



# Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland

By Jan T. Gross

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On a summer day in 1941 in Nazi-occupied Poland, half of the town of Jedwabne brutally murdered the other half: 1,600 men, women, and children—all but seven of the town's Jews. In this shocking and compelling study, historian Jan Gross pieces together eyewitness accounts as well as physical evidence into a comprehensive reconstruction of the horrific July day remembered well by locals but hidden to history. Revealing wider truths about Jewish-Polish relations, the Holocaust, and human responses to occupation and totalitarianism, Gross's investigation sheds light on how Jedwabne's Jews came to be murdered—not by faceless Nazis, but by people who knew them well.

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## **Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland** By Jan T. Gross **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

"One day, in July 1941, half of the population of a small east European town murdered the other half--some 1,600 men, women and children." This short sentence summarizes the subject of *Neighbors*, historian Jan Gross's account of a massacre that occurred in Jedwabne, in northeastern Poland. Gross describes the atrocities of Jedwabne in almost unbearable detail. Men and women were hacked to death with knives, iron hooks, and axes. Small children were thrown with pitchforks onto a bonfire. A woman's decapitated head was kicked like a football. Historians before now have blamed the massacre on the Nazis--whose participation in and responsibility for these crimes has been exaggerated, Gross says. In fact, he argues, a virulent Polish anti-Semitism was liberated by German occupation. Instead of explaining the horrors of Jedwabne, which would be impossible, *Neighbors* sets the record straight as to the identity of the criminals. In doing so, Gross has ensured that future histories of the Holocaust, particularly in Poland, will be more honest, because future historians will be answerable to his argument that the evil of the Nazis was not only forced on the Poles. In places such as Jedwabne, it was welcomed by them. --Michael Joseph Gross

#### From Publishers Weekly

Claude Lanzman's myth-shattering documentary film Shoah demonstrated that some Polish peasants were keenly aware of the Nazis' mass murder of Jews on Polish soil. This volume takes the real-life horror story a step further, documenting how nearly all of the Jews of Jedwabne, Poland, were murdered on one day most of them burned alive by their non-Jewish neighbors. Drawing on testimony that prompted and emanated from a 1949 Polish trial, Gross carefully describes how apparently normal citizens terrorized and killed approximately 1,600 Jewish villagers. Gross, a professor of politics and European studies at New York University, also attempts to place this heinous crime in historical and political context, concluding that he can explain but not fully understand. How to understand the Polish villagers, led by their mayor, exceeding the July 10, 1941, command of conquering German soldiers to annihilate the Jews but spare some tradesmen? Immediately, according to Gross, local townsmen-turned-hooligans grabbed clubs studded with nails and other weapons and chased the Jews into the street. Many tried to escape through the surrounding fields, but only seven succeeded. The thugs fatally shot many Jews after forcing them to dig mass graves. They shoved the remaining hundreds of Jews into a barn, doused it with kerosene and set it ablaze. Some on the outside played musical instruments to drown out the victims' cries. Yet *Neighbors* isn't as terrifying as one might expect, since Gross, a Polish ,migr, himself, guides the reader along an analytical path. By deemphasizing the drama, he helps readers cope with the awful incident, but his narrative occasionally bogs down in his own thoughts. Still, he asserts hopefully that young Poles are "ready to confront the unvarnished history of Polish-Jewish relations during the war." (May)Forecast: The always heated question of the role of Poles in the Holocaust comes to a head here. The book is bound to generate controversy (it has already garnered mention in the New York Times), though its sales will probably be limited.

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#### From [Booklist](#)

On July 10, 1941, in Jedwabne, Poland, the town's 1,600 Jews were murdered by its 1,600 Christians. The non-Jews armed themselves with axes, clubs studded with nails, and other instruments of torture and chased the Jews into the street. Some Jews were butchered and thrown into a hole they had been forced to dig. Beards of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers' breasts, and some people were

beaten and forced to sing and dance. The Jews that were still alive were herded into a barn that was doused with kerosene and set on fire. After the fire, the townspeople used axes to knock gold teeth from still not entirely decomposed bodies, and in other ways violated the corpses. The sources the author used to chronicle this horrible episode include evidence recorded during trials in 1949 and 1953 and a memorial book of the Jedwabne Jews published in 1980, in which several eyewitnesses described the tragedy of their hometown.

*George Cohen*

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