INSIDE

INSIGHT

FEATURING

WORLD WEEKLY

A TWIST of HATE

Fierce nationalism is blazing in Poland, with refugees, reporters, judges and former Solidarity supporters all feeling targeted. A historian makes the controversial case that the current intolerance is connected to dark deeds of Poland's past.

Catherine Porter, IN4-5

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JANEK SKARZYNSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

A demonstrator performs a Nazi salute in front of a "Europe awake" banner followed by a group of Hungarian Jobbik party representatives during a nationalist march last November in Warsaw.

Poland avoids its past, and redefines its present

CATHERINE PORTER
TORONTO STAR

OSWIECIM, POLAND—During the Second World War, Building No. 5 of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum was a prisoner barrack filled with slave labourers. Today, it is packed with "material evidence of crimes": a room filled with shoes, piles of decaying leather suitcases, a haunting mound of hair shorn from the heads of female prisoners and then sent to German factories to be woven into blankets.

Nazis converted many parts of their victims' bodies into useful items, our guide explains. Bones were made into buttons. Human ash fertilized fields and skin was stretched into lampshades — "especially if it had interesting tattoos."

"There is a little step by the door," she instructs. "Watch out please."

Her courtesy in a place of such brutality brings tears to my eyes.

But Anna Ploszczyca's voice becomes firm when someone refers to the camp as "Polish."

"These were not Polish camps. They were German Nazi camps in occupied Poland," she says. "We don't want people to believe the Poles killed Jews here. It's not the case."

The role of Poles in the Holocaust remains an exposed nerve in this country. In August, the Polish cabinet approved a new law punishing anyone convicted of using the term "Polish death camps" with three years in jail. "Our responsibility is to defend the truth and dignity of the Polish state and the Polish nation, as well as our fathers, our mothers and our grandparents," Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro said.

For Ziobro and the other members of his right-wing, nationalist government, the history of the Second World War is black and white — the Poles were victims and heroic resisters of their Nazi occupiers, full stop.

But historians like Princeton University Prof. Jan T Gross have revealed a picture with more streaks of grey, in which Poles — in some terrible cases at least — were complicit in the Holocaust.

That history is especially important today, he says, as Eastern Europe faces its biggest refugee crisis since the 1940s.

Instead of helping fleeing Syrian refugees, Poland has shut its doors, as have Hungary and Slovakia. After the terrorist attacks in Brussels last March, Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydlo announced Poland would break its EU commitment to resettle some 7,000 refugees. And in the wake of the Nice attack, Interior Minister Mariusz Blaszczak praised her party's decision to "stand firm" against migrants.

During the election campaign last fall, the chairman of the Law and Justice Party (known as PiS), Jaroslaw Kaczynski, warned that many Middle Eastern refugees carried "highly dangerous" diseases and parasites.

"How can one dare to say that in a country where 3 million Jews were murdered not that long ago and one of the blatant themes of Nazi propaganda was Jews are carriers of disease?" says Gross, who was born in Poland.

Less than two weeks after that speech by Kaczynski, PiS won a resounding victory, becoming the country's first majority government since communism cracked in 1989.

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A month into the Second World War, Poland ceased to exist. The Third Reich took the lion's share, and signed over the remainder to Soviet Russia. Polish resisters and academics were among the war's first concentration camp prisoners.

Poles suffered massive casualties. An underground army launched an uprising in Warsaw in 1944, and the Nazis reduced the city to rubble, killing more than 200,000 Poles and carting off most of the rest to concentration and death camps.

On the other side, the Soviet army killed more than 20,000 Polish officers in 1940, before the Nazis pushed the Soviets out of Poland. Some 4,000 were shot through the head and buried in the Katyn Forest.

The Polish government did not collaborate with the Nazis. It went into exile in France and Britain, sending troops to join the Allies. An arm of the Polish resistance called Zegota was dedicated to saving Jews at great danger to themselves. While in Germany, the punishment for helping Jews was three months in prison; in Poland, it was death to the entire family. More Poles risked their lives to save Jews than any other nation, according to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum's "Righteous Among The Nations" program.

The Nazis built their death camps in occupied Poland because more Jews lived there than anywhere else in Europe. Before the war, 10 per cent of Poles were Jewish; in major cities like Warsaw and Krakow, they made up one-third of the population. The country boasted 80 Yiddish-language newspapers.

This was the prevailing story until 2001, when Polish-American historian Gross published a slim book called *Neighbours*. In it, Gross describes the horrific murder of hundreds of Jews in the town of Jedwabne in a single day of 1941. While the mass murder happened the week the SS arrived, it wasn't the Nazis who killed the town's Jews, but their Christian neighbours.

Jedwabne was not a horrible oddity, Gross says. Similar pogroms occurred in many nearby villages.

Five years later, Gross released a second book called *Fear*, which examined the massacre in the southern town of Kielce in 1946 — a year after the war and Holocaust ended. Incited by false claims that a Christian boy had been kidnapped by Jews, a mob of locals attacked a Jewish centre housing Holocaust survivors, and killed 42 of them.

Among international academics, Gross's work has been not just validated, but lauded. But among regular Poles and, particularly, politicians, it triggered a huge emotional debate that continues to this day.

Former president Bronislaw Komorowski publicly apologized for the Jedwabne massacre in 2011. But current President Andrzej Duda slammed Komorowski for that apology. "The Lord knows that the Polish people did not take part in the Holocaust," he said in a debate during the election campaign.

In July, the month of the anniversary of both massacres, Polish Education Minister Anna Zalewska called the Kielce murderers "not quite Polish" and said that Gross's account of the Jedwabne massacre was "full of lies."

Last year, Gross published another bombshell. This time, it was a column in *Project Syndicate*, an opinion website that offers content to newspapers around the world, particularly in Eastern Europe. In the piece, Gross criticized his native country for not "contribute(ing) anything to resolve the greatest refugee crisis facing Europe since World War II." The cause of this cold indifference, he wrote, is rooted in the Second World War. Eastern Europe has failed to "come to terms with its murderous past."

"Consider the Poles, who, deservedly proud of their society's anti-Nazi resistance, actually killed more Jews than Germans during the war," he wrote. "Of course, there were Poles who helped Jews during the war … But these remarkable individuals typically acted on their own, against prevailing social norms. They were misfits who, long after the war had ended, insisted on keeping their wartime heroism a secret from their neighbours — afraid, it seems, that their own communities would otherwise shun, threaten and ostracize them."

In response, a Polish prosecutor questioned Gross for five hours in April to determine whether should be charged with insulting the nation — which carries a three-year prison term. (Gross has been investigated before for defaming Poland for his book *Fear*. The investigation did not lead to charges.)

After receiving thousands of complaints about the article, Duda's office also announced it was considering stripping Gross of his National Medal of Merit. To date, it has not done so.

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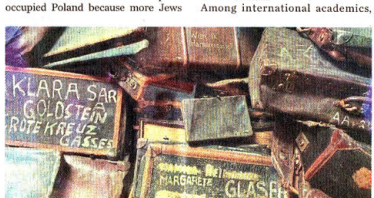
Months after the furor over his article, Gross was back in Poland for a friend's art exhibition. I met him in an outdoor cafe in the old Jewish quarter of Krakow, which today is inhabited almost exclusively by Catholics. The 16th-century synagogue across the street, its outer wall built with pieces of Jewish tombstones broken by the Nazis, is full for Friday night prayers only when Jewish tourists come through, my tour guides say. The country's latest census states there are



CATHERINE PORTER/TORONTO STAR

One of the displays at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum: a pile of suitcases from Nazi victims who believed they were coming to a work camp.

ZOLTAN GERGELY KELEMEN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The Polish government has taken an increasingly hard line against refugees. Here, Polish soldiers join Hungarian forces to patrol the Hungarian-Serbian border.

WOJTEK RADWANSKI/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Jaroslaw Kaczynski, centre, leader of the Law and Justice Party (PiS), warned during last fall's election campaign that many refugees carried "highly dangerous" diseases.

Under a powerful nationalist government, courts, media and refugees are ignored — as are wartime atrocities

7,000 Jews in Poland today, while Jonathan Ornstein, the executive director of Krakow's Jewish Community Centre, estimates there are as many as 100,000. Even then, the Jewish community is a whisper of the 3.3 million before the Second World War.

"What's incumbent on Poland is to mourn and remember. The bulk of Holocaust victims were Polish citizens — Polish Jews," Gross says.

"We understand what it means when a people is put in a situation where their physical existence is at stake and is threatened. We in Poland have seen how this can happen to our fellow citizens, while the world in a way was watching."

If Poles learned their history well — not just the noble sacrifices, but also the shameful treacheries — perhaps they would be quicker to check racism and hatred, he says.

Instead, blatantly anti-migrant, anti-Muslim and anti-Semitic marches have become regular phenomena throughout the country. Many are organized by the National Radical Camp — a party outlawed in 1934 for promoting hatred.

They often resemble military brigades, featuring marching men wearing armbands and waving Polish flags. Their slogan is "Poles for Poland." One march last year included the burning of an effigy of a Hasidic Jew, and at another last April, marchers burned a photo of the town's mayor wearing a Jewish skull cap. (A march guard commander with the National Radical Camp, Szymon Malilan, says the person who burned both was not a party member. But he would not condemn the act. Asked if his group is anti-Semitic, he responded: "We are not Nazis. We don't want eugenics. We don't want to kill them. We just don't want them to have a big influence on the country.")

Last April, marchers in Bialystok chanted "Zionists will hang from the trees instead of leaves."

At the same time, physical attacks on minorities have spiked across the country, according to Rafal Pankowski. He is a university sociology professor and co-founder of the Never Again Association, which has monitored hate crimes since the 1990s. In all that time, he has never recorded such hate as this, he says: Up to 10 physical or serious verbal attacks daily.

Few of the targets have been Jews, mostly because there are so few Jews living in Poland today. "The Jew is the symbol of the other," Pankowski says. Most, like a Chilean musician who was attacked on the train, simply look like foreigners.

Rather than denouncing the attacks and the rampant hate speech, the ruling Law and Justice party has remained silent.

It dissolved the Council against Racial Discrimination, xenophobia and Related Intolerance. It has scrapped the hate crime manual for police.

"This government has created an atmosphere of tolerance for hatred against minorities," says Mikolaj Pietrzak, a leading human rights lawyer. "I'm very worried. I can see that snowballing out of control."

Prime Minister Beata Szydlo's office did not respond to emailed questions about the public displays of anti-Semitism. However, Olga Jablonska with the Polish Embassy in Ottawa said that an investigation by the prosecutor's office led to charges against those accused of burning the effigy of the Hasidic Jew.

Before the Second World War, Poland was one of most multicultural countries in Europe — about 30 per cent were ethnic and linguistic minorities, including Jews, Ukrainians, Germans, Tatars and Belarusians. Since the war's end, it has become one of Europe's most homogeneous countries, with 94 per cent identifying themselves as ethnic Poles.

Part of problem, says Gross, is that Poles benefitted materially from the Holocaust. While Nazis took valuables from Jewish homes, anything nailed down was left for locals.

"If you were a party, at some point — as an individual or collective identity — to the violence that has taken place on this scale, this isn't something that goes away," he says. "It builds."

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Poland's biggest protest since the Solidarity movement's first strike in 1980 burst down Warsaw's stately Ujazdowkie Avenue one hot Saturday last May.

Thousands of Poles blew horns, hoisted Polish and EU flags and sang the national anthem outside the prime minister's chancellery. They were denouncing recent moves by the Polish parliament that, they say, curb their still-tender democracy. They also demanded that the country remain part of the European Union. Some wore Jewish stars, a few wore turbans.

"We've been here before," says Marek Jankowski, a 58-year-old tour guide who was among the rally's organizers. He was jailed briefly by the Communists in 1982 for his support of imprisoned Solidarity leaders. "The government is trying to change the constitution and change the system from a democracy of many parties to a one-party state. We got rid of such a system 25 years ago."

Warsaw authorities pegged the number of protesters at 240,000.

The government-run Polish Television cited another official number, provided by police: 45,000.

That gaping difference proved the protesters' point, Jankowski said.

After the PiS won control of parliament last November, it took over the management boards of the national broadcaster. The aftermath: more than 160 reporters and news anchors quit or were fired because they don't reflect the government's views, according to the New York Times.

The result, says the country's human rights ombudsman, Adam Bodnar, is "total propaganda."

A new civil service law gave notice to some 2,200 top bureaucrats. Bodnar says "reappointment required loyalty to the government."

Then there is the new surveillance law which gives police and security agencies more power to spy on citizens' Internet activity.

Bodnar flagged it and many others as unconstitutional, and sent them to the country's top court for review. But, that court has been essentially paralyzed by parliament, which passed a law changing the way it functions and then refused to recognize its decision that deemed the law unconstitutional.

After the European Commission ruled Poland had violated European Union standards regarding the rule of law, parliamentarians pushed through another bill changing the way the top court works. Critics hold the new law is as damaging as its predecessor.

"The whole idea of all of this is to create a de facto change in the way the state operates, even if later on it's subject to review," Bodnar says from his Warsaw office. "It will be too late to stop it."

This summer, U.S. President Barack Obama, in town for a NATO summit, chided Duda for the impasse over the country's top court.

"And as your friend and ally," he said, "we've urged all parties to work together to sustain Poland's democratic institutions."

Viewers of the main public broadcaster, Telewizja Polska, got a creative translation. They were told Obama had praised Polish democratic efforts. "Concerning the issue of the constitutional tribunal," the reporter related, according to the Washington Post, "he said he is sure that spreading democratic values in Poland will not stop."

Obama had urged the country to "continue to stand as an example for democratic practices." Instead, locals watching state-owned television were told: "Poland is and will be an example of democracy for the whole world."

Censoring an American president is further than even the Communists dared, says Jankowski. Whatever hope he had that swift change was possible has been doused; he and other pro-democracy activists are settling for a long fight.

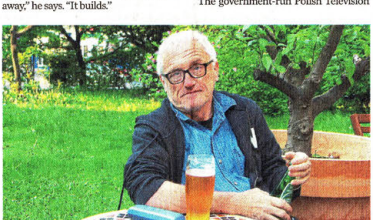
In 1989, he believed their country was on the path to openness. Now, they despair it was just a blip.

"The Communists took my youth," he says over the phone from Warsaw. "Now, they want to take my senior years."

Jablonska, with the Polish Embassy in Ottawa, cited a speech by Szydlo in which she said democracy was thriving in Poland. Szydlo pointed to the anti-government protests as proof.

Jankowski's Committee for the Defense of Democracy was organizing another one of those protests for Saturday in Warsaw. Buses of demonstrators were expected from across the country. Jankowski says Irish rock star Bono was scheduled to give a concert in support.

The theme this time addresses the "us and them" mentality that's gripped the country: "Poland is one."



CATHERINE PORTER/TORONTO STAR

Princeton Prof. Jan T. Gross is being investigated for allegedly insulting the Polish nation by writing about Jews killed by Poles in the Second World War.

KUBA KAMINSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Polish history guide Marek Jankowski, 58, takes part in a massive pro-European, anti-government protest that spread across Warsaw in May.