

NEIGHBORS

One day in 1941, half the population of a small town in Poland murdered the other half. Why?

BY JAN T. GROSS

In January of 1949, security police detained fifteen men in the town of Jedwabne, in northeastern Poland. Among the men arrested—mostly small farmers and seasonal workers—there were two shoemakers, a mason, a carpenter, two locksmiths, a letter carrier, and a former town-hall receptionist. Some were family men (one was a father of six children, another of four), some still unmarried. The youngest was twenty-seven, the oldest fifty-nine. They were, to all appearances, a group of ordinary men.

Other arrests followed, and four months later, on May 16th and 17th, in the District Court of Lomza, a town a dozen miles away, twenty-two men from Jedwabne, including the former town-hall receptionist, Boleslaw Ramotowski, were tried on charges of "assisting authorities of the German state by participating in the capture of some 1,200 people of Jewish nationality who were all burned by the Germans in a barn belonging to Bronislaw Szlęszynski." In 1953, a Jedwabne shop owner named Jozef Sobuta was tried on similar charges. The trials were prompted by a deposition describing the history of the town under German occupation, which was given to the Jewish Historical Commission, an organization that had begun collecting information at the war's end. Szmul Wasersztejn, the son of a Jedwabne butcher, had been deposed on April 5, 1945, and this is what he said:

Before the war broke out, 1,600 Jews lived in Jedwabne, and only seven survived, saved by a Polish woman, Wyrzykowska, who lived in the vicinity. . . .

On June 23, 1941, Germans entered the town. And as early as the 25th local bandits, from the Polish population, started an anti-Jewish pogrom. Two of those bandits, Wacek Borowski with his brother Mietek, walked from one Jewish dwelling to another together with other bandits playing accordion and flute to drown the screams

of Jewish women and children. I saw with my own eyes how those murderers killed Chajcia Wasersztejn, fifty-three years old, Jakub Kac, seventy-three years old, and Elias Krawiecki.

Jakub Kac they stoned to death with bricks. Krawiecki they knifed and then plucked his eyes and cut off his tongue. He suffered terribly for twelve hours before he gave up his soul.

On the same day I observed a horrible scene. Chaja Kubrzanska, twenty-eight years old, and Basia Binsztejn, twenty-six years old, both holding newborn babies, when they saw what was going on, they ran to a pond, in order to drown themselves with the children rather than fall into the hands of bandits. They put their children in the water and drowned them with their own hands: then Baska Binsztejn jumped in and immediately went to the bottom, while Chaja Kubrzanska suffered for a couple of hours. Assembled hooligans made a spectacle of this. They advised her to lie face down in the water, so that she would drown faster. Finally, seeing that the children were already dead, she threw herself more energetically into the water and found her death, too.

The next day a local priest intervened, explaining that they should stop the pogrom, and that German authorities would take care of things by themselves. This worked, and the pogrom was stopped. From this day on the local population no longer sold foodstuffs to Jews, which made their circumstances all the more difficult. In the meantime rumors spread that the Germans would issue an order that all the Jews be destroyed.

Such an order was issued by the Germans on July 10, 1941. Even though the Germans gave the order, it was Polish hooligans who took it up and carried it out, using the most horrible methods. After various tortures and humiliations, they burned all the Jews in a barn.

Despite Wasersztejn's account, the notion that Germans, rather than Poles, had carried out the Jedwabne massacre went unchallenged in Poland for more than fifty years. The vast majority of Poles believe that throughout the Second World War they were victims—and only victims—of their German and Soviet occupiers. Roughly three million Poles and three million Polish Jews died in the war. Although Jews made up ten per cent of the country's popula-

tion, most historians have treated their destruction as somehow unrelated to the Polish people. Evidence, however, shows that in Jedwabne's case the conventional historiography had failed to come to terms with what actually happened.

The first account reporting the massacre in Jedwabne was Szmul Wasersztejn's 1945 deposition. Then, in 1980, a Memorial Book of Jedwabne Jews was assembled by Rabbis Jacob and Julius Baker, consisting of accounts of Jewish life in the town. In it, several eyewitnesses described the events surrounding the massacre. In 1998, the filmmaker Agnieszka Arnold interviewed several Jedwabne inhabitants for a documentary called "Where Is My Older Brother Cain?" And, later still, I had an opportunity to talk about these events with several former residents, including Szmul Wasersztejn.

Much of the evidence comes not from Jewish survivors but from testimony in the 1949 and 1953 trials. In the 1949 trial, twelve of the twenty-two defendants were sentenced to prison terms ranging from eight to fifteen years, and one man, Karol Bardon, was sentenced to death. (The sentence was never carried out.) In the Lomza courtroom, several defendants revealed that they had been beaten during interrogation. Beatings appear to have been standard interrogation procedure at that time, however, and the investigation, most of which was completed in two weeks, and the trial, which was completed in two days, appear to have been perfunctory. Most of the defendants were deposed only once and were asked, more or less, three questions: Where did you live in July, 1941? Did you participate in the murder of Jews in the month of July? Who else participated in rounding up and murdering the Jews of Jedwabne? This was

"They chased them all to a barn. Poured kerosene all around. It took but two minutes, but the scream . . . I can still hear it."



"They stay together for the money."

not, I concluded, a political trial, and the evidence it produced can be relied upon.

I—A QUIET TOWN

Jedwabne is situated near the intersection of two rivers, the Narew and the Biebrza, some ninety miles from Warsaw. The rivers overflow each spring, and the area is famous for picturesque wetlands, several varieties of waterfowl, and lush vegetation; in 1993, the country's largest national park was established there. But the town itself is ugly. The houses were traditionally built of wood and straw, the cheapest and most readily available construction materials in this part of the country, and

fires were frequent. In an account for the Jedwabne Memorial Book, one Jew recalled how in the evenings, before going to sleep, villagers might cast a last glance toward the north, where, just beyond the horizon, lay the neighboring town of Radzilow. And if the night sky showed a faint pink glow they would quickly load wagons with supplies and rush to the rescue. Similarly, Radzilow kept an eye on Jedwabne.

Jedwabne received its town charter in 1736, though it had already been settled for three hundred years. By 1770, three hundred and eighty-seven Jews lived there, a substantial majority of the total population of four hundred and fifty. According to 1931 census figures, the town population then totalled twenty-

one hundred and sixty-seven. More than sixty per cent of Jedwabne's inhabitants identified themselves as Jews.

Jewish communities in the area had various nicknames for one another. Jews from Radzilow, for example, were called *Radzhilover kozes*, or Radzilow goats, an amiable and slightly mocking label; Jews from Lomza, a much larger town, were nicknamed *Lomzher balonim*, or choosy, smug, and somewhat sybaritic; Jews from Kolno, a town to the northwest, were known as *Kolner pekelakh*, meaning that they carried loads, or burdens, and tended to complain a lot; and Jews from Jedwabne were called *Yedwabner krikbers* ("crawlers"), presumably because they were known to move around slowly and methodically.

Rabbi Jacob Baker, who is now eighty-six and lives in Brooklyn, has fond memories of prewar encounters with Polish neighbors. He lived in Jedwabne with his mother, his grandparents, his brother Julius, and another brother, not far from a compound occupied by a family of Poles, the Sielawas. Like many other people from the neighborhood, he and his siblings would occasionally go to the Sielawa well to draw water, because it was reputed to be excellent. He recalled, "One winter nightfall I observed neighbor Sielawa's little girl deliver to Reizele"—Baker's grandmother—"a small amount of potato peel for her cow, for which she immediately reimbursed her with a whole gallon of milk. When I wondered at the unequal exchange, Reizele explained it thus: 'From the small amount of potato peel we may deduce how little food that family had for supper.'" An elderly Polish pharmacist from Jedwabne, interviewed a few years ago by Agnieszka Arnold, also recalled good neighborly relations between Poles and Jews: "Here there were no such big differences in opinion or whatever, because they"—the Jews—"were, in this little town, on good terms with the Poles. Depending on each other. Everybody was on a first-name basis, Janek, Icek . . . Life here was, I would say, somehow idyllic."

There was plenty of interaction among the neighbors. And if there was an undercurrent of prudence and caution—Jews were always aware of a latent hostility in the surrounding population, especially since Poles throughout the

area tended to support the anti-Semitic nationalist parties—open confrontation seems to have been avoided during the interwar years.

Of course, there were times when Jews were particularly vulnerable to outbursts of anti-Semitism. In the distant past, when the local gentry periodically convened the territorial assembly, bringing together large retinues of servants and acolytes, there had often been drunken brawls, during which local Jews were beaten. At Easter, priests evoked in their sermons an image of Jews as God-killers, making the season a perennial occasion for anti-Semitic violence. In such an atmosphere, a mere coincidence could be unfortunate. Jona Rothchild, a Jedwabne hardware-store owner, writes in the Memorial Book that in 1934 a Jewish woman was killed in Jedwabne, and a few days later a craftsman in a neighboring town was shot to death at a fair. A rumor began to circulate that the Jedwabne Jews had thus taken revenge on the Poles. The threat of a pogrom (which people had begun to dread) was averted after the spiritual leader of the Jewish community, Rabbi Avigdor Bialostocki, and Rothchild himself visited the Jedwabne priest.

Jews took it as a matter of course that at times when there was a threat of anti-Semitism both secular and religious authorities had to be appeased with gifts. They were prepared to pay for protection, and for centuries the *kehiles*, the Jewish communal authorities, had maintained special funds designated for this purpose.

II—RUSSIANS AND GERMANS

On August 23, 1939, the German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression was signed in Moscow, opening the way for Hitler to launch a military invasion of Poland without the risk of the Soviet Union's creating a second front against him, in the east. As a result of the pact's secret protocols, more than half the territory of Poland was occupied in the autumn of 1939 by Soviet forces, after the Red Army marched across the Polish eastern border, on September 17th. Hitler had invaded Poland on September 1st. Initially, there was confusion about the boundaries between the two

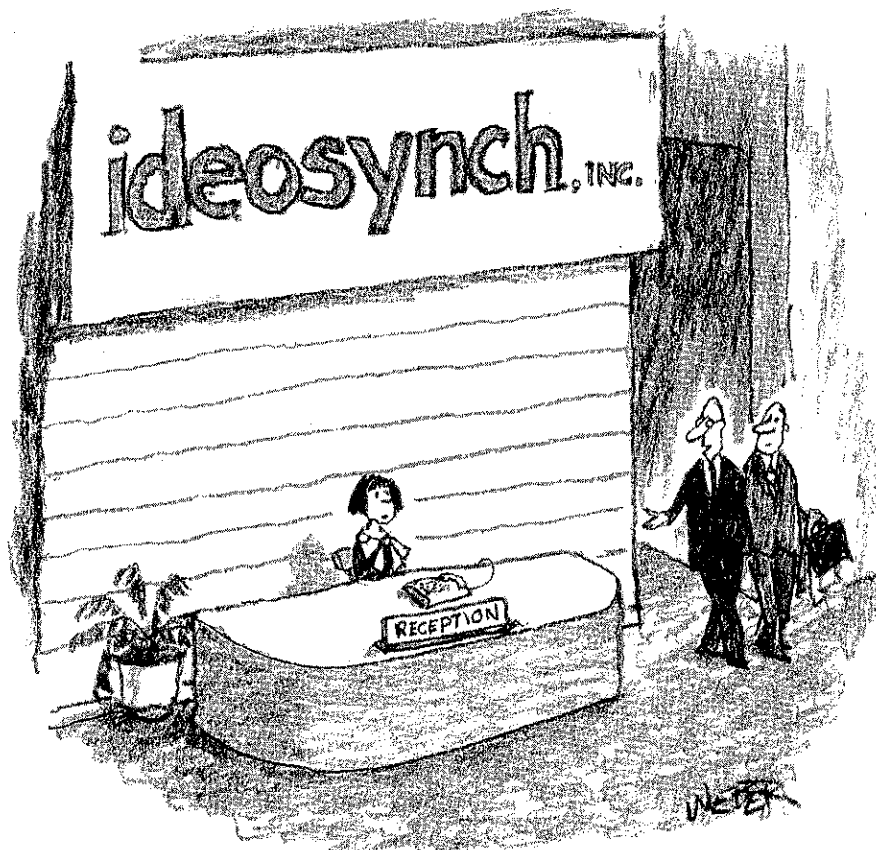
occupation zones, and that autumn Jedwabne was briefly occupied by the Wehrmacht before being turned over to the Soviet authorities. The Soviet occupation lasted until Hitler's surprise invasion of the Soviet Union, in June of 1941.

Conventional wisdom has it that at first the Jews collaborated with the Soviets, at the expense of the Poles, and that if brutal outbursts of anti-Semitism did take place in 1941, when the Germans occupied the area, they were in part understandable. It is undoubtedly true that Jews, who made up more than half the population of Jedwabne, took jobs with the new administration, in the militia, or in state-run commerce and manufacturing coöperatives established by the Soviet authorities. The Soviets were used to manipulating ethnic antagonisms to maintain control over the local population. However, positions at the top level of the local administration were entrusted to experienced personnel from the Soviet Union, rather than to local people.

Nevertheless, residents of the Polish territories occupied by the Soviets in

1939 often portrayed the Jews as having a privileged relationship with the occupiers. In many accounts, Polish witnesses have described their towns' first encounters with the Red Army as being accompanied by spontaneous outbursts of joy and celebrations by the Jewish population, which, they go on to say, eagerly enlisted in the new administration. When Agnieszka Arnold interviewed the daughter of the barn owner Bronislaw Szleszynski—a source who certainly would not whitewash Jewish behavior toward the Soviet Army—she had this to say:

I saw how the Soviets came in, you know. They went down Przyszelska Street. Here there was a bakery and a Jew and a Jewess put out a table, it was covered with red cloth, you know, this red cloth was on it, and a Polish family. Two Polish families, because these were Communists from before the war . . . And so these three families greeted Soviet soldiers with bread and salt. This I saw. A large banner was attached from one building to another: "We welcome you" in big white capital letters, they were white, capital letters. And so they greeted them with their wives. And then the army at the square, where there is a park now, spread around. I was sixteen years old then, and there were also children. Just children, because older people did not



"This is Ms. Watkins, a vital member of our greet staff."

come out to look at this, they were afraid, only from afar, but children have to be everywhere. Well, I was not such a young child, but we went down there.

In yet another conversation recorded by Arnold, the local pharmacist, an elderly Pole, attempted to explain the nature of the alleged collaboration between the Jews and the Soviet administration: "You know, I don't know any proof of this. I only repeat what was, so to speak, a well-known secret. This is what people said. Well, someone had to do it. But I cannot guarantee this with my . . . No, I didn't see anyone do it. I didn't personally know." In other words, the stereotype of the Jews' sycophantic attitude toward the Soviets could be "confirmed" by a group of Jewish children cheerfully marching down the street, or by the fact that a Jew worked in the post office or some other official institution, or that a Jewish youth spoke arrogantly to a passerby on the street or to a fellow-customer waiting in line in a store. Undoubtedly, there were "collaborators" or Soviet secret-police agents among the Jews, but not among the Jews exclusively. In the Jedwabne area, a Polish underground organization was betrayed to the Soviets by one of its members, a Pole.

Twenty-one months of Soviet occupation of the area took a heavy toll on residents. A process of Sovietization affected people of all religions, ethnic groups, and social classes, but the brunt of propaganda and repression was directed against the Polish state. Local élites were arrested or deported. Private property was gradually taken over by the Soviet authorities. A vigorous campaign of secularization targeted all religious institutions and personnel. Consequently, with the exception of the Jews (who feared the Nazis more than they feared the Bolsheviks), in the summer of 1941 the population welcomed the invading German Army.

The German attack on the Soviet Union began on June 22, 1941. As soon as the Germans entered Jedwabne, Czesław Kupiecki, a local Communist who worked in the Soviet militia, was denounced, as were many other Communist sympathizers throughout the area. And even though it is not clear who, specifically, was responsible for

identifying Kupiecki, it appears that, from the beginning of the occupation, local people were helping the Germans identify Communists and others they considered enemies and terrorize them. Thus, Karol Bardon, who was sentenced to death in the 1949 trial, saw, in the main square in Jedwabne, a group of people covered with blood and standing

with their hands up, first Kupiecki, former volunteer of the Soviet militia and inhabitant of the town of Jedwabne, then Wisniewski, former chairman of the village soviet, third Wisniewski, secretary of the soviet—these were brothers from the hamlet of Bartki in Jedwabne *gmina* some ten kilometres from Jedwabne—then three people of Mosaic faith, one of them the owner of the bakery in Jedwabne at the corner of the square and Przyszelska Street. Two others I didn't recognize. These six bleeding individuals were encircled by Germans. In front of the Germans stood a few civilians with thick clubs, to whom a German was yelling, "Do not kill at once. Slowly, let them suffer." The hands of the beaten were falling. Those civilians doing the beating I didn't recognize, because they were encircled by a group of Germans.

It was Szmul Wasersztejn's deposition—followed by testimony from other witnesses—that first drew attention to what happened in Jedwabne in the days after the Germans arrived. Some people were killed, but the principal threats to Jews were beatings, confiscation of property, and humiliation—men walking down the street would be ordered to clean outhouses with their bare hands, for example.

We know from accounts in the Memorial Book that among the Jews fear was intensifying, primarily because of rumors about pogroms and killings being carried out in the immediate vicinity. A young Jew from Radzilow, Menachem Finkielsztejn, reports that in the days preceding the Jedwabne massacre several hundred Jews were killed in Radzilow. And on July 5th, in nearby Wasosz, another massacre occurred. Describing the murder of the Radzilow Jews, Finkielsztejn wrote:

What a terrible sight this presented can be gauged from the fact that the Germans stated that the Poles had gone overboard. The arrival of the Germans saved eighteen Jews who had managed to hide during the pogrom. There was an eight-year-old boy among them, who had already been buried, but who revived and dug himself out. . . .

In this manner the Jewish community in Radzilow was wiped off the face of the earth

after five hundred years of existence. Together with the Jews everything Jewish was destroyed in the village as well: the study house, the synagogue, and the cemetery.

Finkielsztejn's narrative found unexpected confirmation sixty years later. Last year, in an article in the newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, an elderly Polish man who wished to remain anonymous spoke about the Radzilow pogrom: "Neither on this day nor on the preceding day did I see any Germans coming from the outside to Radzilow. A gendarme stood on the balcony and looked at the scene. But our people did it. In fact on the previous day, on Sunday, July 6th, a lot of people came to Radzilow by horse-drawn carts from Wasosz, where a pogrom had taken place a day earlier."

As a result of those pogroms, many Jews from the surrounding villages sought shelter in Jedwabne. Among them was a sixteen-year-old named Wiktor Nielawicki. He was a nephew of the Pecynowicz family, well-to-do millers in Jedwabne. Nielawicki was from Wizna, where the Germans, immediately upon entering the town, executed scores of Jewish males. But, since the Wizna Jews looked very much like their Polish neighbors, German executioners needed help from local Polish informants to identify them. In this manner, some seventy Jewish males were picked up from a few houses still standing after the German bombardment—near the town square—and were taken and shot in a nearby ditch. At a smith's house at Srebrowska Street, where several Jewish families had sought shelter, another seventy-five were killed on the spot.

Nielawicki and his parents found temporary shelter at the house of his uncle. "In Jedwabne it was still quiet," Nielawicki writes in the Jedwabne Memorial Book. But people knew what was coming. Both Dwojra Pecynowicz, Nielawicki's cousin, and Mietek Olszewicz, who survived the war in hiding with Wasersztejn, were warned by Polish friends of an impending catastrophe. When Nielawicki urged his relatives to take note of these "constant warnings that came from friendly Gentile neighbors" and hide, they were dismissive, pointing out that Jews had lived in Warsaw under the German occupation for two years already. "My uncle and his



Szmul Wasersztejn (center), shortly after the war. He was saved by Antonina Wyrzykowska (seated, left), who hid him.

rich brother Eliyahu did not believe me when I told them what had happened in Wizna," Nielawicki writes. "And if it had happened there, they said, 'we here in Jedwabne are safe because the Bishop promised to protect us.'"

In the meantime, Jedwabne's Poles formed a new municipal government. Marian Karolak, whose family had a business in the main square, became the mayor, and among his clos-

est collaborators a certain Wasilewski and the shop owner Jozef Sobuta can be identified. It is not clear what municipal authorities were doing during those days, beyond consulting with the Germans.

Here is Szmul Wasersztejn's account:

On the morning of July 10, 1941, eight 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,

unanimously, that all Jews must be killed. When the Germans proposed to leave one Jewish family from each profession, the local carpenter Bronislaw Szleszynski, who was present, answered: We have enough of our own craftsmen, we have to destroy all the Jews, none should stay alive. Mayor Karolak and everybody else agreed with his words. For this purpose Szleszynski gave his own barn, which stood nearby. After this meeting the bloodbath began.

Local hooligans armed themselves with axes, special clubs studded with nails, and other instruments of torture and destruction and chased all the Jews into the street. As the

first victims of their devilish instincts they selected seventy-five of the youngest and healthiest Jews, whom they ordered to pick up a huge monument of Lenin that the Russians had erected in the center of town. It was impossibly heavy, but under a rain of horrible blows the Jews had to do it. While carrying the monument, they also had to sing until they brought it to the designated place. There they were ordered to dig a hole and throw the monument in. Then these Jews were butchered to death and thrown into the same hole.

The other brutality was when the murderers ordered every Jew to dig a hole and bury all previously murdered Jews, and then those were killed and in turn buried by others. It is impossible to represent all the brutalities of the hooligans, and it is difficult to find in our history of suffering something similar.

The massacre was coordinated by Marian Karolak. His name appears in virtually every deposition. (He left the area after the war and was apparently never brought to justice.) A few other people identified in leading roles that day were also employed by the town council. A road watchman, Mieczyslaw Gerwad, put it simply: "The entire town council participated in this murder of Jews."

It cannot be determined whether the initiative originated with the Germans or with the town council alone. But both sides apparently quickly agreed on the matter, and on the method of its imple-

mentation. Jerzy Laudanski, one of the youngest—he was not yet nineteen—and most brutal participants, testified:

At the instruction of my brother Zygmunt Laudanski I went to work for the gendarmerie in Jedwabne, and in 1941 four or five Gestapo men came in a taxi and started talking in the city hall; what they talked about I don't know. After a certain time Marian Karolak told us Poles to call Polish citizens to the town hall. After calling in the Polish population, he ordered them to round up the Jews in the square, presumably to work, and this was done. At that time I also participated in herding the Jews onto the square.

The visit of the Gestapo men to Jedwabne is confirmed by many sources. But they do not agree on details—did the Gestapo arrive on the day of the pogrom, for example, or the day before? "Before the start of this mass murder," Karol Bardon, who, soon after, began working for the German gendarmerie, writes, "I saw in front of the Jedwabne town hall a few Gestapo men, but I don't remember if it was on the day of the mass murder or the day before." A witness named Henryk Krystowczyk said that the town council signed some "agreement with the Gestapo" about the burning of the Jews. But he did not participate in the meeting and only repeats what he has heard "from various peo-

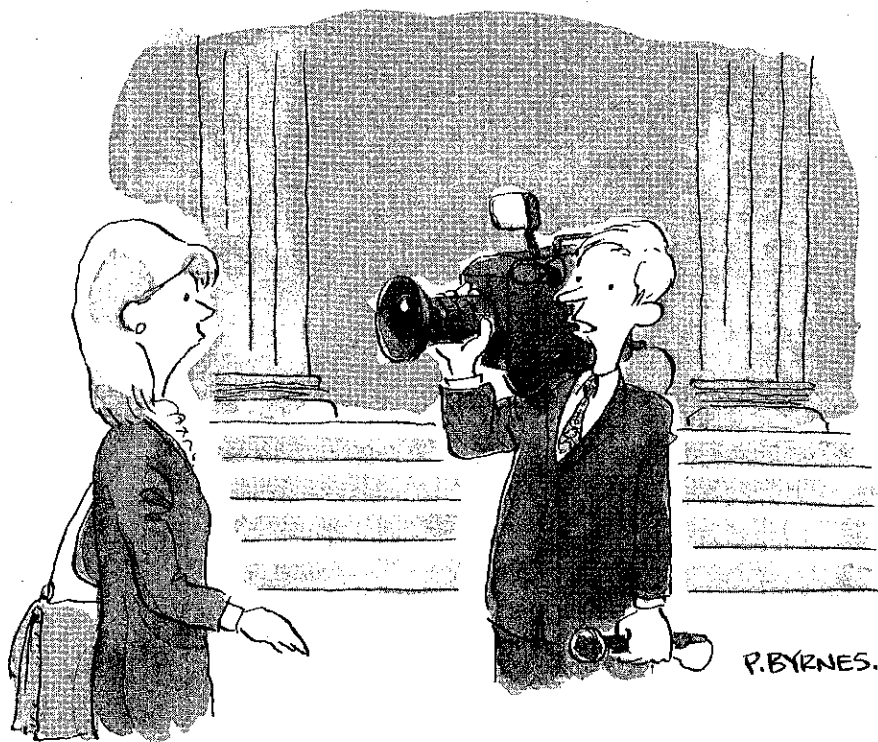
ple." The only town-council member who left a deposition is Jozef Sobuta; after the war, he pretended to be out of his mind, and his testimony is less than forthcoming.

Estimates of the precise number of Germans in Jedwabne on the day of the massacre vary, but most witnesses agree that the gendarmerie was staffed by fewer than a dozen men. In all likelihood, the municipal authorities were given a certain amount of time—eight hours, if we are to take literally an angry reprimand by the gendarmerie commander—to get rid of the Jews as they pleased.

According to Jozef Zyluk, one of the 1949 defendants, "It was like this: I was cutting hay, and the mayor of Jedwabne, Karolak, came to me in the meadow and said to go and bring all the Jews into the square. And so we both went."

The term "gendarmes" is often used to explain the circumstances that led several of the accused in the trials to appear in the market square or near the barn. Thus, in a typical deposition, Czeslaw Lipinski, a farmer, tells the court that Jerzy Laudanski, Eugeniusz Kalinowski, "and one German" came to get him, and that he went with them to round up Jews and bring them to the square. Feliks Tarnacki was visited by Karolak and Wasilewski, who "together with a Gestapo man chased me to the square," where the Jews were gathered. Wladyslaw Miciura, who was doing some carpentry work in town, was told by a gendarme at some point "to go to the square to watch the Jews." This is the only testimony that has a lone gendarme ordering anyone into action. In all other testimony, the gendarme made the rounds in the company of members of the town council.

It should not be forgotten that the over-all, undisputed rulers over matters of life and death in Jedwabne were the Germans. No sustained organized activity could take place without their consent. They were the only ones who could decide the fate of the Jews. It would have been within their power to stop the pogrom at any time. They did not choose to intervene. If they suggested that some Jewish families be spared, they must have done so without serious conviction, for virtually all the Jews on whom the murderers laid their hands were killed in the end. It is clear that had Jedwabne



"Actually, I work for a newspaper, but people won't talk to me without it."

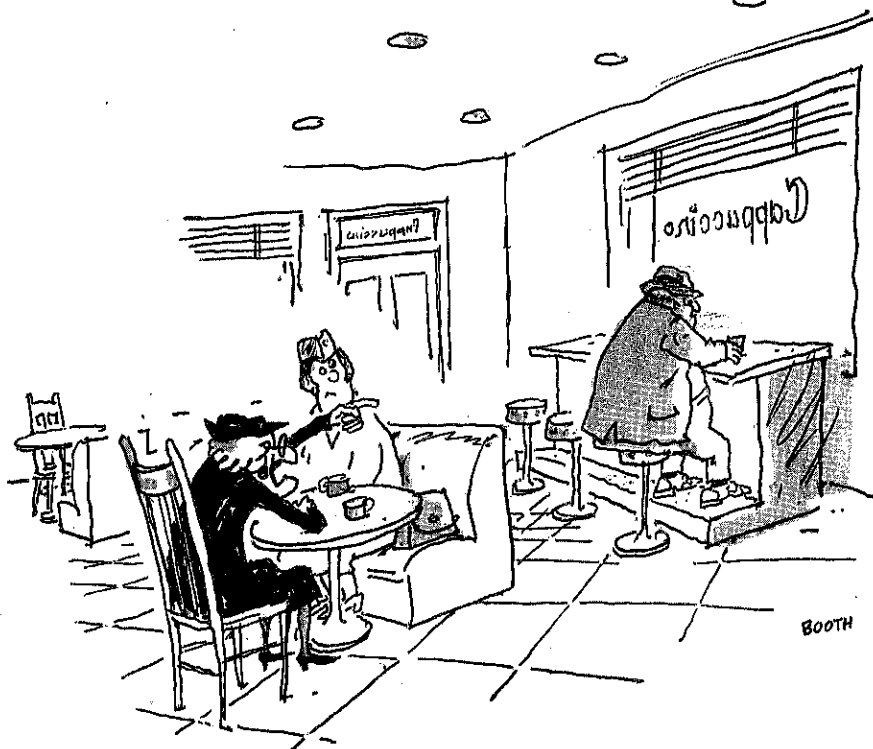
not been occupied by the Germans, the Jews would not have been murdered by their neighbors.

In 1949, Edward Szleszynski testified, "In the barn of my father, Bronislaw Szleszynski, a lot of Jews were burned. I didn't see it with my own eyes since I was in the bakery on that day, but I know from people who lived in Jedwabne at the time that Poles carried out this deed. Germans participated only in photographing." The defendant Boleslaw Ramotowski testified, "I want to stress that Germans did not participate in the murder of Jews; they just stood and took pictures of how Poles mistreated the Jews." Mieczyslaw Gerwad: "Jews were being murdered by the Polish population."

Julia Sokolowska worked as a cook for the gendarmes, and was at the German outpost during the day of the massacre. When she was questioned during the 1949 investigation, she gave the following testimony:

A few days after the German occupying army entered Polish territory in 1941, inhabitants of Jedwabne, together with the Germans, started to kill Jews living in the town of Jedwabne, where they killed over fifteen hundred people of Jewish nationality. I stress that I did not see any Germans beating the Jews. The Germans even brought three Jewish women to the gendarmerie outpost and said to make sure that they didn't get killed, so I locked them up and gave the key to the gendarme who had told me to lock them up, and he ordered me to give them something to eat, so I prepared something and I brought it to them. When everything was over and things calmed down, these Jewish women were let go, and they lived in a house near the gendarmerie and came to work at the gendarmerie outpost. Germans did not beat the Jews; the Polish population bestially massacred the Jews, and Germans only stood to the side and took pictures, and later they showed how Poles killed the Jews.

Sokolowska then proceeded to enumerate fifteen individuals or families (fathers and sons, for instance, or brothers) who she says took an active part in the massacre. She notes who beat the Jews with a wooden club, and who used a rubber truncheon, and adds one more interesting detail: "I saw how Eugeniusz Kalinowski approached the commander of the gendarmes asking that he issue him weapons because 'they' didn't want to go—he didn't say who didn't want to go. The commander jumped to his feet and



"See that man sitting right over there? He gives me fever."

said, I will not give you weapons; do what you want. Then [Kalinowski] turned around and quickly ran outside the town where they were chasing these Jews."

Sokolowska later modified some of this testimony, claiming that there were sixty Gestapo men and many gendarmes in town that day, but her number was directly challenged by Karol Bardon after the war:

After the killing of Jews was carried out, a few civilians ran into the courtyard of the gendarmerie outpost where I was repairing a car and tried to grab three Jews who were chopping wood. Then the commander of the outpost, Adamy, came out and said, Was eight hours not enough for you to do with the Jews as you please? From the above it is clear that the mass murder of the Jews was not carried out by the Gestapo, whom I did not see that day, but by the local population under the leadership of Mayor Karolak.

Bardon went back to this episode three years later, in an autobiography that he sent to the President of the Polish People's Republic as an attachment to an appeal for clemency. He ended his autobiography with the following sentence: "During this day of mass murder I walked three times to the toolshed,

some 350-400 metres away, and in the streets to dinner and back, and I did not see a single uniformed individual either in the streets or by the group of people assembled in the square." It seems unlikely that a convict pleading for mercy would write such things in support of his clemency appeal to endear himself to the President of Poland, who would presumably rather hear news confirming that the Germans, rather than his fellow-citizens, had murdered the Jews. And, indeed, the available sources cite, by my count, ninety-two names (and, often, home addresses as well) of Jedwabne Poles who participated in the murders of the Jews. Perhaps not all of them should be labelled murderers—after all, ten of the accused in the 1949 trials were found not guilty. People who guarded the Jews in the square may not have been involved in acts of murder. On the other hand, it is clear that the people mentioned by name are not the only ones who participated. "Near the assembled Jews, there was a mass of people not only from Jedwabne but also from the environs," Miciura states. The crowd of perpetrators somehow grew as Jews were being herded toward the



"We've got to talk—let's go to a movie."

bring brooms. Since Jews had previously been pressed into debasing cleanup jobs, one could imagine at first that this was to be merely a routine exercise in humiliation. "My husband took our two children and went there," Rivka Fogel wrote. "I stayed at home for a while trying to put things in order and lock the windows and doors properly." It soon became clear that the circumstances were different. Mrs. Fogel did not follow her husband and children to the square; instead, she and a neighbor, Mrs. Pravde, hid nearby in the garden of a nobleman's estate. A few moments later, "We could hear from there the terrible cries of a young boy, Joseph Lewin, whom the goyim were beating to death."

Karol Bardon, who happened to be passing by a few moments later, on his way to the toolshed on the estate, wrote that Lewin had been stoned to death:

Around the corner from the foundry adjacent to the toolshed an inhabitant of Jedwabne, Wisniewski, was standing. . . . Wisniewski called me, and I came closer and Wisniewski pointed to a massacred ca-

daver of a young man of Mosaic persuasion, about twenty-two years old, whose name was Lewin, and said to me, Look, mister, we killed this S.O.B. with stones. . . . Wisniewski showed me a stone weighing twelve to fourteen kilograms and said, I smacked him good with this stone and he won't get up anymore.

This murder took place at the beginning of the pogrom. As Bardon said, on his way to the toolshed he saw only about a hundred Jews in the square; on his way back, the number had grown considerably. In another part of town, a Pole named Wincenty Goscicki had just returned home from his job as a night watchman:

In the morning when I went to bed, my wife came and told me to get up and said that bad things were going on. Near our house people were beating Jews with clubs. I got up then and went outside the house. Then I was called by Urbanowski who told me, Look what is going on, and showed me four Jewish corpses. These were 1. Fischman, 2. the two Styjakowskis and Blubert. Then I hid in the house.

Early that day, the Jews understood that they were in danger. Many tried to

escape into the fields, but only a few succeeded. It was difficult to get out of town without being noticed, as small vigilante groups of peasants were seeking out Jews who were hiding or fleeing. A dozen teen-agers grabbed Nielawicki, the sixteen-year-old, who was in the fields trying to sneak away to Wizna when the pogrom began. He was beaten up and brought to the square. Mietek Olszewicz, too, was caught in the fields by peasant youths, beaten up, and brought back to town. Nielawicki and Olszewicz managed to get away, hide, and survive that day, but Bardon, on his trip to the toolshed, saw "on the left side of the road . . . in the fields belonging to the estate, civilians mounted on horses, wielding thick wooden clubs," who were patrolling the area.

Uncoordinated incidents of violence occurred simultaneously throughout the town, with Karolak and the town council exercising only general supervision, such as enlisting people for guard duty in the square. They monitored what was happening and made sure at critical moments that the goal of the pogrom was being carried out. Otherwise, people were free to improvise.

Bardon, later in the day, saw Wisniewski in the same place as before, near Lewin's body:

I understood that Wisniewski was waiting here for something. I took all the necessary parts from the toolshed, and on my way back, at a distance of about a hundred metres from the toolshed, I met the same two young men whom I had seen for the first time when I went to the toolshed. [He later identifies them as Jerzy Laudanski and Kalinowski.] I understood that they were coming to Wisniewski, to the place where Lewin had been killed, and they were bringing another man of Mosaic persuasion, a married owner of the mechanical mill where I had been employed till March, 1939, called Hersz Zdrojewicz. They held him under the arms and blood was flowing from his head over his neck and onto his torso. Zdrojewicz said to me, Save me, Mr. Bardon. Being afraid of these murderers, I replied, I cannot help you, sir, and I passed them by.

Thus, in one part of town Laudanski and Kalinowski were killing Zdrojewicz; in front of Goscicki's house, somebody was clubbing four Jews; in a pond near Lomzynska Street, "Wladyslaw Luba . . . drowned two Jewish blacksmiths"; at another site, Czeslaw Mierzejewski raped and then killed a young woman named Judes Ibram; Gitele Nadol-

nik, the youngest daughter of a teacher, whom the townspeople knew because they had learned to read at her father's house, was decapitated, and the murderers later kicked her head around; in the square, "Dobrzanska asked for water, then fainted; no one was allowed to help her, and her mother was killed because she wanted to bring water; Betka Brzozowska was killed with a baby in her arms." Other Jews were beaten, and their houses were plundered.

At the same time, more organized forms of persecution were taking place; for instance, Jews were driven in groups to the Jewish cemetery to be killed. According to the trial testimony of Abram Boruszczak, a Jew, "They took healthier men and chased them to the cemetery and ordered them to dig a pit, and after it was dug out Jews were killed every which way, one with an iron rod, another with a knife, still another with a club." In a second deposition, Wasersztejn said, "Stanislaw Sielawa was murdering with an iron hook, stabbing in the stomach. The witness"—Wasersztejn—"was hiding in the bushes. He heard the screaming. They killed twenty-eight men in one place from among the strongest. Sielawa took away one Jew. His tongue was cut off. Then a long silence."

The murderers got excited and worked at a frantic pace. "I stood on Przytuliska Street," an older woman named Bronislawa Kalinowska said, "and Jerzy Laudanski, inhabitant of Jedwabne, was running down the street, and he said that he had already killed two or three Jews; he was very nervous and ran away."

It must have soon become apparent that so large a number of people could not be killed by such primitive methods in a day, at which point the perpetrators moved to kill all the remaining Jews at once, by burning them together. This method had been used a few days earlier, during the Radzilow pogrom. As Jozef Chrzanowski, a defendant in the 1949 trial, testified, "When I came to the square, they"—Sobuta and Wasilewski—"told me to give my barn to burn the Jews. But I started pleading to spare my barn, to which they agreed and left my barn in peace. They told me to help them chase the Jews to Bronislaw Szleszynski's barn."

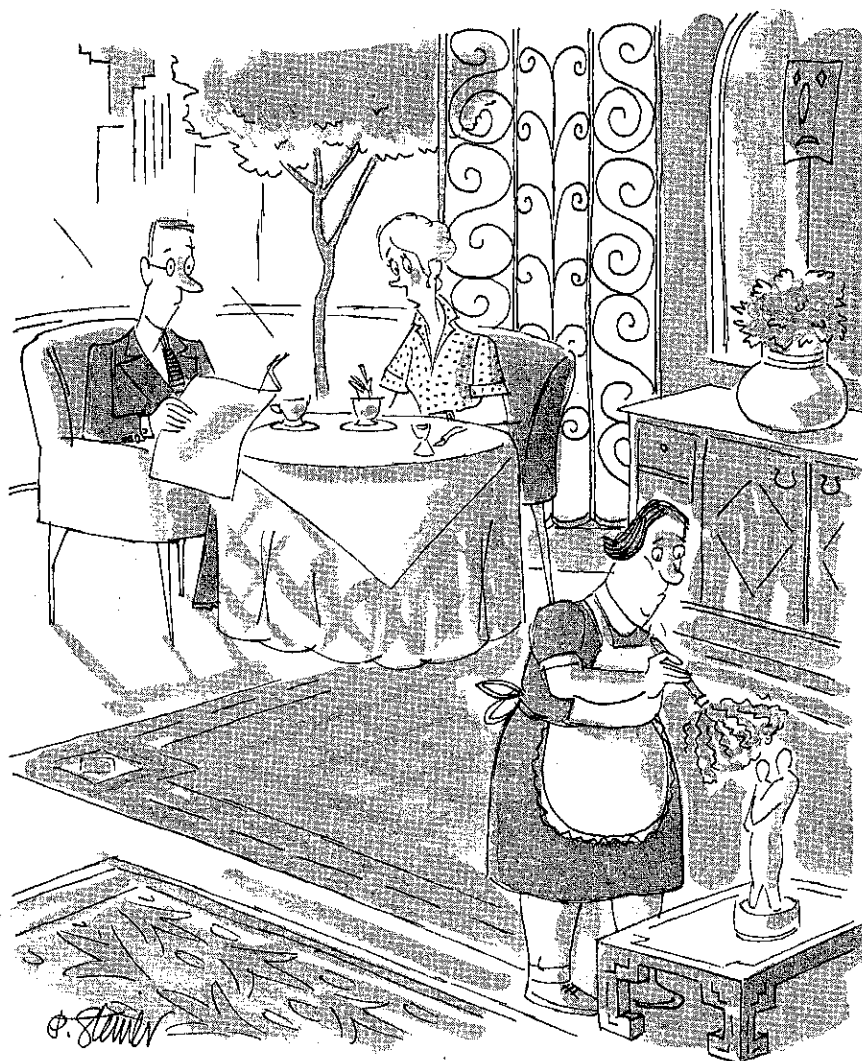
According to the defendant Roman Gorski, "I saw how Sobuta and Wasilewski took some dozen Jews from among the assembled and ordered them

to do some ridiculous gymnastics exercises." Before the Jews were herded from the square to the barn, Sobuta and his colleagues organized a sideshow. During the Soviet occupation, a statue of Lenin had been erected in the town, right next to the main square, and the Memorial Book and the trial testimonies confirm Szmul Wasersztejn's earlier deposition. As one account put it, "A group of Jews was brought to the little square to take down Lenin's statue. When the Jews broke the statue, they were told to put its various pieces on some boards and carry them around, and the rabbi was told to walk in front with his hat on a stick, and all had to sing, 'The war is because of us, the war is for us.' While carrying the statue all the Jews were chased toward the barn, and the barn was doused with gasoline and lit, and in this manner fifteen hundred Jewish people perished."

Last summer, an elderly Polish woman named Halina Popiolek, who was a young girl in 1941, told a journalist for the newspaper *Gazeta Pomorska*:

I was not present when they were beheading Jews, or piercing them to death with sharp spikes. I also did not see how our people ordered young Jewesses to drown in a pond. My mother's sister saw it. She was all in tears when she came to tell us about this. I saw how they ordered young Jewish boys to take off Lenin's monument, how they were told to carry it around, and shout, "War is because of us." I saw how they were beaten at the time with rubber truncheons, how Jews were massacred in the synagogue, and how the massacred Lewiniuk, who was still breathing, was buried alive by people. . . . They chased them all to a barn. Poured kerosene all around.

A thick crowd was milling around the barn, helping to shove the beaten, wounded, and terrorized Jews inside. "We chased Jews under the barn," Jerzy Lau-



"Hon, would you say a kind word to Maria?
She's entirely in technology stocks."

danski later reported, "and we ordered them to enter, and the Jews had to enter."

Here is the conclusion of Waser-sztejn's deposition of April, 1945:

Beards of old Jews were burned, newborn babies were killed at their mothers' breasts, people were beaten murderously and forced to sing and dance. In the end they proceeded to the main action—the burning. The entire town was surrounded by guards so that nobody could escape; then the Jews were ordered to line up in a column, four in a row, and the ninety-year-old rabbi and the Kosher slaughterer were put in front, they were given a red banner, and all were ordered to sing and were chased into the barn. Hooligans bestially beat them up on the way. Near the gate a few hooligans were standing, playing various instruments in order to drown the screams of horrified victims. Some Jews tried to defend themselves, but they were defenseless. Bloodied and wounded, they were pushed into the barn. Then the barn was doused with kerosene and lit, and the bandits went around to search Jewish homes, to look for the remaining sick and children. The sick people they found they carried to the barn themselves, and as for the little children, they roped a few together by their legs and carried them on their backs, then put them on pitchforks and threw them onto smoldering coals.

After the fire they used axes to knock golden teeth from still not entirely decomposed bodies and in other ways violated the corpses of holy martyrs.

Michal Kuropatwa, a Jewish coachman, who sometime earlier had helped a Polish Army officer hide from his Soviet pursuers, was among those herded into the barn. When the lead-

ers of the pogrom noticed him in the crowd, he was taken out and told that, because he had helped a Polish officer, he could go home. He refused, choosing to share the fate of his people.

The Poles doused the barn with kerosene, which came from a warehouse owned by Antoni Niebrzydowski. Referring to his brother Jerzy and to Eugeniusz Kalinowski, Niebrzydowski said, "They brought the eight litres of kerosene that I had issued to them and doused the barn filled with Jews and lit it; what followed I do not know."

At the last moment, four people inside the barn managed to escape. A surge of hot air may have blown the barn door open. A young Jew named Janek Neumark was standing right next to it with his sister, her five-year-old daughter, and another young man. Stanislaw Sielawa—the Sielawas were the family to whom Jacob Baker's grandmother had given milk years before—barred their exit, wielding an axe. Neumark wrestled the axe away from him, and they managed to flee and hide in the cemetery. The last thing Neumark remembered was the sight of his father, engulfed in flames.

Halina Popiolek recalled, "It took but two minutes, but the scream . . . I can still hear it." The fire must have spread unevenly. It appears to have moved from east to west, perhaps on account of the wind.

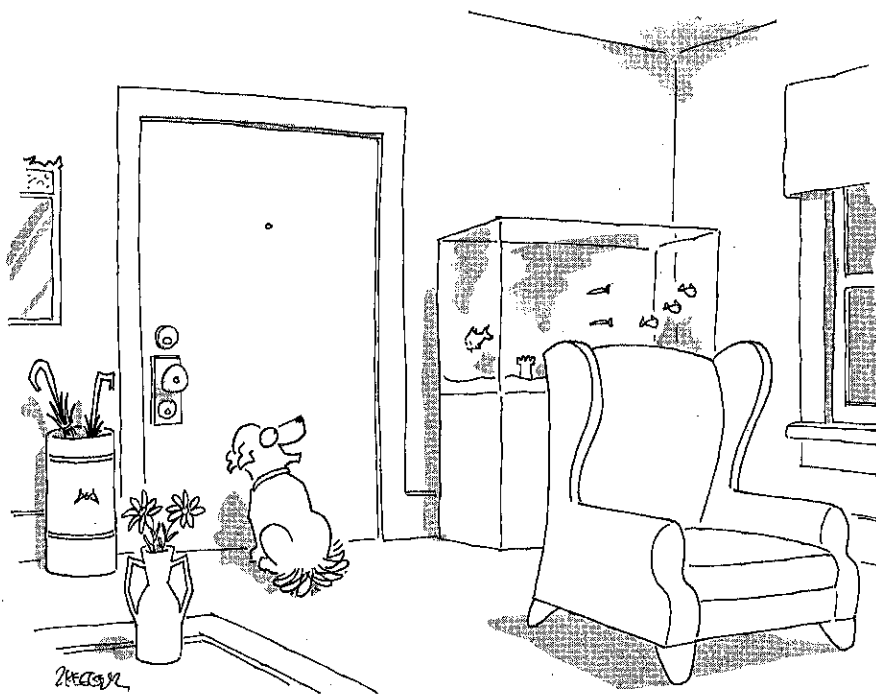
Afterward, a few charred corpses were found in the east wing of the incinerated building; there were some more in the center, and toward the western end a large pile. Those whose bodies were in the upper layer of the heap had been burned to death, but those beneath had been crushed and asphyxiated; their clothes in many cases remained intact. "They were so intertwined with one another that bodies could not be disentangled," recalled an elderly peasant who, as a young boy, had been among a group of men sent to bury the dead. In unwitting confirmation of Waser-sztejn's testimony, he added:

In spite of this people were trying to search the corpses, looking for valuables sewn into clothing. I touched a Brolin shoe-polish box. It clinked. I cut it through with a shovel, and some coins glittered—I think golden tsarist five-ruble coins. People jumped over to collect them, and this drew the attention of onlooking gendarmes. They searched everybody. And if someone put the find in his pocket, they took it away and gave him a good shove. But anyone who hid it in his shoe saved it.

In my research, I found numerous other examples of plunder, enough to convince me that robbery cannot be dismissed as a motive for the crime.

The slaughter of the Jews in Jedwabne lasted an entire day, and it was confined to a relatively small area. Szleszynski's barn, where the majority of the pogrom victims died, was very near the town's central square. The Jewish cemetery, where victims were knifed, clubbed, and stoned to death, was just across the road. Everybody who was in the town that day and in possession of a sense of sight, smell, or hearing either participated in or witnessed the deaths of the Jews.

It was the middle of a very hot July, and the burned and asphyxiated corpses of the barn victims had to be buried quickly. There were no more Jews in town who could be ordered to do it. "Late in the evening," Wincenty Gosciński, the night watchman, recalls, "I was taken by the Germans to bury those burned corpses. But I could not do this because when I saw this, I started to vomit and I was released from burying the cadavers." Apparently, he was not the only one who couldn't stomach the job. "On the second or the third day after the murder," Bardoni testified, "I was standing with Mayor Karolak in the



"They're back! They're back! How do I look? Oh, never mind! Never mind!"

square not far from the outpost, and the commander of the German gendarmerie, Adamy, came up and said to the Mayor with emphasis, So, you managed to kill people and burn them, eh? But no one is eager to bury them, eh? By morning, all must be buried! Understood?"

News of this angry outburst spread. Almost sixty years later, Leon Dziedzic, from Przestrzele, near Jedwabne, could still quote the German commander's words to the reporter from *Rzeczpospolita*: "You insisted that you'd put things in order with the Jews, but you don't know how to put things in order at all." He was afraid that an epidemic might break out, because it was very hot and dogs were already getting at them—the corpses. But this was an "impossible job," as Dziedzic said in an interview with *Gazeta Pomorska*. The piled-up bodies of the victims were tangled like "the roots of a tree. Somebody hit upon the idea that we should tear them into pieces and throw these pieces into the dugout. They brought pitchforks, and they tore the bodies as best we could: here a head, there a leg."

After July 10th, the German occupation administration reestablished a kind of routine, one that would last for three years. Jewish survivors returned to town. They stayed for a while—some worked at the gendarmerie outpost—but in the end they were driven by the Nazis to the ghetto in Lomza. Seven Jews—Szmul Wasersztejn and his brother; Janek and Leja Kubrzanski; Mietek Olszewicz and his fiancée; and Eljasz Gradowski—owed their lives to a Pole named Antonina Wyrzykowska, who lived with her husband, Aleksander, in the nearby hamlet of Janczewko. The Wyrzykowskis were farmers. For almost three years, Wyrzykowska kept the fugitives hidden on her compound and brought them food. (Had she not saved Wasersztejn, the story of the Jedwabne massacre might never have been told.) Even her husband did not know the extent of her rescue efforts—he knew of only four or five Jews, or "martyrs," as he called them—hiding in their compound. But Wyrzykowska's caution was justified.

After the area was "liberated" by the advancing Red Army, in the summer of 1944, Jewish survivors continued to fear for their lives. Armed nationalists who

had fought the Germans as underground guerrillas now sometimes turned their guns against the newly established authorities, and occasionally against the surviving Jews and their rescuers. Here is the Wyrzykowskis' account:

I, Aleksander Wyrzykowski, together with my wife, Antonina, wanted to make the following deposition. When the Red Army came, these martyrs were free; we dressed them up as best we could. The first one went to his house, but his family had perished so he came to eat with us. The rest went to their places.

One Sunday I noticed that guerrillas were coming and they said, We'll come over today and get rid of the Jew, and the other said that they would kill everybody one night. From this time on the Jew slept in the field in a dugout for potatoes; I gave him a pillow and my coat. I went to warn the others as well. They started to hide. The two girls who were their fiancées the guerrillas had nothing against, and those bandits told them not to say a word to their fiancées that they came.

This same night they came to us to get the Jew; they said to give him away, that they would kill him and would no longer bother us. My wife replied that I had gone to visit my sister, and that the Jew had gone to Lomza and hadn't come back. Then they started to beat her so that she didn't have a white patch on her body, only black skin everywhere. They took what good things they found in the house and told her to drive them back. My wife took them in a horse cart near to Jedwabne.

When she returned, the Jew came out of the hiding place and saw how she was beaten up. After a certain time another Jew, Janek Kubrzanski, came. We talked afterward and decided to run away from this place. We took residence in Lomza. My wife left a little child with her parents. From Lomza we moved to Bialystok, because we feared for our lives. . . .

In 1946 we moved to Bielsk Podlaski. But after a few years this was found out, and we had to leave Bielsk Podlaski.

Some years after Aleksander died, Antonina Wyrzykowska left Poland, and settled near Chicago. ♦

