



Exhibit about Jedwabne at the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw

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The Noble and the Base: Poland and the Holocaust

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In 2012, while conferring a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom on the Polish anti-Nazi resistance fighter Jan Karski, Barack Obama inadvertently touched off the greatest crisis in US-Polish relations in recent memory. It was his use of the phrase "Polish death camps" in his speech that set Polish officials off demanding an apology. The article takes this incident as an opportunity to reflect on the sensitivities and pitfalls of addressing recent Polish history during Nazi occupation.

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The Noble and the Base: Poland and the Holocaust

In 2012, while conferring a posthumous Presidential Medal of Freedom on the Polish hero Jan Karski, Barack Obama inadvertently touched off the greatest crisis in US-Polish relations in recent memory. The man he honored had served as a courier for the Polish resistance against Hitler, and in 1942 Karski traveled across occupied Europe to tell Western leaders about the Nazi war crimes being committed in Poland, including the Holocaust. Karski had been sent on this secret mission, Obama explained, after fellow underground fighters had told him that "Jews were being murdered on a massive scale and smuggled him into the Warsaw Ghetto and a Polish death camp to see for himself." It was late evening in Warsaw when Obama spoke, but within minutes Polish officials were demanding an apology for his use of the phrase "Polish death camp," which they thought scandalous.

"Polish Death Camps" - a Sensitive Issue

Even those well-versed in European history must wonder why. After all, the media routinely speak of "French camps" from which Jews were sent to their deaths, and the phrase doesn't draw similar ire from the French government. On the contrary, in July the French president himself, François Hollande, began a widely covered speech on the seventieth anniversary of the roundup of Jews at Vélodrome d'Hiver by stating, "We've gathered this morning to remember the horror of a crime, express the sorrow of those who experienced the tragedy...and therefore France's responsibility." Why are Poles so sensitive on the matter of Polish camps? Readers of Halik Kochanski's new book, *The Eagle Unbowed*, will ask the opposite question: How could a famously well-educated person such as Barack Obama be so insensitive regarding the simple facts about Poland, the first country to stand up to Hitler?

The First Country to Resist Hitler

Here's one undisputed, essential fact: after the Nazis and their Soviet allies overran Poland in September 1939, they did not permit the Poles to form a new national government. The Soviets made the eastern Polish territories into western Soviet republics; the Germans annexed the western Polish territories into the Reich and made central Poland a "General Government" that they ruled directly. This arrangement was radically different from those in Nazi-occupied France, Denmark or Slovakia, which were ruled by collaborationist regimes. The French camps, then, really were French—that is, operated by French collaborators (a fact stressed by Hollande in his July speech). In Poland the death camps were German, like most other institutions. The Germans allowed the Poles no administration above the village level, reduced the police force to 15 000 men and made the population into a pool of slave labor. They denied Poles schooling above grade six and closed down newspapers and journals while making vodka and pornography readily available. Meat rations disappeared almost entirely, and the population was kept on a starvation diet.

To break Polish resistance, the Germans staged frequent "round-ups", cordoning off sections of a city's streets and detaining everyone caught in the dragnet, or sealing off apartment houses, trams or churches and arresting everyone inside. The prisoners were sent to concentration camps or to the Reich as slave labor—or, if circumstances required, kept as hostages, to be shot if Germans were killed by the Polish underground (the ratio was 100 Poles for every German). As one of Kochanski's sources recalled, in this climate of terror "there was never a moment when we did not feel threatened."

By 1942, the SS had devised a plan to deport some 31 million Slavs to areas beyond the Ural Mountains. That number was to include 85 percent of all Poles. (A small percentage would stay behind and be forcibly "Germanized".) In their place would come millions of German settlers, and with them the transformation of Poland into the eastern marches of the thousand-year Reich. The plan calculated a fatality rate from deliberate starvation of up to 80 percent. The mass expulsions began in late 1942, when the Germans cleared some 300 villages near Lublin.

Idealism, Self-Sacrifice and Betrayal

Poles resisted these genocidal policies. By 1944, an underground "Home Army" (AK) had grown to more than 400 000 soldiers on Polish territory, who harassed the Germans while awaiting the right moment for an uprising. Thousands of other Poles escaped and continued the fight outside Poland. Polish pilots accounted for one of every eight German planes shot down during the Battle of Britain. An entire army of Poles left the Soviet Union in 1942 and fought through North Africa and up the Italian peninsula. In September 1944, a Polish parachute brigade under British command dropped into the Netherlands, and the following year Polish soldiers fought their way into Germany, from the west as well as the east.

Despite these efforts, the Poles saw themselves as a nation betrayed. Home Army units broke out of hiding to assist the Red Army as it entered prewar Polish territory early in 1944. Yet instead of welcoming them as allies, Soviet authorities arrested the Polish soldiers and sent them to camps. In August 1944, with Red Army troops encamped on the opposite bank of the Vistula River, the Home Army staged an uprising against the Germans in Warsaw. Soviet forces simply looked on as the Germans regrouped and destroyed the insurgency. Some 200 000 Poles lost their lives. (More than 2 million non-Jewish Poles died in World War II.) Though Poland was the first state to resist Hitler, it lost huge swaths of territory to the Soviet Union without its Western allies so much as uttering a protest. Poles from the lost areas were placed in cattle cars and resettled in central and western Poland (some of which was being "cleansed" of Germans).

Such dramas of idealism, self-sacrifice and betrayal—told well if selectively in Kochanski's history—seem indelibly compelling. So how did they escape Obama and his speechwriters? The *Eagle Unbowed* is billed as the "first truly comprehensive account" of Poland in World War II, but previous works have told the basic story. On my small office shelf I count five such volumes (including Timothy Snyder's important recent work *Bloodlands*). Why do Westerners remain so ignorant about the simple facts of Poland's war?

Challenging the Narrative of Recalcitrant Victims

Clues are offered by Jan Gross and Irena Grudzinska-Gross in their new book *Golden Harvest*. The facts are not so simple, because the country they depict hardly resembles the one described by Kochanski.

Instead of starved and recalcitrant victims, gentile Poles appear as accomplices in Nazi policies to exterminate their Jewish co-citizens. These policies involved not only death camps but also massive seizures of Jewish property. After deporting Jews from ghettos, German officials confiscated and sent home the most valuable loot—but much remained to tempt local Poles. When news circulated that Germans were about to clear a ghetto, peasants from surrounding villages drove up their horse carts to haul away all they could. Lust for gold sent Poles to fields around Treblinka and other German death camps, where they dug many meters into the earth seeking tooth fillings and jewelry. Regions around the camps experienced economic booms.

Rather than being heroic, Poles appear in *Golden Harvest* not so different from other Europeans in their willingness to aid Hitler in destroying the Jews. Such a perspective, which may seem unremarkable to Western readers, culminates a revolution in historical thinking within Poland itself, sparked some eleven years ago by the publication of Jan Gross's book *Neighbors* (2001). Previously, the standard view was that Poles did not help the Nazis because the Nazis viewed Poles as subhumans unfit for collaboration; instead, the Germans sought camp guards from the Ukrainian or Baltic populations. If Poles did not rescue more Jews, that was because of the penalties for doing so: unlike any other people under Nazi occupation, Poles hiding Jews were punished with death for themselves and their families.

In *Neighbors*, Gross began to undermine this consensus by showing that in the small town of Jedwabne in northeast Poland, on 10 July 1941, Poles murdered their Jewish neighbors in a day-long orgy of violence. After recovering from the shock of this revelation, Polish historians examined previously neglected sources and found more than twenty other places where Poles—encouraged but not forced by the Germans—had abused and killed Jews in the summer of 1941. A new Polish Center for Holocaust Research in Warsaw has pushed forward this revolution. Historians still agree that the overwhelming majority of Polish Jews were killed by the Germans, first in overcrowded ghettos under conditions calculated to kill slowly, and then through deportations to the death camps, a process mostly completed by late 1942. But they estimate that some 10 percent of Poland's Jews escaped deportation and sought shelter in villages and forests, often in large family units. The great majority of these Jews (probably more than 80 percent) did not survive until liberation because Poles helped Germans hunt them down.

In their studies of rural Poland, the Polish historians Jan Grabowski, who teaches at the University of Ottawa, and Barbara Engelking, of the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, have shown how this happened. First, German police and Polish village leaders enlisted peasants to comb the forests for Jews who were attempting to survive, often in hand-dug caves and bunkers. Once discovered, the Jews were usually executed on the spot, often by German policemen but sometimes by Polish ones. Jews who took shelter with Polish peasants likewise were usually hunted down and killed. This was due not to frequent patrols by the German police, who were actually few and far between, but to the watchful eyes of other Poles, recording in an invisible ledger every commonplace fact, such as extra portions of bread or milk being consumed by a given household. The members of one Polish family lost their lives when German gendarmes—tipped off by the family's neighbors—discovered stores of food intended for Jews in hiding (who were also discovered and shot).

Polish historians have long known about Polish collaborators, whom they described as marginal, the dregs of society. Now a consensus is arising among researchers that the denouncers came from all walks of life. In villages around Kielce, for example, local elites orchestrated the killing of several hundred Jews, lending the crimes a "kind of official imprimatur", according to Gross. Polish policemen tended to be well-situated heads of families. In his investigation of a district in southeastern Poland, Grabowski discovered that peasants with medium-size properties were overrepresented among the collaborators.

Jan and Irena Gross do not claim that all Poles took part in looting Jews' property, let alone in killing them. Yet those who did could count on the tacit acceptance of their communities. Villagers also knew about the Polish underground but divulged nothing about it to the Germans, for that would have violated a societal consensus. Indeed, thousands of Poles eagerly risked death in the Home Army. Young people in particular plunged enthusiastically into all kinds of "suicidal" acts aimed at frustrating German policy—save the policy of killing Jews. By contrast, stealing from, hunting down and murdering Jews did not flout commonly shared values. Again and again, postwar court testimony speaks of a Jew

discovered in hiding and begging his neighbors (with whom he might have played as a child) for his life, yet being delivered to the gendarmes and then shot. All of this occurred in the open. Alina Skibinska, who has read hundreds of court files and other documents, said she has not encountered a single case where villagers found escaped Jews and either let them return to the forest or decided to hide them themselves. The new historical work makes it clear that rural Poland was a hostile, indeed deadly, environment for Jews seeking help.

"The Eagle Unbowed" the "First Truly Comprehensive Account" of Poland in World War II?

Halik Kochanski does not deny that Jews under German occupation faced a different situation from Poles. "For all the sufferings of the Christian Poles during this period," she writes, "they were not being subjected to the unprecedented policy of calculated and deliberate extermination that the Polish Jews faced." Yet though Kochanski reads Polish, the revolution in the history of Polish-Jewish relations has passed her by. She acknowledges the killings at Jedwabne but attributes them to German instigation. Of the pogroms in nearby Polish towns she says nothing, though she eagerly reports that Ukrainians abused Jews in eastern Poland. The "Ukrainians needed little encouragement," she writes. But Poles needed no more.

Kochanski admits to the existence of anti-Semitism in Poland but denies it explanatory power. She cites an SS report from 1941 complaining there was "no real antisemitism" in the country, but she fails to ask whether the perspective of the SS is reliable on this score: Who, after all, might count as "real" anti-Semites for these hyper-racists? In keeping with the old stereotypes, Kochanski explains Polish hostility to the Jews as a reaction to the supposed Jewish sympathy for Communism. "One possible motive for taking part in the pogroms at Jedwabne", she writes, "could have been revenge against the perceived prominence of the Jews in the Soviet administration." Does that account for the hundreds of men, women and children who were burned to death in a single barn (and whose screams were so loud that a band was brought in to drown them out)?

Though she has not read recent studies of the fate of Jewish refugees, Kochanski does respond to earlier work by the Israeli historian Shmuel Krakowski on the Polish Home Army's hunting down of Jewish partisans hiding in the forests. In tune with nationalist writers, she calls these partisans "Jewish bandits" and asserts that, by executing such alleged marauders, the AK "protected" the Polish population. And yet, if it had included Jews as part of the population to protect, the Polish underground would have fed those in hiding rather than hunt them down. In a sense, members of the AK were also bandits, dependent on the local population for provisions, taking by force what they could not obtain by consent. Why does Kochanski think that Polish Jewish partisans were a menace whereas Polish Christian partisans were not?

The answer is that Kochanski repeats the stereotypes of her sources. In the Polish mind, Jews were Communists, and armed groups of Jewish escapees were feared for showing particular brutality toward the Polish Christian population. The combing of forests for "bandits" thus produced a sense of security among Poles. Like the nationalist authors she favors, Kochanski assumes that most Poles wanted to help the Jews. Drawing on a few stories from eastern Poland (including recollections of her relatives), she asserts that "the outsourcing of Jewish labour [from camps] to local landowners and farmers gave the Poles the opportunity to provide assistance." If more Jews did not survive, that was because they refused to help themselves. Władysława Chomsowa, a Pole who was "very active in saving Jews", noted,

"the greatest difficulty was the passivity of the Jews themselves." Kochanski cites a Jewish survivor from Wilno: "we should have mobilized and fought."

If Kochanski had read more Jewish memoirs, she would feel the cold absence of sympathy characteristic of such opinions. Resistance is not spontaneous. A crowd consisting largely of women and children, herded by heavily armed and extremely violent guards, does not "as a man" start thrashing or hitting. Until the end, Jews could not be certain of their fate, though they could be certain that even a slight display of disobedience would result in the immediate execution of oneself and one's loved ones. The Nazis diabolically exploited Jews' devotion to their families: though Kochanski writes that the Jews of eastern Poland were "poorly guarded and had ample opportunities for escape", it would have meant abandoning children and elderly parents to their fate. When some Jews finally did escape from the ghettos in 1942 to avoid being sent to the death camps, they fled in large family units—and that is how they met their deaths during the ensuing manhunts. In Kochanski's account, Poles have no role in this story. She writes that some Jews "took to the forests where the Germans hunted them down."

Referring to Polish attitudes toward Jews during the Holocaust, Kochanski writes that the issue has "provoked intense and highly emotional debates which show no sign of ending." The implication is that the historiography consists of a predictable repetition of viewpoints, "Polish" and "Jewish". In her book, the former mostly prevails.

Jan Gross: a Self-critical though Patriotic Perspective

One might have thought it understandable that destitute Poles would seize Jewish property after its owners were killed; after all, they also seized the property of other Poles. Historian Anna Machcewicz has written of a B-24 bomber that crashed in Poland; soon, local peasants went inside the wreckage and stripped the dead Polish crew of their clothes. Silent hoards of Polish looters descended on the Warsaw Ghetto after it was emptied in 1943, but the same thing happened in the ruins of the city's west bank after the Germans left in January 1945. And after the fighting, millions of Poles moved in and began using property left by the Germans in the western part of the country. In desperate times, people take what they need to survive.

Jan Gross refuses to accept such reasoning. Though many in Poland dismiss him as a Jew, Gross represents a particular kind of Polish perspective, one that is self-critical though patriotic. Of the inhabitants of the villages around Treblinka, he writes: "It can be safely assumed that the customs of every social and ethnic group demand respect toward their dead. Such respect is not a sign of some 'higher' civilization, but of basic human solidarity. The body is not a thing; even after death it retains the shape of the person whom it was serving in life...one cannot say that the despoiling of the 'bottomless Treblinka earth', as Vasili Grossman described it, could be justified by poverty, need, or necessity." Vital here are two words yoked together, "their dead": in Gross's telling, the murdered Jews were as much Polish as Jewish.

How to relate Poles and Jews is a question that has confounded historians. Gross himself omitted Jews from his first book, *Polish Society Under German Occupation* (1979), because they were "separated from the rest of the population and treated differently by the occupiers." He wrote of the self-sacrifice and heroism of Poles as they created institutions to salvage their national life. Yet his sources made him wonder about the realities left out of this "heroic" narrative. At the Hoover Institution in Stanford, Gross discovered a shocking report written in 1940 by Jan Karski, who believed that Poles ought to understand

that both Jews and Poles "are being unjustly persecuted by the same enemy". However, "such an understanding does not exist among the broad masses of the Polish populace. Their attitude toward the Jews is overwhelmingly severe, often without pity." Karski worried that this attitude made Poles vulnerable to demoralization. "A large percentage of them is benefitting from the rights that the new situation gives them.... 'The solution of the Jewish Question' by the Germans...is a serious and quite dangerous tool in the hands of the Germans, leading toward the 'moral pacification' of broad sections of Polish society."

These observations were so embarrassing that Karski kept them out of his reports for the Western allies. They unsettled Gross because they called into question the stories he had imbibed growing up in postwar Poland, even in a household that found ethnic nationalism repugnant. His father was the Polish-Jewish barrister Zygmunt Gross, widely respected for defending victims of Stalinism in the early 1950s; his mother, the Polish gentile Hanna Szumanska, served in the Polish underground. She helped hide Zygmunt and other Jews, including a first husband denounced by neighbors (who were rewarded with a liter of vodka). His parents were a bridge for Jan to an older, romantic sense of Polishness, largely forgotten in mostly mono-ethnic postwar Poland—a Polishness that had included Jews, Lithuanians and Ukrainians. Jan, his parents and his wife Irena left Poland after the anti-Semitic campaign orchestrated by Polish Communists in 1968, first heading for Italy and then the United States. This was the "March emigration", in which most remaining Polish Jews left the country. The former dissident publisher Barbara Torunczyk later recalled that Zygmunt was the first of the émigrés she saw return for a visit. That was in 1973: he was bringing back Hanna's ashes to be laid to rest in Polish soil. Later, Jan would return with the ashes of his father.

After the collapse of Communism in 1989, Jan Gross spent more time in Poland and consulted previously inaccessible records. A sociologist by training, he also used methods considered unserious by Polish historians, such as talking to people who knew about the crimes. At pubs in Jedwabne, one could hear "incredible" stories about Jews being murdered in a barn that the historians knew nothing about. After *Neighbors*, Gross published *Fear* (2006), a study of the postwar pogroms in Krakow and Kielce (on July 3, 1946, in the latter city, Poles killed forty-two Jews who had survived the Holocaust). "I wrote this book", he later said, "as a Pole who felt the events described were a stain on my Polish identity."

Yet the intensity of this criticism left little space for the more tolerant Poland that was his parents': none of the protagonists in *Golden Harvest* communicate values that transcend the ethnic perspective. Historian Paweł Machcewicz, himself a leader in investigating the Jedwabne massacre, has criticized Gross for not including in his accounts the thousands of Poles who helped Jews. In Warsaw alone, some 25 000 Jews are thought to have lived in hiding before the outbreak of the uprising in August 1944, and, according to conservative estimates, at least three times that number of Poles would have been required to keep them alive. No other group is as numerous among the "Righteous Gentiles" honored at Yad Vashem as Poles.

Gross's answer to criticisms like Machcewicz's is that the heroic story is well-known in Poland, and his task as an author is to say something new. But why has no one before him told of Poles robbing and murdering Jews? Gross's book on Jedwabne appeared sixty years after the crime. A partial explanation lies in the decades of collusion between Communism and nationalism. Poland's Communists were placed in power by the Red Army and widely seen as lackeys of Moscow, Poland's historic enemy. They therefore sought to boost support through an ethnic narrative that was anti-German but also, at times, anti-Semitic. The historians of Communist Poland ignored questions of wartime collaboration and wrote

that 6 million Polish citizens had died, failing to note that more than half were Jewish. As late as 1995, only 8 percent of Poles surveyed believed that Auschwitz was, above all, a place where Jews were killed (of the 1.1 million people killed at Auschwitz, about 90 percent were Jewish); by 2010, that number had risen to 47.4 percent.

In this sense, the work of Jan and Irena Gross and younger Polish historians like Engelking and Grabowski is pedagogical: part of the broader democratization of Polish society, excavating and contextualizing evidence deemed inopportune by the Communist regime—for example, the hundreds of Yiddish-language memoirs left by survivors in the immediate postwar era and stored in the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Even historians on the far right are now admitting some Polish role in the Holocaust. But Kochanski, a military historian whose parents fought in the resistance, also wants to educate, and her target audience is Westerners ignorant of the Polish struggle against Nazi and Communist totalitarianism.

A Country of Heroes and a Country of Collaborators?

The question is whether these two images of Poland—a country of heroes and a country of collaborators—can be combined. The difficulty stems from the occupation itself. Rarely has a society been more violently divided than Polish society was during the war: Jews divided from Poles, but also Poles divided from other Poles. The Polish Jewish writer Janina Bauman, who escaped the Warsaw Ghetto with her mother and sister and lived among Poles, described the process. "Some time and several shelters passed", she recalled, "before I realised that for the people who sheltered us our presence also meant more than great danger, nuisance, or extra income. Somehow it affected them, too. It boosted what was noble in them, or what was base. Sometimes it divided the family, at other times it brought the family together in a shared endeavor to help and survive."

The base attained a distance from the noble that Westerners can scarcely imagine. But the story does not end there, for the distance between the two poles was also collapsed as each was inverted, and each inversion compounded. The base became more so by being presented as virtuous, and the noble eluded people's reach because it was stigmatized as harmful, indeed self-serving. Jan Gross writes of a case in southern Poland where neighbors hounded a woman to dispose of the two Jewish children in her care, insisting she was "selfishly" endangering the village. They left her in peace only after she had assured them—falsely—that she had drowned the pair. Gross asks us to ponder the inversion of morality in a place where people breathed a sigh of relief believing that their neighbor had murdered two children. In his sources, Grabowski repeatedly encounters Polish police carrying out their "patriotic" duty of turning over Jewish women and children to the Germans. The debasement of the noble continued after the war, as Polish rescuers begged the Jews they had saved to keep quiet. The eminent critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki and his wife owed their salvation to the Polish worker "Bolek", who housed them for fourteen months after they had fled the Warsaw Ghetto. When Soviet troops finally pushed the Germans back and liberated them, Bolek offered Reich-Ranicki a glass of vodka to celebrate but implored him to tell "no one that you were with us. I know this nation. They would never forgive us for sheltering two Jews."

Reich-Ranicki kept his promise until 2000, when his autobiography appeared, to much acclaim, in Germany. Like him, historians such as Jan and Irena Gross are also exposing stories that have lain dormant beneath the surface for decades, unnoticed because they happened far away from Warsaw or Krakow, where urbane intellectuals construct "historical memory". Gross cites an esteemed Polish ethnomusicologist who has spent decades collecting folklore in the Polish countryside, who is

"enamored of Polish village life and its culture", but who writes, "The most painful thing for me is the attitude in the countryside toward Jews, and a universal sense of triumph because they are no longer there." A keen reporter for the Polish underground had already written in December 1942 that in the "soul" of Polish society, there was no "elemental protest" against the murder of the Jews. Instead, Poles felt "a subconscious satisfaction that there will be no Jews in the Polish organism." This was a confirmation of Karski's worst fears. By 1943, writes the historian Andrzej Zbikowski, Poles took for granted that the Jews would disappear, and a kind of solidarity spread through the Polish underground, from the (otherwise nonracist) socialists to the deeply anti-Semitic nationalists. The war would lead to the defeat of two enemies: the Germans, but also the Jews.

From a European perspective, Poland seems to be advancing toward a "normal" open society that is working its way through a difficult past. In France, decades elapsed before the public and the French state recognized the extent of native collaboration with the Nazis. What is different in Poland is the severity of the clash between the old and new narratives. The Polish underground was more massive, Polish collaboration far smaller than its French counterpart, and Polish suffering on a scale unknown in Western Europe—yet the crimes against Jews on Polish territory, and the virulence of native anti-Semitism, were also far greater. And even more is at stake here: the myth (not to say fiction) of martyrdom became a pillar of identity in Poland, a country made to live not only under the yoke of a system imposed by the Soviets but also in great poverty, forgotten by Europe and seemingly irrelevant. If Poland did not have a present, at least it had a past.

In a 31 May letter to his Polish counterpart, President Obama apologized for the words "Polish death camps." "The killing centers at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Belzec, Treblinka, and elsewhere in occupied Poland were built and operated by the Nazi regime", he wrote. "In contrast many Poles risked their lives—and gave their lives—to save Jews from the Holocaust." Yet if one reads the newly translated memoirs of Jewish survivors, and the neglected court testimonies backing up the long-suppressed popular memories of looting and murder, one can say that during World War II, Poland itself became a death camp for Jews. If it worked effectively, that was because Poles helped keep it running. Exactly how many took part in the manhunts and denunciations isn't known, but their numbers were significant enough to produce the result that the country's nationalists wanted, satisfying widespread hopes that Poland would become "Polish". To say so is not to hurl slander at the Poles from afar, but to reprise a story that ever more Poles are telling about themselves, in the name of a Poland that is at the same time very old and very new.

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