



TALKING ABOUT GENOCIDE - WAR, TRUTH AND MEMORY: CASE HISTORIES

INTRODUCTION

It was in 1941 that the order went out that Jews were to be massacred. But the killing of Jews by Germans had already taken place under cover of the war. In war, the normal rules of living together are forgotten, and civilisation begins to crumble.

There is no end to the damage war can, and does, do. It is a catastrophe affecting everyone within its reach. At a time specially chosen for thinking about the horror of genocide, and how to prevent it in the future, it's worth thinking about war - which is also a massacre of innocents. How do we let ourselves become violent and murderous? Why do we abandon truth in favour of treachery? We have to recognise that this is something of which almost all of us may be capable, if we create (or allow) situations in which prejudice, anger and hatred govern what we do and how we struggle to survive.

Here is a case history to think and talk about. It raises a number of issues about the way war changes not only what we do, but how we handle what's been done.

AN OUTLINE OF THE EVENTS

Jedwabne is a small town in the countryside of north-eastern Poland. In 1939 its population was over 2,000, half of them Jews.

On the morning of July 10 1941, a unit of probably up to a dozen armed German police arrived and went to the local authority offices to liaise with the mayor. Then many of Jedwabne's Jewish population - men, women and children - were rounded up and herded into the market place. Evidence suggests that the rounding-up was mainly done by local Polish men under the orders of the Germans, who distributed wooden clubs for the purpose. The men were also ordered to guard the Jews and prevent any of them from escaping.

The Jews were kept all day in the hot sun, humiliated and abused. Like Jews in a neighbouring town a few days before, they were ordered to kneel and weed the paving stones. They were also ordered to dismantle a statue of Lenin which had been put up in the square during the recent Soviet occupation of eastern Poland. During that occupation, many Poles had been deported to Siberia by the Soviets. Now, in 1941, both Jews and Poles might well wonder whether the Germans, the new occupiers of Poland, were going to deport them too.

Towards the evening the Jews were brutally driven through the town to a local farmer's barn (close to the Jewish cemetery), where they were shut in. Evidence also suggests that some were murdered on the way. The barn was then doused with inflammable fuel and set alight.

In 1949, under Poland's new communist government, a trial was held of almost two dozen men, all Roman Catholics living in Jedwabne, charged with 'collaborating with German

authorities in capturing 1,200 individuals of Jewish nationality who were then mass burned by the Germans in Bronislaw Sleszynski's barn'. It was noticeable in the trial reports that many of the men (mostly in their 30s and 40s; the youngest was 19, the oldest 52) changed their testimony from earlier statements made to interrogators. Before the public prosecutor their admissions were more limited. Some said that they had been beaten while being questioned, and had therefore said things which were not true.

Twelve of the men were given prison sentences from 8 to 15 years. (In 1950 an Appeal Court acquitted two of them. The rest were released in an amnesty after Stalin's death in 1953.) Another, tried separately, was sentenced to death: he had procured the fuel used in the burning. He was a man of German birth working for the local police, and was regarded by the court as not having been forced by the Gestapo to do what he did. His sentence was later reduced to 15 years in prison, though he may not have served the full term.

EXTRACTS (TRANSLATED) FROM WITNESS STATEMENTS, 1945

A Jewish survivor provided two written statements in 1945, telling his story of the massacre. It was this testimony that prompted the arrests and trial in 1949.

'Gestapo men came to town and had a meeting with representatives of the town authorities. When the Gestapo asked what their plans were with respect to the Jews, they said that all Jews must be killed. A local farmer offered his own barn which stood nearby. After this meeting the bloodbath began. Local hooligans armed themselves with axes, clubs studded with nails and other instruments of torture, and chased the Jews into the street. They selected 75 of the youngest and healthiest, and ordered them to pick up a huge monument of Lenin that the Russians had put up in the centre of town. It was impossibly heavy, but under a rain of terrible blows the Jews had to do it. While carrying it, they also had to sing. They were ordered to dig a hole and throw the monument in. Then they were butchered to death and thrown into the same hole. The rest of the Jews were ordered to line up in fours, with the rabbi and the Kosher butcher at the head, and were chased into the barn, beaten up along the way. Bloodied and wounded, they were pushed into the barn. Then the barn was doused with kerosene and lit, and the ruffians went round to Jewish homes to look for any sick people or children who had been missed out. After the fire they used axes to knock gold teeth from the bodies.'

This witness wrote in his statement that Germans had first entered Jedwabne on June 23 (part of the occupation of Poland as the German army advanced eastwards to invade the Soviet Union). He also said that local Polish thugs had begun anti-Jewish action straight away. 'I saw with my own eyes how these murderers killed a woman and two men, one of them 73 years old. Another they stoned to death with bricks. Another they knifed, plucked out his eyes and cut off his tongue. He suffered terribly for 12 hours before he gave up his soul.'

This same witness also described a tragic suicide on the same June day. Two women in their 20s, 'both holding new-born babies, saw what was going on. They ran to the pond in order to drown themselves with their children rather than fall into the hands of the thugs. They put the children in the water and drowned them with their own hands. One then sank to the bottom, but the other suffered for 2 hours. Assembled hooligans made a spectacle of this: they told her to lie face down in the water, so she would drown faster. Seeing that the children were already dead, she flung herself more energetically into the water and found her death too.'

Someone else saw this dreadful scene. She wrote that the two women were sisters, whose husbands had worked for the Soviets. Their men, fearing reprisals, had left them and joined the retreating Soviet army. Terrible treatment by the incoming Germans drove the two women to end their lives. Each took the other's child and leapt into the water. 'Non-Jews standing by rescued them, but they again jumped into the water and drowned.'

EXTRACTS (TRANSLATED) FROM WITNESS STATEMENTS, 1949

Records were made at the time of the arrest and trial of Jedwabne Poles. Here are extracts from some of them.

(a) A primary school caretaker (aged 30):

(After arrest, January 8) 'I took an active part in driving the Jews to the barn. I didn't see who lit the fire, I only know that we Polish drove nearly one and a half thousand Jews, and that they were burned.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'Yes, under the orders of the mayor and the German police I took an active part in guarding the Jewish population who had been driven to the market. My task was just to make sure that none of them got away.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'I was at the market for around 2 hours, because I was forced by the Germans to guard the Jews. When the Germans drove the Jews to the barn, I ran off home. During the interrogation I was forced to tell on other people, because I was beaten.'

(b) A farmer (aged 48):

(After arrest, January 11) 'The school caretaker came to me by order of the town mayor and said I was to go and drive Jews to the market square, so I went. After we'd driven them there, the police, together with the Poles, started terrible beatings. The Germans told the Jews to pick up the monument of Lenin and to walk with it into town, singing. I wasn't there then, because I got an order from the town mayor to fetch clover. When I got back, the barn with the Jews inside it was already burning. About a thousand Jews had been chased into that barn.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'Yes, under the orders of the town mayor Karolak and the Gestapo, I drove two Jewish people to the market square. A lot of Jews were already there. I went straight home and I didn't see what happened after that.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'The mayor told me to collect Jews, but I didn't want to. When I went out in the street, one of the Gestapo told me to take 2 Jews, but I let them go when the Gestapo man went into the bakery. The Jews were being driven by the Gestapo, who were beating them.'

(c) A farmer (aged 21):

(After arrest, January 11) 'I didn't take part in the murdering of Jews. Together with the Germans we took the Jews to the market square. The Germans told me to watch that the Jews did not run away. I sat there with this stick for around 15 minutes, but I couldn't watch how they were murdering them any longer. I went home and on the way I threw away the stick.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'While I was standing in my own courtyard a German came up and took me with him to the market to guard the Jews, who'd been driven to the market. As soon as the German walked away, I ran off. I only stayed in the market for a

short time, maybe 10-15 minutes, because I was terrified by what was happening. I don't remember anything about any civilians taking part in murdering Jews. When I got home I hid in the hay. I don't know what happened to the Jews.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'I didn't take any Jews to the market square. In my statement I talked about how they forced me, but that was because I was badly beaten. I wasn't in the market at all and I don't know what went on there.'

(d) A shoemaker (aged 51):

(After arrest, January 11) 'I didn't take part in the murdering of Jews, I took part only in guarding the market, where there were over fifteen hundred people who'd been driven there by the Polish community. My task was to watch that not one Jew got away, which I did. I got this order from mayor Karolak and a German. While I was on guard I didn't see anyone beating Jews.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'Police came to my home with mayor Karolak and told me to go to the market and guard the Jews. Because I didn't want to go and tried to run away, the German hit me over the head with his gun. He also struck me in the face with his hand and knocked a tooth out. I stood there for around 2 hours. As soon as the German moved away from me I ran away home.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'On that day I was working near the church and I didn't take any part. I said what I did during the interrogation, because I was beaten. I was afraid of further beating. I didn't see any of the other men accused. I was beaten up very badly.'

(e) A farmer (aged 52):

(After arrest, January 11) 'Two Jedwabne officials told me to go to the market so I didn't refuse. When I got there they said I was give up my barn for the burning of the Jews. When I said I didn't want my barn burned, they told me to help them drive the Jews to Sleszynski's barn instead. The Jews were rounded up in fours and we Polish guarded them on both sides so they couldn't not run away. When we got to the barn, they told all the Jews to go inside; we had to make sure that all the Jews went in. They set fire to the barn and the Jews were burned. Then I went home.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'I wasn't present at the round-up of Jews, neither did I take part in leading them to the barn. I was asked to provide my barn for the burning, but I didn't agree. Being scared of the Gestapo, I ran away into the rye fields and stayed there until evening. I didn't see any of the other men accused.'

(f) A farmer (aged 37):

(After arrest, January 10) 'The mayor, Karolak, came to my house at noon, with a German policeman who kicked me. They took me to the market square and ordered me and some 16- or 17-year old boys to guard the Jews. I was there until 3pm and then I went back home, as my wife had fallen ill. I didn't leave the house again that day.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'I was made to guard the Jews collected in the market place. I also saw that Karolak and the magistrate selected about a dozen Jews and ordered them to do strange physical exercises. I don't know what happened next, as I went back home.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'Police came to my house and ordered me to go with them. When I refused, they beat me and forced me to go. I only stayed for 15 minutes. I escaped and came back home, because my wife, when she saw that the Germans were beating me, fell ill. I was beaten very badly during the investigation proceedings and gave the names of other people because I was in pain.'

(g) A locksmith (aged 40):

(After arrest, January 10) 'The German mayor, Karolak, and an assistant policeman came to my house. They ordered me to go to guard the Jews whom they were driving into the market. I didn't know what was going on. Under orders, I fetched some kerosene.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'I was made to guard the Jews collected at the Jedwabne market. I gave some kerosene from the storehouse to the policeman and two other local men, I didn't know what they needed the kerosene for. After some time I went back home. I saw the fire belching out of that barn.'

(Before the court, May 16) 'People said that my kerosene had been used to burn the barn.'

(h) A carpenter (aged 38):

(After arrest, January 10) 'Three or four days before the raid I was made to do some carpentry work at the police station. Several cars came with Gestapo men and they organised a raid on the Jews, who were hurried to the market square. The police sent me home for breakfast. When I came back an hour later a policeman ordered me to go to the market to guard the Jews and prevent them from running away. I did this from noon till 4pm and then went back to the police station. They didn't want me to work, they told me to go and drive the Jews to the barn. I did so, and I was there until the moment the barn full of Jews was set on fire.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) Threatened by German police and Gestapo men, I was made to guard the Jews collected at Jedwabne market. I didn't take part in driving the Jews to the barn.

(Before the court, May 16) 'I didn't take part in driving the Jews to the barn. Under interrogation I gave the names of other accused men because I was beaten. I wasn't at the market square at all. I was working as a carpenter at the police station all day.'

(I) A casual worker (aged 31):

(After arrest, January 9) 'I was taken off mowing the hay, and together with Karolak the mayor I collected a Jew from the mill. On the way to the market square I let him go.'

(Before the public prosecutor, January 15) 'On the critical day, while I was mowing the hay, the mayor came and told me to go with him to the town. I didn't want to go with him, but he told me that if I didn't I would be shot. So I went. Later on I saved eight Jews'.

REGIONAL COMMISSION REPORT 1989 (TRANSLATED)

The head of the Regional Commission on the Study of German War crimes made a study of the destruction of Jewish communities in the Jedwabne region. His report was published in 1989. He concluded that on July 10, 1941, about 200 German officials and policemen came into the region, under the command of a Warsaw Gestapo officer. They were 'acting in the operational framework' of the notorious Einsatzgruppen, units (often including known

criminals) formed specifically to slaughter Jews. Much of the Einsatzgruppen's work was to be directed against Jews in the Soviet Union. In Jedwabne, notes the Commission head, a few Poles were ordered by the Germans to bring Jews to the main square and then escort them beyond the town. 'The Germans herded the Jews together beyond the town where some 900 of them were burned alive.'

EXTRACTS (TRANSLATED) FROM WITNESS STATEMENTS, 2000

These are the recollections of a man who was 15 years old in 1941:

'We knew what happened on July 10 in Jedwabne, though our mother told us not to leave the house that day. We heard agonising screams, turning into a quiet lament, and we saw black smoke above the Jewish cemetery, 3 kilometres away as the crow flies.

Two days later the Germans - for whom we all had to work - sent for twenty men to go to Jedwabne. They told us to bring spades. There were three policemen guarding the smouldering ruins of the barn, just next to the cemetery. Others must have been at work there before us: there were heaps of corpses covered with thin layers of sand. The bodies on the top were charred remains, the ones below were scorched, below them they were just grimy, but at the bottom even the clothes were untouched: these had died not by fire but by suffocation.

We dug a trench by the barn, and we buried them. The bodies were so tangled up we couldn't separate them. But people still tried to search them, to find valuables. I found a box with coins in it, and people came running, so the policeman came and searched everyone and took away their finds. Some people got away with it by tucking their finds into their shoes.

The corpses were all Jews who had died not only on July 10 but also earlier, killed in the town, or at the Jewish cemetery. People said some had been made to dig their own graves. It was hot weather and the dogs were already getting at the bodies. It wasn't the first time I'd had to bury someone, but this really got to me. Even now I can't get rid of the nightmare.'

The following is the recollection of another man who was 15 years old in 1941:

'A friend and I, with some other local people, were walking behind the column of Jews. Once the column got near to the barn, they were brutally ordered to enter it, and in many cases were "helped", so to speak, by German soldiers who kicked them, beat them up, and pushed them in. Once in, the big barn door was closed. A military lorry full of soldiers came up at high speed; some of the soldiers jumped down, the rest began handing down metal cans of petrol. The soldiers on the ground poured the petrol on and around the barn, and set light to it. The barn went up straight away, with leaping flames and smoke. There was a terrible wailing and lamenting from inside.'

EXTRACTS (TRANSLATED) FROM WITNESS STATEMENTS, 2001

Three surviving Jedwabne-born brothers were young men barely in their 20s at the time of the massacre. Their father was a member of Poland's right wing political party which before the war had campaigned for a boycott of Jewish shops. Two of the brothers and their father were among those arrested by the communist authorities in 1949 and charged with carrying out the Jedwabne massacre. The father was acquitted because of lack of evidence. The brothers

were jailed. They claim that they were framed, and that the investigators who brutally questioned them after arrest were Jewish communists. One still maintains that he was not even present, but he recalls 'heavy black smoke everywhere. It swept over our parents' home and smelt horrible...like burning meat.' Their elder brother says he was not in the village at all on July 10. But he remembers, he says, how the whole region was furious with the Jews: they were believed to have collaborated with the Soviets who harshly mistreated Poles. 'It was a sacred anger. Revenge was the duty of every patriot.'

A journalist visited Jedwabne and its neighbourhood. and had a number of conversations. One retired lawyer said, 'Please don't mention my name. Some of those people are still alive and living where I do my shopping. I don't want any trouble. Maybe this fear has been with me since 1941, but even now friends warn me about talking with you....I was 10 years old, and I saw it with my own eyes. There was a crowd of about 50 men. The one who led the crowd when the Jews were made to carry Lenin's statue, who'd beaten them the hardest and was going round the houses to find the ones still trying to hide, so he could finish them off with a bayonet - he was there. He was throwing children into the burning barn. A terrible crime was committed by Polish hands. I left Jedwabne as soon as I was old enough, and I don't want anything to do with the place.' The journalist writes: 'After many conversations in Jedwabne I noticed that those who now accuse the Jews of collaborating with the Soviet Secret Service during the Soviet occupation (and with the Soviet authorities after the war) saw lots of Germans on the scene of the massacre. Those who feel sorry for their murdered neighbours didn't see a single German taking part in the round-up of the Jews that day. They don't question that the murder took place with the Germans' consent or at their suggestion, just that they didn't participate directly, but just took a photograph or two.'

THE HISTORY OF JEWS IN POLAND

The Jews originally settled in their 'promised land', between the Mediterranean Sea and the river Jordan, in about 2000 BC, overcoming the Philistines to do so. They built Jerusalem and its temple about a thousand years later. Jerusalem lies in the region known to the Romans as Judaea, a province of the Roman empire from 63 BC. When the Jews rebelled against Roman rule, their temple was destroyed, and the Jews began to leave Palestine in search of safer homes elsewhere. They now had no homeland, but were united by their religion, customs, culture and ethnicity, which they cherished with care.

The Roman empire spread across Europe as far as the British Isles. In the 4th century AD, the emperor made Christianity the state religion. Jews were regarded by the Christian Church as responsible for Jesus Christ's death, and were persecuted accordingly. They were not allowed to own land or have a trade; this forced them into finding work as moneylenders or entrepreneurs, work which was then despised. The crusades enhanced already strong anti-Jewish feeling. By the 16th century, many Jews were forced by law to live in separate crowded 'ghettos'. Anti-Jewish prejudice (anti-Semitism) spread and put down roots, though many Jewish individuals were respected, not least for their love of learning, which continues to this day.

Mediaeval Poland, indeed, had welcomed its early Jewish population: it was in need of skilled merchants to develop the world's great new adventure: international trade. By the 20th century, 3.5 million of Poland's 30 million inhabitants were Jewish. But although their cultural and political activities flourished, many Jews continued to be treated with hostility, suspicion and disrespect. Poland was strongly Roman Catholic, and churchmen continued to preach

that Jews were enemies who had murdered Jesus (though he himself was a Jew) and who practised dark arts and rituals. This prejudice extended across Europe, flaring up from time to time in 'pogroms': attempts to drive out Jews by violence and murder. Anti-Semitism was also fired by the growth of nationalism in many countries. Between the two World Wars, anti-Semitism in Poland experienced a surge: laws discriminating against Jews were passed, as they also were in Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Greece, and, in particular, Nazi Germany.

In 1939 eastern Poland came under the control of Soviet Russia. Under communist rule the region's inhabitants had a rough time: local Poles lost their jobs, were beaten and arrested; some were deported to the Soviet Union, and some of these deportees never returned. But the communists were not anti-Jewish; there were Jews therefore who were ready to support them.

In 1941 Germany broke the non-aggression pact it had made with the Soviet Union. Hitler's plan was to invade the Soviet Union and annex its lands as part of a new German empire. These lands included eastern Poland (Germany had occupied western Poland since 1939). It was well-known that German policy was anti-Jewish. As Germany claimed eastern Poland on the way to invade the USSR, its troops and militias left a trail of slaughter. Elsewhere in Poland, too, the Polish people suffered under the hostile Nazi policies of suppression and extermination: during the Nazi occupation over 6 million people were killed. Half of them were Jews. Poland is the site of many mass graves of Jews and other persecuted minorities: the death camp at Oswiecim (Auschwitz) is the largest Jewish cemetery in the world. There are also Treblinka, Chelmno, Sobibor, Maidanek, Belzec. These camps were set up in remote areas, often close to the border, with one facility in common: they could be easily reached by railway.

It is estimated that by 1945 only 50,000 Polish Jews had survived. In 1967-8, 35,000 left Poland to settle in Israel. Hostility towards Jews remained strong. One historian, sadly reviewing the history of Jews in Poland, put it this way: it was as if 'we let the Jews into our home, but told them to live in the cellar. When they wanted to come up to the main rooms, we said we would allow that if they stopped being orthodox Jews and became "civilised". There were Jews who were prepared to do this. But then we started talking about a "Jewish invasion", about the danger we would be in once the Jews permeated Polish society.' Nevertheless thousands of individual Poles risked their lives to save Jews from death; these included a married couple at Jedwabne, who hid seven Jedwabne Jews on July 10 and looked after them until the end of the war.

After the Second World War there was a new communist government for the whole of Poland, established under Soviet influence. The trade union movement, Solidarity, rose in opposition during the 1980s. With the collapse of communism, the Polish republic began to rebuild democracy and review its troubled history.

THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT JEDWABNE, 2000-2001

In 2000 a book called 'Neighbours: the destruction of the Jewish community in Jedwabne' was published. Drawing on the 1945 testimony of a Jewish survivor, and some of the 1949 court records, the author (a Polish Jew now an American Professor of sociology and political sciences) vividly described how in 1941 the Polish community in Jedwabne had turned on its Jewish neighbours in a particularly brutal way. The book started an international row. A number of Polish academics found fault with the author's use of evidence, and with the

reliability of the evidence itself. This included an assertion that the 1945 eyewitness was in fact 500 metres away from the scene, in hiding, and could not have seen all that he claimed. Historians and others who accepted the story as told in 'Neighbours' had hostile exchanges with those who rejected it. Poles at large were either outraged by the implications or filled with shame. Jewish anger (now publicly expressible) grew that the memorial stone at Jedwabne implied only German responsibility. The inscription read: 'In memory of Jews from Jedwabne and its neighbourhood, men, women and children, partners in this land, murdered and burned alive at this spot on 10 July 1941. As a warning to posterity so that the sin of hatred inflamed by German Nazism might never set the inhabitants of this land against each other' (translation). The stone was removed in March 2001.

In September 2000 the Polish Institute of National Remembrance embarked on an investigation into the Jedwabne massacre. In February 2001 a meeting was held between the Institute's president and representatives of the Jedwabne Jews in America. A press release was issued. 'All participating in the meeting acknowledged that these actions are an essential element of the healing process between Jews and Poles. This process will set the pace of Polish-Jewish reconciliation and will indeed serve the generations to come as a beacon, allowing for the separation of right from wrong.'

The investigators studied the eyewitness statements and the reports of the 1949 trial (and of a later trial in 1953). They looked at German archives concerning the activities of a German Gestapo commando unit which had ordered the murder of Jewish inhabitants, in a very similar way, in nearby towns. At Jedwabne itself, two burial sites, one inside the barn's inner area and one along its edge, were found. The mass graves were opened, revealing the remains of up to 250 Jewish victims. About 100 German rifle bullets and cartridge cases were also found, including a bullet case with a melted core, assumed to have melted in the fire.

The investigation, which had resolved to uncover the whole truth, encountered difficulties. For religious reasons, there was Jewish opposition to exhumation, so that the bodies could not be removed and counted. The grave beneath the barn floor also contained fragments of a statue of Lenin; but eyewitnesses in 1941 had maintained that these, and the people forced to carry them, had been buried in the old Jewish cemetery close by. This was an unwelcome reminder that what witnesses say, and what the facts are, may not always be the same.

Although the investigation was not over - and some said that an accurate history may never be established - a memorial ceremony was held in Jedwabne on July 10 2001, the 60th anniversary of the massacre. The President of Poland officially apologised for the part taken by Poles. 'We know with certainty that there were Poles among the persecutors and butchers. Here in Jedwabne citizens of the Polish republic died at the hands of fellow citizens. I apologise on my own behalf and on behalf of those Poles whose consciences have been stirred by the crime.'

There was a silent march from the square to the new Jedwabne Jewish memorial, a plain block of sandstone on a lawn surrounded by grey stone blocks, which has been set up on the site of the barn. The Jewish prayer for the dead was said. Two beds of evergreens mark the graves where the victims' remains were buried. A memorial has also been placed in the Jewish cemetery nearby.

It was a wet day, and fewer people were present than the police had expected. There were some notable absentees. No-one represented the Roman Catholic church; its bishops had

already prayed, in May, in penance for Poles who had wronged Jews in 'atrocities committed in Jedwabne and elsewhere on Polish soil'. Poland's cardinal had said, 'We apologise above all to God but also to the wronged on behalf of Polish citizens who committed evil against citizens of the Mosaic faith'; but he added, 'Should not Jews also admit guilt for collaborating with the Bolsheviks in sending Poles to Siberia, or for the leading role played by Jews in the communist secret police?' The local priest also stayed away from the memorial service, saying 'I will not take part in a lie.'

Most of Jedwabne's inhabitants kept their distance, too. Notices had been put up in shops saying 'We do not apologise: It was the Germans who murdered the Jews of Jedwabne'. Some local people said they would have liked to attend, but were afraid that doing so would be an admission of guilt for a crime that occurred before they were born. A number of Jews were also absent: they objected to the failure to record on the new memorial the number killed and by whom.

AFTERWORD

One commentator wrote: 'Perhaps an accurate memorial inscription would warn against the sin of hatred inflamed by German Nazism and Soviet Communism and fanned by selfish human short-sightedness.' Is this a fair comment? What historical evidence would be needed to obtain a complete picture of what happened in July 1941? Could such evidence ever exist? What is the difference between an objective account of more-or-less verifiable 'facts', and eye-witness accounts? Should a fair historical record draw evidence from one or both of these sources, and how?

History is seldom as simple as we try to make it. Human beings are complex, so how can their history be anything else? But we can look at history, and especially cases like this one, to study the seeds of conflict and how they grow, and learn how to protect future society from their terrible fruit.