settle for a phenomenological representativeness instead of the statistical one and calling for sensitive and empathetic reading of the Jewish sources.

One of the decisive turning points in the discussion of Polish-Jewish relations during the Second World War came with Jan Tomasz Gross's *Neighbors*, published in Poland in late May 2000.¹ Based on survivors' accounts and the documentation of the post-war trials, the book shocked many readers in Poland with the details of the brutal massacre of the Jewish community in the small town of Jedwabne, the massacre perpetrated by the Polish inhabitants, intimately familiar with their Jewish victims. The heated public debate that followed – one of the most significant public discussions since the fall of Communism in 1989 – reached its peak in the first half of 2001 with hundreds of polemical and supportive newspaper articles, and continued later with books published 'against' and 'in favour of' Gross.² Further research, carried out in the wake of the public debate, yielded more details and the sense of a broader regional scope of the anti-Jewish violence in the summer of 1941.³ In response to his more recent books – *Fear: Anti-Semitism after Auschwitz*, and *Golden Harvest: Events on the Periphery of the Holocaust* – Polish historians have continued to discuss thorny issues such as antisemitism, Polish-Jewish relations during and after the war, and in particular Poles profiting from the murder of the Jews.⁴ Indeed, *Neighbors*, *Fear* and *Golden Harvest* have made a lasting impression on the community of scholars in Poland and on the Polish general public as they ran counter to well-established self-images and national icons of Polish heroism, patriotism and victimhood.⁵

The discussion in the wake of Gross's publications also tackled the issue of historians' craft and scholarly guidelines on uncovering the past. In an attempt to delegitimise painful questions about Polish-Jewish relations during and after the Holocaust, Gross was repeatedly criticised for his lack of 'objectivity' and accused of not being enough of a historian. He was chastised for drawing conclusions about the nature of Polish-Jewish relations during and after the Holocaust based on such unique and distinct events as the

murder of the Jews in Jedwabne and the pogrom in Kielce. Historians rebuked him for what they perceived as his failure to address the social, political and psychological contexts in which Polish society found itself in the aftermath of the Soviet occupation in 1941 and in the wake of the communist takeover in 1946. Polish historians also questioned Gross's attitude to Jewish testimonies, and, for that matter, to court files in the post-war trials of Polish citizens indicted for collaboration. Indeed, Gross argued for the inclusion of Jewish testimonies as a rule rather than as an exception. Polish historians by and large have rejected this position. They called for selective use of Jewish accounts, and stressed the need for scrutiny in corroborating Jewish sources against other, less personal documents.⁶

Their position of caution was far from exceptional, particularly when scholars focused on institutional analysis of the Final Solution. In his autobiographical book, Raul Hilberg addressed the criticism of his reliance on perpetrators' sources expressed by the historians affiliated with Yad Vashem, and asked rhetorically, 'Did his [Dr Joseph Melkman] experts really believe that their Yiddish or Hebrew sources had altered the basic history revealed by the German documents?'⁷ Based on her own experience with transcribed testimonies, Lucy Dawidowicz complained that they 'have been full of errors in dates, names of participants, and places, and there are evident misunderstandings of the events themselves. To the unwary researcher, some of the accounts can be more hazard than help.'⁸

Despite critical voices, a growing consensus among Polish historians did emerge recognising that the experience of the victims must be explored and integrated into the Polish historical narrative of the Second World War and that testimonies played a key role in this effort. Hence, in the course of the last decade or so, Polish historiography of the Holocaust has increasingly incorporated a variety of Jewish accounts: diaries, memoirs, court testimonies, video tapes and more, as an indispensable historical source. Moreover, the use of survivors' accounts helped Polish historians to recognise the advantage of individual, unique perspectives on the Holocaust inherent in such primary sources. In fact, a generation of researchers emerged willing to settle for a phenomenological representativeness instead of a statistical one. Authors such as Barbara Engelking, Dariusz Libionka, Alina Skibińska, Angieszka Haska and Marta

Cobel-Tokarska have insisted upon a sensitive and empathetic reading of the Jewish sources. Does this turn to Jewish testimonies by a number of Polish historians indicate their embracing of a new, more 'Judeo-centric' approach to the study of the Holocaust?⁹

Addressing the Limits of Jewish Testimonies

Despite Gross's methodological calls, Polish scholars writing about the Holocaust remained – for the most part – suspicious of his position. They made forceful statements on the need for an objective and value-free use of documents since generating a historically accurate narrative remained the goal of historians. From their point of view, testimonies appeared unreliable due to their subjectivity. Having compared the pitfalls and advantages of using eye-witness testimonies when they could hardly be corroborated and interpreted, Gross's critics considered such practices as a departure from the canons of historical craft. In the discussion following the publication of *Neighbors*, some historians mocked not only Gross's account of the events in Jedwabne but the institutions which collected testimonies. Piotr Gontarczyk remarked: 'After the war various historical commissions collected testimonies, which were concerned with various political and propagandist interests more than with the truth.'¹⁰ His position – the demand for balance, context and professional distance of the scholar – served to defend a particular vision of Polish Jewish relations. Gontarczyk's strategy has been aptly termed 'objectivizing historical thinking'.¹¹

While Gontarczyk can certainly serve as a rather extreme example, other Polish historians questioned the usefulness of Jewish accounts in terms of two crucial categories: representativeness and credibility.¹² In the 2011 discussion of experts organised by the prestigious *Rzeczpospolita*, one of Poland's leading dailies, Andrzej Chwalba expressed reservations about the credibility of the Jewish testimonies published by the *Karta*. He categorised them as 'strongly subjective' and therefore useful only for the studies of emotions, emotional climate and ambiance. In his eyes, these were 'insightful studies of persecuted individuals' and just that.¹³ Upholding the ideal of a positivist mode, he discouraged his fellow historians from referring to these documents for 'numbers and dates', or as another

Polish researcher put it, ‘actual behavior’.¹⁴ Marta Cobel-Tokarska argued that personal documents constituted

a more valuable source of knowledge about the opinions, feelings and psychological state of individuals, their perception of reality and the place these individuals see for themselves in this reality, than information about the actual course of historical events, especially those in which the author of a testimony did not participate.¹⁵

Holocaust scholars – such as Jacek Leociak, Barbara Engelking, Małgorzata Melchior, Marta Cobel-Tokarska, and others – stressed the discursive aspect of testimonies and the ways in which they reflected perceptions rather than tangible facts.¹⁶ Their authors struggled with the tension between the need to bear witness and the difficulty in expressing their emotions.¹⁷ Engelking offered a sophisticated discussion of the testimonies which revealed the experiences and emotions. She concluded that Jewish testimonies focused on persecution and suffering. As such they ‘tell above all about the destruction, the loss and the tragic fate of the dear ones, but rarely do they include descriptions of emotions which consume them’.¹⁸ In particular, testimonies available to scholars did not present all aspects of daily life during the war, but merely its fragments.

Scholars pointed to inherent problems with Jewish testimonies not only in their thematic focus, factual precision or heavy emotional burden, but also with the representativeness of the genre. In questioning the representativeness of Jewish testimonies, Cobel-Tokarska and Melchior focused on three basic points: few witnesses and participants of events wrote, few texts survived, and post-war testimonies and memoirs were the work of survivors and not representative of those who had been murdered.¹⁹ Engelking admitted to her struggle in reconstructing daily life in provincial towns of the Warsaw district before the liquidation of the ghettos due to the limited number of surviving testimonies. Regarding the goal of working with material representing all aspects of Jewish communal life, she conceded: ‘individual testimonies deal with histories of individuals and individual families and the circle of their acquaintances and neighbors. Only individual representatives of the local communities and their circle close to them survived in the

memories of the survivors.²⁰ She further noted the challenging difficulty in ‘weaving from the single threads of these memoirs a complete picture of the history of respective towns’.²¹ Given these reservations, some scholars concluded that such testimonies or personal documents in general should not form a basis of quantitative research, but rather estimations.²²

Still, many of the scholars who discussed their own difficult experience with individual accounts concluded that relying on them was inevitable if there were no additional sources. An incomplete picture still seemed a better compromise than no picture at all, if there were no other documents available. Sources at scholars’ disposal may offer only fragmentary knowledge as in the case of daily life in provincial towns. Engelking concluded that: ‘Limited number of preserved sources and their character forced a synthetic approach, causing the picture that I am trying to reconstruct to be handicapped and partial, limited and incomplete, possibly missing important elements.’²³ Without institutional documents to compare details, a skewed perspective overrode no perspective at all.²⁴ Ultimately, while pointing to the various limitations of Jewish testimonies, and suggesting caution in using Jewish testimonies as historical evidence, some Polish scholars advocated including such studies in the historiography of the Holocaust, and more broadly of the Second World War. They argued that Jewish determination to leave written traces behind ultimately turned these accounts into fundamental communications from individuals writing in the face of death: ‘If in the view of the authors of the words that they wrote on scraps of paper, they really could not manage to express, or record for posterity or preserve anything, they would not have taken such good care of them, would not have hidden them, would not have given their lives for them.’²⁵ While aware of inherent problems, historians working in Poland have increasingly relied on such accounts, however limited, in order to construct aspects of historical narrative of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. With this new perspective Polish historiography may in fact have entered what one scholar has termed ‘the era of the witness’.²⁶

Fitting Exemplifications and Textual Discourses

In order to make the claim for historical accuracy and objectivism, a number of Polish historians insisted on using only testimonies written very close to the event itself and largely avoided those created decades later. Andrzej Żbikowski declared that ‘on principle, testimonies recorded many years after the war – generally speaking since the 1960s – were much less important to me’.²⁷ Some Polish historians used personal accounts only to illustrate aspects of the Holocaust whose reconstruction ought to otherwise be based on official archival documents. Others incorporated fitting Jewish testimonies into the discussion.²⁸ Dorota Siepracka illustrated her examination of Polish-Jewish relations in *Wartheland* (Warthegau) with references to a few Jewish testimonies.²⁹ Focusing on the subject of assistance, she referred to post-war accounts of Jewish survivors to exemplify her argument that ‘passivity was not a common attitude among Poles’.³⁰ She argued that ‘Polish guards in the camps tried not to cause any harm to the Jewish prisoners and intervened only in necessary instances. Usually they tolerated various deviations from the camp by-laws and even instigated them.’³¹ She claimed that ‘Poles also helped to the best of their abilities the Jews who had escaped from camps.’ She illustrated this conclusion with the testimony of Szaja Gertner who had reached the ghetto in Lodz with the help of Polish peasants.³² She recalled Jewish testimonies to demonstrate the necessity of leaving the ghettos where the Jewish population was starving despite dangers involved.³³ This practice is not only analytically problematic, as testimonies are hand-picked to illustrate a historical narrative rather than to reconstruct it, but also ‘greatly impoverished our understanding of the Holocaust’, as Omer Bartov has recently argued.³⁴

Leading Polish scholars analysed Jewish testimonies as texts rather than historical sources. They distinguished between their strategy of discourse analysis and a reconstruction of the facts. Therefore, Leociak declared his primary interest being ‘the use of language in the cited texts, and how the process of communication of meaning is organized’.³⁵ This close, intimate relationship with autobiographical texts challenges scholars to pay close attention to every trace that may prove crucial for the message.³⁶ Despite their oft-stated distance

from historical analysis, a number of studies based on close readings of the texts provide insights relevant for historiography of the Holocaust. They remind historians of what Leociak called ‘a certain cognitive optimism’.³⁷

The Most Important Source

Without drawing directly on the experiences of survivor historians such as Philip Friedman, Szymon Datner and Joseph Kermish, Gross came to embrace the sources they had collected, and to share their methodological challenges.³⁸ In the introduction to *Neighbors*, he argued for centrality of Jewish accounts from the Holocaust as reliable sources for reconstructing the tragic past:

Jewish testimonies about the Shoah have been deliberately written down in order to provide an exact and comprehensive account of the catastrophe ... We should read in these efforts an intuition that one could effectively oppose, indeed frustrate, the Nazis’ plan of annihilation of the Jews if only a record of the Nazis’ evil deeds was preserved.

He pointed to the centrality of Szmul Wasersztajn’s testimony, which had been filed in 1945, for the reconstruction of the events in Jedwabne.³⁹ A few years later, a testimony of Tadeusz Markiel – a Polish witness to the murder of the local Jews by their Polish neighbours in Gniewczyna near Przeworsk – played a similar central role in uncovering this case. Polish historians of the region ignored it despite the persisting memory of the murder among the local community. Once revealed, the testimony became part of the scholarly literature cited by historians and journalists.⁴⁰ Dariusz Libionka prepared the first chapters of it for publication in the liberal Catholic journal *Znak* in 2008, and described the text as one of ‘the most moving autobiographic documents which I have come across while researching Polish-Jewish relations in the Polish provinces during the German occupation’.⁴¹ He saw Markiel’s testimony as ‘an appeal for a balanced picture of the social reality under occupation for the use of future generations’.⁴² Libionka wrote critically about the focus on the Righteous among the Nations in Polish historical scholarship, and in particular juxtaposed the case of the Ulms – a

family murdered for sheltering Jews from the village of Markowa – with the Jewish victims in Gniewczyna, where a group of local Poles tortured and betrayed local Jews, including men, women and children. Recognising the centrality of Markiel's account, Alina Skibińska, who prepared a book edition of the memoir, described her role as subservient to the voice of the witness. Her text served 'merely to clarify, fill in the blanks or correct the facts for this shocking testimony (based solely on the memory of the participants in the events), putting it in the context of events and realities of the occupation years'.⁴³ Robert Kuwałek's recent monograph of the Bełżec death camp relied heavily on testimonies of the few Jewish survivors and Polish witnesses. He showed that Jewish accounts include details about the functioning of the camp, such as the number of mass graves that had been first documented by Rudolf Reder and which were confirmed by the recent archaeological digs.⁴⁴ Last but not least, Jewish accounts reveal details of the tragic fates of those in hiding.⁴⁵

In the introduction to his monumental *Nazi Germany and the Jews*, Saul Friedländer declared that 'The only concrete history that can be retrieved remains that carried by personal stories'.⁴⁶ Many Polish scholars recognised the potential of testimonies in shedding new light on relations between the different ethnic groups under the German occupation. They argued for the necessity of discussing Polish-Jewish relations as the most important challenge for Polish historians. Moreover, 'One ought to strive to overcome the divide between the "Polish" and "Jewish" truths which found expression particularly in the countryside, and reconstruct the facts based on a broader base of available sources. Sources ... lead to the multi-dimensional space of Polish and Jewish encounters during the Holocaust'.⁴⁷ Ultimately, the turn to Jewish testimonies is bound to radically alter the narrative of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.

Skibińska and several other historians recognised the challenge and the potential in intimate encounters with the Holocaust that these accounts presented. She described diaries, memoirs, letters and testimonies as:

the most valuable source since diaries, memoirs, letters and other forms of it are the voice of the victims – the closest

witnesses of the Holocaust. Most texts, especially those created during the war, include motivations for writing. In most cases they stress that the need for documenting the experience in writing stems from the moral obligation vis-à-vis their murdered brethren. As they write for ‘future generations, the future tribunal’ they stress the factual aspect of their texts and the value of their testimony.⁴⁸

Thus, testimonies preserved information that would otherwise be lost and the voices of individuals who ‘wanted to transmit [their experiences] to others but [were] probably aware of the futility of that attempt’.⁴⁹ Engelking shows how personal accounts allow her to discuss intimate aspects of the Holocaust experience: crisis of families, fear; she discusses intimate details of parting from family members during deportations, and psychological effects on the news about pending deportation, including panic, hysteria and the inability to act.⁵⁰ Jacek Leociak reads closely accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto to reconstruct the dramatic internal religious discourse.⁵¹ A number of historians pointed to the fact that many authors of testimonies were in fact highly attentive to details.

‘The Jewish Side of the Coin’ – Dealing with the Jewish Experience

Interest in Jewish testimonies was closely linked to this newfound attentiveness to the Jewish voices from the Holocaust, despite initial reluctance of scholars in interpreting the role assumed by some Poles during and after the war as perpetrators of murderous violence against the Jews. While critical of Gross’s conclusions, Bożena Szaynok for example complimented him for ‘showing the Jewish experience’ and ‘a perspective on the postwar reality different from the Polish one’.⁵² She admitted that the aspects of this post-war reality presented by Gross ‘for the Jews constituted their basic experience’.⁵³ Increasingly, Polish scholars took interest in what one of them described as ‘the Jewish side of the coin’.⁵⁴

Engelking adopted the perspective from within by using Jewish sources in order to present a broad picture of the daily life of Jews. Her research is particularly important when it discusses provincial ghettos in contrast to well-researched large ghettos in Warsaw, Łódz

and Cracow, with the focus on such questions as daily life, communal and individual responses to the terror and persecution, the personal experience of the Holocaust: fears and hopes, degeneration, and communal and familial solidarity.⁵⁵ Aleksandra Bańkowska studied Jewish family camps in the district of Galicia.⁵⁶ Robert Kuwałek is one of the historians who sought out Jewish sources when researching ghettos and camps in the Lublin region. In particular, he referred to Jewish testimonies and memoirs in order to include the Jewish experience.⁵⁷ In her recently published monograph of the Jewish attempts at survival in Polish villages during the Holocaust, Engelking explicitly declared her interest primarily, if not exclusively, in the Jewish perspective: the Jewish experience, description and understanding of the situation. The choice of perspective led her to focus first and foremost on diaries written while in hiding and post-war testimonies of survivors. Based on the large number of such documents she strove to ‘fish out repetitive elements related to hiding in the countryside, in order to reconstruct them and describe anew’. Her entire effort has been driven by the desire to give voice to the victims as: ‘Others – Polish and Jewish observers of their fate must speak in the name of those who did not survive.’⁵⁸

The intellectual and moral obligation of giving voice to the victims led some Polish scholars to discuss also emotional empathy to the point of adopting a new professional credo: writing history as a personal encounter with suffering. One of the most staggering was the transformation – as it recently turned out, a short-lived one – that occurred in the publications of Krzysztof Jasiewicz. In the introduction to his 2001 study of the Soviet elites in occupied Poland he provided an alphabetic list of Soviet elites in Western Bialorus.⁵⁹ Instead of an emotionally neutral account, he suggested ‘writing a story with heroes that are normalized by the sources’.⁶⁰ Skibińska presented a more integrated project of Holocaust scholarship. Her ‘double mission’ included reconstructing the past while resisting emotional indifference to the burden of suffering of the victims contained in those sources. She concluded: ‘He is obligated to be not only true to his craft but also to be empathetic to the narrators.’⁶¹ However, the most elaborate was the point made by Barbara Engelking, who linked the empathetic search for Jewish voices with Polish historians’ particular moral obligation:

In the face of suffering of others we are overcome with anxiety since this situation requires patience, silence and sometimes it confronts us with our own pain, helplessness and other difficult experiences. It is not easy to remain open in the face of suffering, familiarize with it, look at it and find the path which will lead us in the midst of pain. Instead, we try to move the suffering away, keep it at a distance, negate it and reject it, instead of coping with it. Of course, the conviction that we can avoid what we are afraid to face is in fact an illusion. While we would like to continue avoiding the witnessing of the humiliation, suffering and death of Polish Jews – we are such witness – not by choice but because of the place of birth.⁶²

Ultimately, the challenge is ‘to strive to see and remember in the Jews ... a living, suffering human being’.⁶³ Engelking reminds us that testimonies, however fragmentary, can ‘partially save the victims from the anonymity of oblivion’.⁶⁴ Some historians point to the value of memoirs not just in describing facts but also as an emotional side of the Holocaust experience.⁶⁵ The value of Symcha Binem Motyl’s memoir cannot be overestimated as it ‘gives a full picture of Warsaw Jews since the outbreak of the war, through daily life in the ghetto, smuggling, liquidation *Aktion*, the uprising in the ghetto, hiding on the Aryan side, to Hotel Polski, to Bergen Belsen camp until liberation’.⁶⁶

Leociak stressed the importance of historical source, historical fact and the voices of survivors as intellectuals.⁶⁷ Discourse should not replace the reality of the Holocaust. Leociak insisted that Holocaust research ought to deal with ‘what really happened and about another human being, about those who were murdered, every one of whom had his own face and name’.⁶⁸ In particular, the testimonies prove invaluable for studies of local settings. Bartov argues convincingly that, ‘A close look at what happened in small communities on Europe’s eastern borderlands provides us with much insight into the social dynamics of interethnic communities at times of extreme violence’. Yet such a view from below of borderland communities also necessitates making use of records of the past often eschewed by historians.⁶⁹

Conclusions

Polish discussion mirrors one of the most essential changes in Holocaust scholarship – an evolution of historical research for which Jewish testimonies became an important source.⁷⁰ Since the late 1990s, in the scholarship produced in Poland, Jewish testimonies moved from the periphery of the historical scholarship on the Second World War. A young generation of scholars, without much deliberation, has included Jewish personal documents in their accounts of the war. The Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw has been preparing critical editions of the invaluable material from the Ringelblum Archives (Archiwum Ringelbluma. Konspiracyjne Archiwum Getta Warszawy). Finally, multiple initiatives such as the series titled *Memoirs, Testimonies and Diaries* (*Wspomnienia, relacje, dzienniki*) of the Jewish Historical Institute as well as *Polish Jews* (*Żydzi Polscy*) of Karta Publishing House, brought a wealth of primary material to the attention of historians. Polish scholars have now perceived these materials as necessary for a full, more objective picture of Polish society under the German occupation, and/or are willing to include Jewish narratives and perspectives, testing at times the limits of disciplinary norms, despite potential danger to their scholarly objectivity. On the other hand, even historians open to re-evaluating Polish historiography of the Holocaust hardly adopted Gross's radical call.

In the closing paragraph of *Neighbors*, Gross concluded optimistically: 'I believe that we have reached a threshold at which the generation, raised in Poland with freedom of speech and political liberties, is ready to confront the unvarnished history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war.'⁷¹ Following the publication of *Neighbors* and the debate, the subject of the Holocaust was brought to the centre of public attention. Polish historical writing seems to have become more acutely aware of the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations during, before and after the Second World War.⁷² It has also promoted new trends of historical research to be carried out. Thus, the genocide of Polish Jews is being integrated into the narrative of Polish history.⁷³ Jerzy Jedlicki summed up the change brought about by the debate: 'It took a blow as powerful as the news of what had happened in Jedwabne to break through our defensive walls and stir

the garrison of the Polish strong-hold.’ But he also pointed to the extremely divided character of the collective historical consciousness that found its expression in response to *Neighbors*:

It is still too early to predict how successful this breach of the wall will be ... Not to be ruled out is a scenario in which, after an exchange of arguments, each side sticks to its own version of the truth – the well-entrenched convictions in which it has invested so much faith and emotion that it cannot now call them into doubt.⁷⁴

Positivistic attack on testimonies is no longer a matter of course and it remains most explicit among historians who want to exclude evidence such texts contain. Polish historians may have been reluctant to speak of moral obligations in listening to Jewish voices, but they proved open to the possibility of a radical broadening of the sources to include Jewish testimonies, while often driven by a positivist search for facts.⁷⁵

New Polish research on the Holocaust contributes not only to the body of knowledge of the Jewish experience, shedding new light on Jewish-Gentile relations during the Second World War. It also complicates the contours of the Holocaust scholarship, which Dan Michman has divided into several cultural and linguistic spheres: ‘The German research sphere deals mainly with “perpetrators” ... , the Israeli sphere deals mainly with victims, the French sphere mostly emphasizes bystanders ... under the Nazi occupation regimes, and the English sphere devotes much room to issues of rescue and the actions of governments in the Free World’.⁷⁶ Polish historiography seems to be taking a new brave road engaging with the dilemmas of objectivity and subjectivity and bringing together historiography of the victims and of the bystanders.

NOTES

1. Gross, *Sąsiedzi*. Further references from the English edition of the book, unless indicated otherwise: Gross, *Neighbors*. The Jedwabne issue broke into the mass media in Poland with the broadcasting of Agnieszka Arnold’s documentary ‘Where is My Older Brother Cain?’ in April 2000 and Andrzej Kaczyński’s article ‘Całopalenie’, for the daily newspaper *Rzeczypospolita* in May of the same year.

2. Among others in dailies *Gazeta Wyborcza*, *Rzeczpospolita*, *Trybuna*, *Życie*, *Nasz Dziennik* and journals *Wprost*, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, *Więź*, *Znak*, *Tygodnik Solidarność*, *Niedziela*, *Najwyższy Czas*, *Mysł Polska*. For the discussion around *Neighbors* see Jankowski (ed.), *Jedwabne: Spór historyków wokół książki Jana T. Grossa 'Sąsiedzi'*; Henning (ed.), *Die 'Jedwabne-Debatte', in polnischen Zeitungen und Zeitschriften*; Brand (ed.), *Those Shalt not kill*; Polonsky and Michlic (eds), *Thou Shalt Not Kill*. For the more in-depth account of the discussion see Michlic, 'Coming to Terms with the "Difficult Past"'; Justyna Woźniakowska, 'Confronting History, Reshaping Memory: The Debate About Jedwabne in the Polish Press' (Submitted to Central European University Nationalism Studies Program in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts Advisor: Professor András Kovács; Budapest, Hungary 2002).
3. See Machcewicz and Persak (eds), *Wokół Jedwabnego*; Bikont, *My z Jedwabnego*.
4. Gross, *Strach*. Quotes from the English edition of the book Gross, *Fear*. Gross, *Złote żniwa*. In the English version, Gross, *Golden Harvest*.
5. Andrzej Paczkowski rightly pointed out that the underlying issue discussed in the context of Jedwabne was in fact the phenomenon of antisemitism in Poland, see Andrzej Paczkowski, 'Debata wokół "Sąsiadów": próba wstępnej typologii', *Rzeczpospolita*, 24 March 2001. Marci Shore takes the issue further and argues that 'despite the often self-absorbed debate about Polish anti-Semitism, the Jedwabne story is not only about Poles and Jews but also about modernity and revolution, subjectivity and totalitarianism'; Shore, 'Conversing with Ghosts', 351.
6. Gross compared the facts in the Jewish testimonies with the evidence of the post-war investigation and the trials. However, some of Szmul Wasersztajn's claims could not be corroborated. Dariusz Stola argued the evidence cited in the book 'provide[s] a sufficient basis for defining the major features of the crime: its genocidal character and horrifying cruelty, the significant number of Polish participants, and the German involvement, which was more limited than in hundreds of other massacres of Jews in the summer and autumn of 1941. However, both groups of sources have limitations and can be interpreted in divergent ways. German sources are virtually absent ... and the book goes far beyond depicting the above features, opening the door for legitimate controversy'. See Stola, 'Jedwabne', 140.
7. See Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*. In his autobiographical book Hilberg described his work on the history of the Holocaust stressing the official German documentation: 'I had immersed myself in this history, delving deeper and deeper into the documents of the German bureaucracy of the Nazi era in an attempt to touch bottom.' Hilberg, *The Politics of Memory*, 17. He also asserted that 'without an insight into the actions of the perpetrators, one could not grasp this history in its full dimensions. The perpetrator had the overview. He alone was the key. It was through his eyes that I had to view the happening, from its genesis to its culmination. That the perpetrator's perspective was the primary path to be followed became a doctrine for me, which I never abandoned.' *Ibid.*, 61–2. See Browning and Matthäus, *The Origins of the Final Solution*.
8. Dawidowicz, *The Holocaust and the Historians*, 177.
9. In 1957, Philip Friedman, a survivor and a pioneer scholar in the field of Holocaust research, argued: 'We can not rest content with a study of the persecutions and the reactions they provoked ... What we need is a history of the Jewish people during the period of Nazi rule in which the central role is to be played by the Jewish people, not only as tragic victims but as bearers of communal existence with all the manifold and numerous aspects involved. Our approach must be definitely "Judeo-centric" as opposed to "Nazi-centric".' Friedman, 'Problems of Research on the Holocaust', 561. As early as 1945, he had already outlined research into social, economic, religious and

- cultural aspects of Jewish life in the ghettos, camps, and in hiding, see Friedman, 'Outline of Program for Holocaust Research', 571–6.
10. Piotr Gontarczyk, 'Gross kontra fakty', *Życie*, 31 January 2001, 15–16, cited in Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę*, 437. See the discussion about 'objective historians' and Gross, *ibid.*, 435–41.
 11. Krupa, *Opowiedzieć Zagładę*, 440.
 12. See Cobel-Tokarska, *Bezludna wyspa nora grób*, 30.
 13. 'Świadectwa Zagłady – między Polakami a Żydami', *Rzeczypospolita*, 9 July 2011.
 14. Skibińska, *źródła do badań nad zagładą*. In collaboration with Marta Janczewska Skibińska, 358.
 15. Cobel-Tokarska, *Bezludna wyspa nora grób*, 32. See Melchior, 'Zagłada i stosunki polsko-żydowskie w opracowaniach socjologicznych', 68.
 16. By training Melchior and Cobel-Tokarska are sociologists, Engelking, a psychologist, and Leociak, a literary scholar and thus more interested in the subjective experience than external reality.
 17. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny, słoneczny dzień*, 16.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Cobel-Tokarska, *Bezludna wyspa nora grób*, 30. Engelking pointed out that most testimonies from provincial towns of the Warsaw district overlooked detailed discussion of the period before the liquidation of the ghettos. Therefore they make it difficult to reconstruct the daily life of Jewish towns under the German occupation before the spring and summer of 1942. One remembers events that were difficult, uncommon and singular. The daily life was in the shadow of the most difficult experience – the Holocaust, which had to be described first. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny, słoneczny dzień*, 16.
 20. Engelking, 'Życie codzienne Żydów w miasteczkach dystryktu warszawskiego', 119.
 21. *Ibid.*
 22. Cobel-Tokarska, *Bezludna wyspa nora grób*, 30. Małgorzata Melchior suggested choosing diverse cases in terms of individual testimonies both in their background and the subject matter to represent diverse categories, issues and variants. Melchior, *Zagłada i stosunki*, 68.
 23. Engelking, 'Życie codzienne Żydów w miasteczkach dystryktu warszawskiego', 122.
 24. See *ibid.*, 160, 172.
 25. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 266.
 26. Wiewiorka, *The Era of the Witness*, xv.
 27. See Żbikowski, 'Pogromy i mordy ludności żydowskiej', 160.
 28. See Ziółkowska, *Obozy pracy przymusowej dla Żydów*; Urynowicz, *Adam Czerniaków 1880–1942*.
 29. Siepracka, 'Postawy Polaków wobec ludności żydowskiej w Kraju Warty', 195–210.
 30. *Ibid.*, 197. A reference to Jewish testimonies and diaries showed that Poles participated in selling Jewish property, purchasing food, train tickets and travelling across the border to General Gouvernement. *Ibid.*, 198. See Siepracka, 'Stanisław Kaszyński wobec eksterminacji Żydów w obozie zagłady w Chelmie nad Nerem', 228–51.
 31. Siepracka, 'Postawy Polaków wobec ludności żydowskiej w Kraju Warty', 206.
 32. *Ibid.*, 207.
 33. *Ibid.*, 202–3.
 34. While Bartov criticises attitudes wary of testimonies: 'There is no reason to believe that official contemporary documents written by Gestapo, SS, Wehrmacht, or German administrative officials are any more accurate or objective, or any less subjective and biased, than accounts by those they were trying to kill.' Bartov, 'Communal Genocide', 400. In a similar vein, Polish historiography tends to rely on Polish accounts.
 35. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 23. See Monika Polit's comments on the tension between facts and texts, Polit, *Mordechaj Chaim Rumkowski*, 11–53.

36. See Engelking-Boni and Okoński, 'Sen o Zagładzie', 418; Kowalska-Leder, *Doswiadczenie Zagłady z perspektywy dziecka*, 8.
37. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 20. Leociak delves into the opportunities offered by a close reading of even a single text: 'A single text is enmeshed in a network of multifarious links. Firstly, it is in a certain sense "bereaved". It was earlier accompanied in the same time and space by other texts – which spoke of similar experiences and were written from similar motives – but which were lost. It is therefore connected with the lost texts by links which cannot be reconstructed. But we cannot ever finally know what has been lost beyond recall and what is still hidden and may be revealed ... Secondly, an individual text is complemented by other texts that survived. They throw mutual light on one another and fill in one another's gaps. The gaps and unclear passages in one text can be filled in by another text. When read as a stream of texts, they pass beyond their own fragmentary and amorphic nature. Thirdly, and finally, the text itself may be in many ways fragmentary – either preserved only in part or unfinished, or condemned to being inevitably fragmentary and incomplete by reason of the subjective viewpoint or limited knowledge of the author.' *Ibid.*, 20.
38. See Jockusch, *Collect and Record!* For a summary of the research published in Polish since the end of the Second World War, see Tomaszewski, 'Historiografia polska o Zagładzie', 155–70; Aleksion, 'Polish Historiography of the Holocaust', 406–32.
39. Gross, *Neighbors*, 24.
40. Gross and Grudzińska-Gross, *Złote żniwa*, 99–107; Engelking et al., *Zarys krajobrazu*, 233, 361, 378. Łazarewicz, 'Letnisko w domu śmierci', 32–5. See also A. Płęs, 'Strach było o tym mordzie mówić', *Gazeta Codzienna Nowiny*, 10–12 December 2010; A. Płęs, 'Była zbrodnia, nie było kary', *Gazeta Codzienna Nowiny*, 28–30 January 2011.
41. Libionka, 'Zagłada domu Trzczerów – refleksje historyka', 146.
42. *Ibid.*
43. Skibińska, 'Wstęp', 10.
44. Kuwałek, *Obóz zagłady w Bełżcu*.
45. Jan Grabowski asked rhetorically in his recent study, 'Is it really necessary to draw on this long list of drastic descriptions and tragic testimonies in order to prove the murderous actions of Polish youths drafted into the Baudienst? Unfortunately, yes. Even today there are historians willing to defend the activities of Polish *yunaki*, seeking justification for the latter's actions and trying to whitewash their direct involvement in the implementation of the Final Solution.' Grabowski, *Hunt for the Jews*, 128. See *ibid.*, 3.
46. Friedländer, 'Introduction', 5.
47. Engelking et al., 'Wstęp', 14–15.
48. Skibińska, *Źródła do badań nad zagładą*, 347.
49. Cobel-Tokarska, *Bezludna wyspa nora grób*, 27–8.
50. See Engelking, 'Życie codzienne Żydów w miasteczkach dystryktu warszawskiego', 185–91, 200–6.
51. Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 211–65.
52. Szaynok, 'Jan Tomasz Gross "Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz" (2006)', 488–9.
53. *Ibid.*, 489.
54. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień*, 13.
55. See Engelking, 'Życie codzienne Żydów w miasteczkach dystryktu warszawskiego'.
56. Bańkowska, 'Żydowskie obozy rodzinne w dystrykcie galicyjskim 1942–1944', 225–45.
57. Kuwałek, "'Erntefest" w świetle polskich materiałów śledczych (1944–1968)', 287–325; Kuwałek, 'Das kurze Leben "im Osten"', 112–34; Kuwałek, 'Die letzte Station vor der Vernichtung', 157–79.

58. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień*, 15.
59. Jasiewicz, *Pierwsi po diable*.
60. On the transformation of Jasiewicz's views into antisemitic accusations of Jews being allegedly responsible for their own demise in the Holocaust, see Anna Bikont, 'Metamorfozy profesora Jasiewicza', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 7 June 2013.
61. Skibińska, *Źródła do badań nad Zagładą*, 350.
62. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny słoneczny dzień*, 8.
63. *Ibid.*, 20. Engelking contrasts Jewish testimonies with accounts of Gentile witnesses at post-war trials which paid little attention to the feelings and experiences of the victims. *Ibid.*, 21.
64. Engelking, *Jest taki piękny, słoneczny dzień*, 19. In the introduction to Symcha Binem Motyl's memoir, Agnieszka Haska underscores that his account rescues from oblivion people who otherwise would have been forgotten. Motyl, *Do moich ewentualnych czytelników*, 18.
65. *Ibid.*, 19.
66. *Ibid.*, 17.
67. Leociak, 'O nadużyciach w badaniach nad doświadczeniem Zagłady', 11–12.
68. *Ibid.*, 17.
69. Omer Bartov, 'Communal Genocide: Personal Accounts of the Destruction of Buczacz, Eastern Galicia, 1941–1944', in *Shatterzone of Empire: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, ed. Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013), 400.
70. See *ibid.*, 399.
71. Gross, *Neighbors*, 173.
72. Many taboos concerning Polish-Jewish relations in the past have not yet been explored comprehensively, nor did they enter Polish social consciousness. Among these Bikont listed: the rise of antisemitic attitudes that were already strong before 1939, and during the war which were professed also by patriotic elites, and local pogroms in Jedwabne, Radziłów and Wąsosz. See Anna Bikont, 'Pięć lat po Jedwabnem', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 53, 3 March 2006, and 54, 4–5 March 2006, 24.
73. Polonsky and Michlic, 'Introduction', in *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 31–2. Woźniakowska argues that 'even if Jedwabne in the next couple of years does not break through to the school curriculum or the families' conversations, the generational change will gradually prepare the ground for the "dark parts" of national history to be more readily accepted by Poles ... In the changed political circumstances the old-style patriotism in Poland is (to the disappointment of some) disappearing. Young Poles are no longer attracted to history, they no longer need to preserve the image of the "heroic Homeland". Nevertheless, the question remains whether acknowledging Jedwabne and apologizing for the Polish crimes in the past translates directly into the decline of anti-Semitic sentiments.' Woźniakowska, 'Confronting History, Reshaping Memory', 96.
74. Jedlicki, 'How to Grapple with the Perplexing Legacy', 239. Michlic argues that several features of the debate on *Neighbors* in Poland 'indicate that the critical approach has gained more supporters within society than ever before, a positive development, which will hopefully lead to the normalization of the history of Polish-Jewish relations and to the creation of a more realistic and pluralistic collective image of Poles', Michlic, 'Coming to Terms with the "Difficult Past"', 10.
75. In contrast, Jacek Leociak states in his seminar work: 'We – the addressees of this testimony – should not be satisfied with merely condemning evil. We should also provide an answer to it, which means taking the risk of understanding.' Leociak, *Text in the Face of Destruction*, 269.
76. Michman, *Holocaust Historiography*, 389.

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