

“OUR CLASS” PROGRAM – CANADIAN STAGE / STUDIO 180

A Critique by the Canadian Polish Congress – Toronto District

April 2011 (Revised)

The information about Poland, Polish-Jewish relations and Jedwabne contains many serious errors, distortions and omissions. The brochure has not been prepared in a professional manner and cannot be regarded as a reliable source of information for serious discussion. This critique is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of the shortcomings of this publication. We selected only some illustrations pointing to deeper problems. Our recommendation is to withdraw the brochure and materials based on it. These materials do not advance the educational mandate of your organization which, we note, receives extensive government funding for its operation.

The impact of this misleading information disseminated by Canadian Stage is evident in media reports. The *Toronto Star's* theatre critic, Richard Ouzounian, wrote on March 31, 2011 (“Ryan Hollyman: the thinking man’s actor”), Internet: <http://www.toronto.com/article/679349>: “The pivotal event of the play is the 1941 massacre at Jedwabne, where almost all the 1600 Jewish inhabitants of the city were murdered, not by anonymous Nazi soldiers, but by their own friends and neighbours.” There is no reason to believe that audiences will not walk away with that same distorted message.

Soviet/Communist wartime statistics are notoriously unreliable. Losses were routinely multiplied many times over. Jan T. Gross, the author of *Neighbours*, used figures that gained currency in the Stalinist era without any attempt at verification of their accuracy. First, they were sensational, and secondly, they supported his thesis that the “Polish half” of the town murdered the “Jewish half”, on its own initiative and with no German input.

Political History of Poland

1935 – A new constitution was written supporting militant nationalism.

While the 1935 Constitution, a late legacy of the Piłsudski era, contained certain elements of authoritarianism, it could hardly be seen as supporting militant nationalism. If anything, it was designed to check the political influence of the Nationalist and Radical camps which were opponents of the Piłsudski (Sanacja) regime.

1936 – In Poland, Catholic youth groups became increasingly militant. ... preached by the Church ... Sporadic attacks on Jewish property are sanctioned by the prime minister.

Catholic youth groups were not known for their militancy. As was the case throughout much of Europe, militancy was a feature of the political landscape. It was practiced primarily by organizations that were political in nature, not religious, including Jewish ones. The latter generally fought (often physically) with other Jewish organizations. Neither the Catholic Church nor the prime minister sanctioned physical attacks on Jews, quite the contrary, they deplored them. In his pastoral letter of 1936, Cardinal Hlond condemned violence directed against Jews as well as fascist propaganda emanating from Nazi Germany. Along with some criticisms of Jews, he wrote: "This does not apply to all Jews. There are very many Jews who are believers, honest, righteous, merciful, doing good works. The family life of many Jews is healthy and edifying. ... One is forbidden to hate anyone, including the Jews... In the Jew, too, one should respect the human being and neighbour ..." It was in 1938 (not 1936) that Prime Minister Sławoj Składkowski, a Calvinist, made his famous statement voicing approval for economic competition between Poles and Jews, provided it did not entail violence ("Walka ekonomiczna—owszem, ale krzywdy żadnej.") There are copious examples of police intervening to put an end to violence directed against Jews. To repeat, contrary to what is stated, neither the Catholic Church nor the Polish authorities sanctioned violence against Jews. As for the (religious) beliefs taught by the Catholic Church in Poland, they were no different than those taught by the Catholic Church in other countries. The Church did support the economic advancement of Poles and promoted both private and communal Polish commercial enterprises, as did all ethnic groups in interwar Poland in relation to their communities. This was viewed as a threat by the Jewish community which traditionally had played a leading role in commerce.

1937–38 - OMISSION

*While there is mention of the Great Famine in the Ukraine (1932–1932), there is no mention of pivotal information necessary for a proper assessment of the era and Polish attitudes toward the Soviet Union, namely Soviet genocidal policies directed against that country's Polish minority. As American historian Timothy Snyder has pointed out in his groundbreaking study *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), it was the Soviet Union, and not Nazi Germany, that undertook the first shooting campaigns of internal enemies in the 1930s, and it was the Poles who were the first mass victims of the national operations of Stalin's Great Terror:*

In 1937 and 1938, a quarter of a million Soviet citizens were shot on essentially ethnic grounds. ... the Soviet Union in the late 1930s was a land of unequalled national persecutions. Even as the Popular Front [of the Comintern or Communist International] presented the Soviet Union as the homeland of toleration, Stalin ordered the mass killings of several Soviet nationalities. The most persecuted European national minority in the second half of the 1930s was not the four hundred thousand or so German Jews (the number declining because of emigration) but the six hundred thousand or so Soviet Poles (the number declining because of executions).

Stalin was a pioneer of national mass murder, and the Poles were the preeminent victim among the Soviet nationalities. The Polish national minority, like the kulaks, had to take the blame for the failures of collectivization. The rationale was invented during the famine itself in 1933, and then applied during the Great Terror in 1937 and 1938.

The Polish operation was in some respects the bloodiest chapter of the Great Terror in the Soviet Union. ... Of the 143,810 people arrested under the [false] accusation of espionage for Poland, 111,091 were executed. Not all of these were Poles, but most of them were. Poles were also targeted disproportionately in the kulak action, especially in Soviet Ukraine. Taking into account the number of deaths, the percentage of death sentences to arrests, and the risk of arrest, ethnic Poles suffered more than any other group within the Soviet Union during the Great Terror. By a conservative estimate, some eighty-five thousand Poles were executed in 1937 and 1938, which means that one-eighth of the 681,692 mortal victims of the Great Terror were Polish. This is a staggeringly high percentage, given that Poles were a tiny minority in the Soviet Union, constituting fewer than 0.4 percent of the general population. Soviet Poles were about forty times more likely to die during the Great Terror than Soviet citizens generally.

1937 – Directives from the Minister of Education ordering the separation of Jews during school prayer time are announced.

This directive was intended not as a segregation measure but rather ensured that non-Catholic students were not required to be present during Catholic prayers. Public schools were open to students of all nationalities and faiths. In addition, the State financed many schools for minorities, including Jewish ones, which were not attended by Christian Poles. Religious instruction was part of the school curriculum. It was given separately to each denomination, including Jews, by religious personnel from that group.

1939 – 150,000 Jews fight against the invading Germans – 32,000 die defending Poland.

Poland mobilized around one million troops for the September 1939 campaign, of whom some 66,000 were killed in the fighting. The figures given in the brochure are not substantiated by any hard evidence, indeed such evidence is scarce. Estimates are often made of the Jewish component of the Polish army based on their numerical strength in the overall population (under 10%), arriving at a figure of approximately 100,000 mobilized soldiers. The numbers cited in the brochure are neither estimates nor guesstimates, but – especially in relation to losses – sheer concoction. They are symptomatic of the shoddiness of the historical research in this brochure.

September 1939 – OMISSION

Since neighbour-on-neighbour violence is the predominant theme of Our Class, the brochure should have noted that this phenomenon began in Eastern Poland in the final weeks of September 1939, just before and after the arrival of the Soviet Army, and not with the arrival of the Germans in September 1939. Several thousand Polish citizens, almost all of them ethnic Poles, were killed by members

of the prewar national minorities. A case in point is the massacre of about 50 Poles in Brzostowica Mała, in the Białystok District (where Jedwabne is located). This occurred the 20th of September 1939, before the arrival of the Red Army. Armed with blades and axes, a Jewish-led band of local pro-Soviet Jews and Belorussians entered the hamlet and proceeded to drag people out of their houses and then cruelly massacred the entire Polish population. The victims were tortured, tied with barbed wire, pummelled with sticks, forced to swallow quicklime, thrown into a ditch and buried alive. The murder was ordered by Żak Motyl, a Jew who headed the revolutionary committee in Brzostowica Wielka.

September 1939 – OMISSION

In advance of the arrival of the Soviet Army, local pro-Soviet elements formed militias and revolutionary committees that began to seize power in the name of the Soviet invaders. They arrested local officials, officers and prominent Poles and handed them over to the Soviets. These events had a tremendous detrimental impact on relations between Poles and Jews, as was the case in Jedwabne.

Meir Grajewski (later Ronen), a native of Jedwabne, identified by name five “scoundrels” – for the most part rather ordinary members of the town’s Jewish community – who set up the local militia, which was headed nominally by a Polish Communist. As Ronen confirms, they also denounced their Polish neighbours and, occasionally, fellow Jews: “During the Soviet occupation five Jewish scoundrels domineered. ... It is true that they denounced Poles. ... The Soviets started to make lists and arrest people. Mostly they arrested Poles.”

*At least twelve more Jewish “scoundrels” from Jedwabne – including Jakub (Yakov) Katz, a character in the play – have been identified by name. Such people existed in every Polish town under Soviet occupation. A Jew from the nearby town of Wasilków wrote that his father “served as advisor to the NKVD about who among the local Poles was to be sent to Siberia, or otherwise dealt with. ... Naturally, word of Father’s clandestine activities got out. ... Consequently, when the Germans invaded Russia in June 1941, the name of Chaim Mielnicki was on the hit list.” [John Munro, *Białystok to Birkenau: The Holocaust Journey of Michel Mielnicki* (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press and Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre, 2000)]*

1940 – The Soviets ... start to arrest and deport people.

1940 – April/June: Mass deportations by the Soviets.

1941 – April and June: Major deportations by the Soviets.

The Soviets started to arrest Polish officials, officers, soldiers, landowners, and political and religious figures not in 1940, but as soon as they invaded Poland on September 17, 1939. Those arrested were either imprisoned locally or deported to the Soviet interior. By year’s end almost 20,000 persons, most of them ethnic

Poles, had been arrested, not counting interned POWs (who were released). By June 1941, according to Soviet sources, the number of arrested was close to 120,000, almost half of whom were ethnic Poles. Most of these people were killed.

The deportation of at least 350,000 civilians took place in waves starting in February 1940, and then in April and June 1940, and in May (not April) through June 1941. The brochure does not mention the February 1940 deportation, which was the first, largest (140,000 victims) and harshest (in the dead of winter), and was comprised of more than 80% ethnic Poles.

1941 – End June: Germans invade Soviet Poland. In Jedwabne they take over the old NKVD office almost immediately.

July: The massacre in Jedwabne.

Leonard Neuger (“The Place of the Crime”): “The crime was committed on July 10, 1941. In Jedwabne (ca 3000 inhabitants) there then lived more than 1600 Jews, most of them were murdered. ... Only a few Jews were saved.”

SERIOUS ERRORS AND OMISSIONS

In preparation for their invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Germans made use of intelligence and paid agents to instigate attacks (“cleansing actions”) against the Jewish population. These operations were conducted in great secrecy. Reinhard Heydrich, head of the Reich Security Head Office, issued orders to the commanders of the Einsatzgruppen, on June 17, that pogroms “should be evoked, in a manner which leaves no traces, intensified, if that is needed, and channelled in the proper direction, yet in such a manner that the local ‘self-defence squads’ will not be able, in the future to invoke any order or any granting of political assurances.” According to Operational Situation Report USSR No. 10, dated July 2, 1941, Heydrich issued an order to all Einsatzgruppen to incite Poles to carry out anti-Jewish actions: “Because of their experiences, Poles residing in the newly-occupied territories ... may be expected to reveal themselves as anti-Communists and also anti-Jewish. ... these sort of Poles are particularly important for initiating pogroms and as sources of information. (This depends, of course, on local conditions.)”

While a few Soviet collaborators (both Jews and Poles) were killed by some local avengers when the Soviets retreated, there were no attacks against the entire Jewish population. It was only on July 10, 1941, that a pogrom took place in Jedwabne. According to Jewish and Polish eyewitnesses, Jakub Katz (Kac) – one of the characters in the play who is allegedly cruelly murdered by Poles (Lesson 7), who later deny this and try to pin the crime on the Germans (Lesson 14) – was in fact killed by the Germans, who do not appear in the play. Rivka Fogel from Jedwabne states: “On the very first day that the Germans entered the city of Yedwabne, they murdered the harnessmaker Yakov Katz, the stitcher Eli

Krawiecki, the blacksmith Shmuel Weinstein, the businessmen Moshe Fishman, Choneh Goldberg and his son.”

One of the first measures carried out by the Germans in Jedwabne was to appoint a “mayor” and other local “officials” who were under their command. These persons had no association with the prewar Polish authorities and did not represent any official Polish organization. Interestingly, in his essay “Victims and Perpetrators,” James Thompson writes: “The history of mistreatment shows that perpetrators are generally a minority, and generally have to be organized and supervised to do their dreadful work.” The new German-appointed “authorities” were not organized, directed or supervised by any Polish authority, underground organization or the Catholic Church.

Radosław Ignatiew, the prosecutor in charge of the official investigation carried out by the Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish Nation (a branch of Poland’s Institute of National Remembrance) in 2000–2002, stated unequivocally: “It is obvious that Poles could not simply do what they wanted in the territories occupied by the Germans. They could not therefore have organized pogroms. They were organized by the Germans. As the documents show, the Germans prepared themselves to organize pogroms of Jews and had advance intelligence (from their agents) as to who among the Poles bore hatred toward Jews because they had denounced their relatives to the Soviets and who was a bandit that would kill if paid money. And it was those people whom they chose to carry out the pogroms, turning them into ordinary gangs.” Recently found German documents confirm that the Germans employed agents provocateurs to incite persons whose relatives had been denounced to the Soviets, as well as paid thugs.

Historians at the Institute of National Remembrance did extensive research on the population of Jedwabne and its ethnic make-up. (Leonard Neuger claims to know the major study on Jedwabne published by the Institute, but his treatment of this issue belies that contention.) Suffice it to say that Jedwabne did not have 1600 Jewish residents on the eve of the war, and the number of Jews dwindled during the Soviet occupation because of migration, the military draft, and flight with the retreating Soviet authorities. According to a census conducted by the Soviets, Jedwabne counted only 562 Jewish residents in 1940. According to the official investigation, several hundred Jews (“at least 340”), some of whom were not normally resident there, were killed on July 10, 1941. Andrzej Kola, the renowned forensic expert who conducted the partial exhumation (the Jewish community having objected to a full exhumation), proffered a significantly lower victim count. While the exact number of victims is not known, claims that around 1,600 Jews were killed in Jedwabne are simply untenable and discredit those who advance them. The count is, in all probability, in the low hundreds. At least 200 Jews from Jedwabne had moved to other towns or fled during the massacre. Approximately 125 Jews returned to Jedwabne afterwards and were confined in a ghetto created by the Germans. (One of those Jews was Rivka Fogel, who

provided this figure. Another Jewish eyewitness, Menachem Finkielsztejn, says there were 300 Jews in the Jedwabne ghetto after the massacre.) However, many Jews who fled did not return but moved to other towns where they told their stories (some of which are mentioned below). The ghetto was eventually closed and the remaining Jews were transferred to Łomża, and afterwards to the Treblinka death camp.

*Jan Gross belatedly acknowledged the findings of the official investigation in a 2008 encyclopedia entry he authored: “Except for 100–150 who managed to escape, the town’s entire Jewish population was murdered. ... An investigation carried out in 2000–2002 by the Polish Institute of National Memory concluded that “at least 340” people were killed.” [“Jedwabne,” in Gershon David Hundert, ed., *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), vol. 1]]*

The official investigation into this crime by the Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish Nation concluded that the pogrom was organized by the Germans, and that only some local Poles (at least forty) participated. Because of a lack of German documents, the role of the Germans in the actual massacre was not thoroughly investigated. Eyewitness testimonies were not consistent, but many accounts, including Jewish ones, spoke of direct German involvement. The earliest reports by Jews who escaped from Jedwabne confirm that the Germans played a central role in the massacre:

*“Refugees from Jedwabne and Radzilow [Radziłów] arrived [in Sokoły], who were coincidentally saved from death, and who saw with their own eyes and felt the hell on their flesh. With the help of local farmers, the Germans gathered the Jews of these places, with the rabbi and leaders of the community at the front, in the market square. At first, they beat them cruelly and forced them to wrap themselves in their *tallitot*, to jump and dance, accompanied by singing. All this was done under an unceasing flood of lashes from cudgels and rubber whips. At the end, they pushed all the Jews, while beating and kicking them, into a long threshing house and set it on fire with them inside.” [Deliverance: *The Diary of Michael Maik, A True Story* (Kedumim, Israel: Keterpress Enterprises, 2004)]*

*“Later on, some Jews who had fled Jedwabne [to Dereczyn] told us when the Germans first entered their town, they had herded all the Jews into a barn and set it ablaze. Anyone who tried to get out was cut down by machine-gun fire.” [Harold Zissman, *The Warriors: My Life As a Jewish Soviet Partisan* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005)]*

*Many historians, both Polish and non-Polish, have taken Jan Gross to task for minimizing the German role in these events, which were far from being spontaneous and locally-inspired. Christopher Browning states: “While Gross has found much corroboration of the survivor accounts in the testimony of both bystanders and perpetrators for the decisive Polish role in carrying out the massacre of Jedwabne’s Jews, I suspect that the German role was not just one of granting permission for the massacre but rather of active instigation, orchestration, and participation.” [Christopher R. Browning, *Collected Memories:**

Holocaust History and Postwar Testimonies (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003)] Alexander Rossino is even more critical of Gross's findings in his study "Polish 'Neighbours' and German Invaders: Anti-Jewish Violence in the Białystok District during the Opening Weeks of Operation Barbarossa," in Polin: Studies in Polish Jewry, volume 16 (2003).

Rabbi Jacob Baker, a native of Jedwabne, has gone on record to state: "The majority of residents of Jedwabne did not take part in the pogrom. It was a group of degenerates and hooligans from neighbouring villages ... The ordinary residents of Jedwabne were decent people. We were good neighbours and friends with them." It bears repeating that there were no such massacres in thousands of other Jewish settlements throughout Poland. The few that did occur did not occur in 1939, when the Germans and Soviets invaded Poland, but almost two years later. One must therefore ask why at that time, and why there. More than 99 percent of the Polish population had no involvement in them.

After the war, Jewish survivors were able to reclaim and sell their property in Jedwabne. The American Jewish Year Book (1947–1948), which monitored conditions in Poland closely, reported: "The return of Jewish property, if claimed by the owner or his descendant, and if not subject to state control, proceeded more or less smoothly."

1944 – The Red Army advances westward, through Poland to Germany. ... May 1945: Communist-led Polish "provisional government" signs 20-year treaty of friendship with USSR. ... January 1947: Communists and their allies win rigged elections in Poland; elimination of opposition parties. ... 1948 – Stalinist regime introduced in Poland. ... 27 May 1948: Corpus Christi celebrations – organized by the Church and permitted by the Communists. ... 1952 – Constitution guarantees health care in Poland. Education system also supported by the Soviets. 1953 – Stalin dies.

One would never surmise from this description that the postwar Stalinist occupation and Communist proxy regime installed in Poland by the Soviet Union, with the help of the Soviet Army and the NKVD, marked one of the darkest and bloodiest chapters in 20th Century Polish history. In its attempt to eradicate the Polish underground and political opposition and to silence the Catholic Church, as many as 100,000 Poles were imprisoned, executed or deported to the Soviet Gulag. In addition to the NKVD, local Communists set up their own apparatus of terror, including the infamous Security Office which was responsible for interrogating and torturing Poles. Among its many victims were General August Emil Fieldorf, a legendary Home Army leader (as commander of the Kedyw [special operations executive], he ordered the successful assassination of the infamous SS and Police commander Franz Kutschera on February 2, 1944), and Witold Pilecki, an underground member who allowed himself to be captured and sent to Auschwitz to gather intelligence (after his escape he reported on conditions there to the Polish authorities and its Western Allies). According to the

most recent studies of the Institute of National Remembrance, in the years 1944–1954, 37.1 percent of the top positions in the Ministry of Public Security (167 out of 450) were occupied by persons of Jewish origin. Ethnic Poles accounted for 49.1 percent, and the balance of key posts were filled for the most part by Soviet officers (Russians, Belorussians, and Ukrainians), who accounted for 10.2 percent of the cadre. Almost the entire population of the country, as well as the victims of the Security Office, were ethnic Poles. Everyone involved in the secret show trial of General Fieldorf, considered a national hero, was of Jewish origin: the investigators, several prosecutors, the trial judge, and three appellate judges. Fieldorf was tried and sentenced to death under the decree of August 31, 1944, “concerning the punishment of Hitlerite-Fascist criminals.” Since the issue of the Security Office is raised in the play, one would have expected to see more on this topic in materials aimed at generating informed discussion.

1969 – Revival of anti-Semitism – attempt to wipe out any remaining Jews in Poland

The anti-Semitic “revival” was the deed of Polish society but occurred within the ranks of the Communist Party and state institutions under the government’s control. While there was spillover to non-Party members, there was certainly no attempt to “wipe out any remaining Jews”. Thousands of Jews chose to emigrate from Poland, but thousands remained and many continued to hold good positions.

1978 – The Bishop of Krakow, Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, is chosen as Pope – hailed as a miracle by nationalist Catholic Poles

What a bizarre formulation! Most Poles considered the election of a Polish Pope in 1978 as unthinkable, especially the Communists. The ecstatic reaction to his election by the Polish people had nothing to do with their alleged “nationalist” leanings, but with national pride and a profound sense of hope after decades of totalitarian rule. It is regrettable, but symptomatic, that such a bigoted, stereotypical characterization of the Poles is found in this brochure.

OUR WEBSITE: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/fundusz_obrony.html