

REBUTTAL TO PROFESSOR JAN TOMASZ GROSS

JEWISH COMMUNITY CENTER, SAN FRANCISCO -- MARCH 14, 2007

I'd like to thank the Jewish Community Center, the Taube Foundation and Professor Gross for allowing me to make these comments in this forum.

I am proud member of the Advisory Board of the Taube Foundation, and I have also worked closely with both the JCC and the AJC. Since my appointment four years ago, I have worked to enhance relations between our communities and I hope that this evening will be continuation of the process – however painful and unpleasant the subject matter.

Dialogue and Reconciliation

It seems to me that the first part of any dialogue on the matters covered by Professor Gross' books is for Poles and Polish Americans to acknowledge that atrocities against Jews by Polish Christians *did* occur and they were wrong. We must admit that these acts were *inexcusable*. Just as that word suggests -- there can be no excuse for them. Let me be clear: Nothing I say here is intended to *excuse or justify* unconscionable acts by Poles or any other nation against the Jewish people.

I am also not going to address the issue of the actual number of Jewish victims. Whether 300 or 1600 Jews were killed at Jedwabne, however many died at Kielce, -- it was far too many. Even one Jew killed or harmed or attacked by Poles, it is a black mark on the nation of Poland.

And I am far from the first person affiliated with the Polish government to say so: President Kwasniewski said so in this very room last May. President Kaczynski has made similar statements. The Polish government is on record on this question..

I want to say to the Poles and Polish Americans here – and I know there are some here tonight – that we need to engage in reconciliation with the Jewish community.

We have a great role model in this regard – the Polish Pope, Karol Wojtyla.

Pope John Paul II knew the importance of reconciliation. He took major steps to reconcile with the Jewish community, the Muslim community, other religions – even his own intended assassin.

Let us in the Polish community – who revere John Paul II and exalt his teachings – let us follow his example and reach out to the Jewish community and Israel, as he did. Let us continue his legacy by meeting our Jewish friends at least halfway – in fact more than halfway; let us not measure each other's movement, let us not wait for the other side to take the first step; let us lead the way toward mutual reconciliation and respect.

The Pope emerged from the same era of which Professor Gross writes

I want to add a point here for those who say that Poles are somehow inherently anti-Semitic, which I frankly think is a baseless assertion -- it is noteworthy that took a Polish Pope to reach out to the Jewish community far beyond any of his predecessor Popes.

- It was this Polish Pope who first visited a synagogue and conducted a prayer service with rabbis there;
- it was this Polish Pope who went to Israel and prayed at the Wailing Wall;

- it was this Polish Pope who first acknowledged in a meaningful way the guilt and responsibility Christians played in the Holocaust and pogroms and anti-Jewish attacks throughout history.

This was a Polish man born of this same era of which Professor Gross writes, when he claims, Poland was a sea of anti-Semitism. But Karol Wojtyla was a friend of the Jews his entire life and his bold but compassionate leadership as Pope has moved the Catholic and Jewish peoples closer. His remarkable life is itself a profound rebuttal to those who claim anti-Semitism is somehow endemic to being Polish.

Now let me make a few observations about Professor Gross' book and the weaknesses I see in it.

Book Lacks Context

As the Consul General for Poland in New York Krzysztof Kasprzyk has said, Professor Gross' book "does not have a rainbow-like character. It has been painted with pure white and darkest black."

The book is scholarly, well-documented and powerful. Professor Gross has written in painstaking detail about post-war discrimination, criminal acts and even pogroms against Polish Jews by Polish Christians. Each incident is documented by reference to original sources.

But the book fails to put its carefully documented catalog of violent incidents against Jews by Poles in the context of the horrific conditions existing at the time. There is scant consideration in the book of the hunger, poverty, desperation, violence and terror that Polish Christians and Polish Jews lived in immediately after the war. Without this context, it is easy to read this litany of horrors and conclude that Poles must be anti-Semitic, a conclusion I believe is wrong.

First of all, six million Polish Jews and Gentiles were killed during the war – roughly half Jewish and half Gentile. These are numbers that are unfathomable for us. During 9/11, America lost 3000 people and look at what an impact it had on our society; *the Polish Jewish and Gentile population lost that many people every day for six years.*

It's difficult to comprehend the effect that such loss has on the moral structure and psychology of a people. This factor is missing from Professor Gross' analysis. Second, the immediate post-war period was a time of lawlessness, violence and even civil war. Law and order had broken down in many areas of Poland and everywhere there were bandits, deserters from several armies and other armed men. Much of Polish industry and agriculture had been destroyed by the Nazis and the Soviets. Hunger and deprivation were everywhere. And to add insult to injury, the Nazi oppression had been replaced by a Communist one. This new totalitarian regime, as we all now know, was no friend to Jew or Gentile. The Soviets were in fact, skilled in fomenting and exploiting differences among communities to further their own grip on power. The classic divide and conquer.

As the American historian Thaddeus Radzilowski writes: "The pogrom at Kielce, as terrible and ugly as it was, was only a small part of the overall disorder, murder, repression and civil war that marked this period in Polish history." I respectfully submit that these factors are not given proper weight by Professor Gross.

As I said in the beginning – and I want to emphasize again -- these conditions do not *excuse* the violence described in the book; but they do offer some alternative explanations besides that offered by Professor Gross – which is, that Poles were violently anti-Semitic as a nation.

I suggest to you tonight that these are profound alternative causes contributing to these tragic acts described in his book.

Book Is Wrong About Polish Collaboration with Nazis

As a Pole, I also feel compelled to react to Professor Gross statement that Poles were guilty of “widespread collusion” with the Nazis extermination of the Jews during the war. He implies that Poles did little or nothing to save Jews from the Holocaust. While he makes brief mention of such people in his first chapter, the importance of this phenomenon – *righteous Polish gentiles saving Jews* – is completely absent from his conclusions.

This requires a lengthy response – largely from Jewish sources:

Yad Vashem.

I have here a book entitled “***Those Who Helped***” published in conjunction with Yad Vashem listing the names of Polish gentiles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. This book contains thousands of names.

For those of you who have read or will read Professor Gross’ book and have read his detailed and disturbing catalogue of Polish crimes against Jews -- you ought to also read this book and the pages and pages of righteous acts to save Jews by Polish gentiles, most of whom were executed as a result – before you conclude, as the Professor has, that the Poles as a people were guilty of “widespread collusion in the extermination of the Jews”

Significantly, in no country other than Poland did the Germans introduce the death sentence for saving Jews. In Poland, the practice of the Nazis was not only to kill the offending Gentile, but all of his family members, including children and infants and in some cases, much of the village where the Gentile lived. “Even high ranking

underground members unmasked by the Nazis would be executed alone, but a peasant discovered sheltering Jews died witnessing the execution of his whole family.”

In spite of this, the biggest single group of the Righteous Among Nations at the Yad Vashem Institute are Poles.

As of 1993, 10,000 medals were awarded by the Yad Vashem Institute to Gentiles from 31 different nations; of these, 4000 or 40% of the total went to Poles. In an address to these Poles, Chaim Herzog the President of Israel said: “It was you, at terrible risk to yourselves, obeyed the divine command to love one’s fellowman as one’s self. Many a hard-working dedicated citizen of Israel owes his or her existence – and now his family’s – to you. They think of you with love and gratitude.”

Hannah Arendt

In terms of Professor Gross’ condemnation of Poles’ conduct during the war, other historians have reached different conclusions.

For example, **Hannah Arendt**, the Jewish writer and historian, has a much different view of the Poles in her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Arendt also emphasizes the risks that the Poles faced in helping Jews and concludes that the Poles acted relatively selflessly compared with other nations. She writes in terms of saving Jews, the conduct of Gentiles “had been better in Poland than in any other Eastern European country” [p. 231]. Professor Arendt goes on in her book, citing testimony from the trial of Adolph Eichmann, to describe the acts of many Polish Gentiles to save Jewish lives.

Irene Sendler (Irena Senlerowa)

In fact, just today the Polish President honored Irene Sendler, a Polish Christian who saved as many as 2500 Jewish children by creating false documents and arranging

for their safe passage to Christian homes. This year –at age 96 – she has been nominated for the Nobel Prize.

As British Historian Norman Davies has written: “Poland had no Quislings” . Poland had the largest underground in the history of the world. It is simply not fair to suggest that there was any widespread practice of Poles helping the Germans carry out the Holocaust.

Professor Gross is wrong to label all Poles as Anti-Semitic

The major flaw of this powerful book is that Prof Gross draws grand conclusions about Poles and Polish society from the comparatively isolated incidents he describes. Poland was a country of 25 million people. The estimates of those participating in the Kielce pogrom are between 60-100. Even if you assumed that every incident of murder, attack and discrimination against Jews described in this book did occur, was perpetrated by Polish gentiles, and was motivated by anti-Semitism – rather than mere banditry -- it would still implicate only a tiny fraction of the Polish population in such heinous conduct. To draw the conclusion that post-war Poles were all or even mostly anti-Semitic is wrong.

As Elie Wiesel said in his own review of the book: “Does it follow that all of Poland was to blame? I do not believe in collective guilt. Only the guilty are guilty; their contemporaries are not. The children of killers are not killers but children.”

Both Jews and Poles were victims of Nazism and Communism

In assigning guilt and responsibility for the deaths during the years of the Holocaust, let us not forget the forest for the trees: the Nazis killed most of the innocents and the Soviets were responsible for an overwhelming majority of the others.

After that, we can discuss responsibility of all the other peoples and governments – and there is blame to be distributed all around, including in Poland and including in the United States, which turned away a boatload of Jews from a port in Florida and sent them back to possible extermination in Europe.

As Norman Davies, the British historian has written: “Jewish investigators tend to count Jewish victims (of the Holocaust). Polish investigators tend to count Polish victims. Neither side wishes to stress the fact that the largest single category of victims was both Polish and Jewish.” The most salient point is this: both the Jews and the Poles were victims, not perpetrators.

Where do we go from here?

I am not a proponent of forgetting the past. And the Holocaust is one part of our past that *we dare not forget*. I myself have been to Auschwitz three times – the first time when I was 20 years old in 1980 and the last time one year ago. No one can go through this experience unchanged.

All Americans and all Poles should go through this experience – and by the way, this is a standard and I believe obligatory field trip for all Polish school children. But I ask you to remember: Jewish history in Poland is not all about death camps and cemeteries. As most of you know, Polish Gentiles and Jews have a shared history of over 700 years. According to Abba Eban’s *Heritage: Civilization and the Jews*: by 1650, there were 500,000 Jews living in Poland in peace and relative prosperity with the Polish Gentiles. Jewish music, literature and arts flourished for three more centuries. By 1939, one third of the world’s Jews lived in Poland. The Jewish history in Poland is a cherished part of Polish history. And Right now, Jewish life and culture in Poland is

going through a renaissance. This is not only about re-visiting issues like the pogroms of the 1940s, but also about honoring centuries of Jewish life in Poland –

- Restoring yeshivas and synagogues,
- Reviving Yiddish theatre
- Studying Jewish history
- Performing Jewish-Polish music, such as klezmer

And much of this new found interest in Jewish culture is taking place among the **Gentile** population of Poland. The Taube Foundation here in San Francisco is behind much of these activities.

It's worthy to specifically mention the wonderful Jewish music and arts festival that occurs every summer in Krakow, where one finds crowds of Christian Poles dancing and swaying to klezmer music, eating Jewish food and taking in Jewish culture, on the streets of ancient Krakow,

There is also under construction, the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. This is a wonderful joint project of the Polish government and private donors. I implore you to get involved in these activities. I urge you all to support their efforts; let's work together to rebuild the Jewish culture in Poland.

Now let me make a further suggestion:

Aside from dwelling on what must be two of the most dismal years in Polish-Jewish history (1945-1946), I propose that future events that we organize celebrate some of the beauty and richness of the 700+ years that Polish Gentiles and Jews lived together in Polish lands. Let us organize a lecture about the great Jewish-Polish writers like Chaim Potok or Isaac Bashevis Singer. Let us hold a klezmer music concert together and enjoy the strains of the wonderful music written by Polish Jews. Let us

even hold a joint prayer service – with rabbis and priests together – mourning the Jewish and Polish and Polish-Jewish victims of Nazi and Soviet terror.

I say to the Jewish Cultural Center, how about these ideas for future events and you will have my complete support and participation in any of these ideas.

As the Polish Ambassador Janusz Reiter wrote in a letter to the Washington Post:

“While probing history, we should strive to build a better future in the relations between Poles and Jews.”

In closing, I want to echo those thoughts:

Let’s work toward reconciliation with our shared tragic experience from the war years,

But let’s also celebrate the many centuries of rich history before that;

and let’s look to the future at what these two ancient civilizations can do together, in peace, in relative prosperity and – at last, in freedom.

Thank you very much.
