

JEDWABNE FACT SHEET

Background information for *Our Class*: The complex story the play avoids.

Jedwabne is a small town in north-eastern Poland which gained notoriety because of Jan T. Gross's book *Neighbours*. Gross, an American sociologist, advanced the now discredited claim that the "Polish half" of the town spontaneously murdered the "Jewish half", on its own initiative and with no German assistance.

When the Germans arrived in Jedwabne in September 1939 there were no altercations between the town's Polish and Jewish populations. However, the Germans soon withdrew and that part of Poland was occupied by the Soviets. Together, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union had invaded and carved up Poland.

A few Poles but many more Jews welcomed Soviet rule. Quite a few started to collaborate with the new overlords. The vast majority of those arrested, executed and deported to the Gulag by the Soviet regime were ethnic Poles.

Meir Grajewski (later Ronen), a native of Jedwabne, identified five "scoundrels" – for the most part rather ordinary members of the town's Jewish community – who set up the local apparatus of terror and 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."

Many other "scoundrels" from Jedwabne 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."

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 that pogroms "should be evoked, in a manner which leaves no traces [of German involvement], intensified, if that is needed, and channelled in the proper direction."

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. 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 shot 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 Jedwabne, they murdered the harnessmaker Yakov Katz, the stitcher Eli Krawiecki, the blacksmith Shmuel Weinstein, the businessmen Moshe Fishman, Choneh Goldberg and his son."

It was only on July 10, 1941, that a pogrom took place in Jedwabne. Several hundred Jews – and not 1,600 as claimed by Jan T. Gross – were killed in a barn that was set on fire. Several hundred Jews managed to escape from the town. At least 125 Jews later returned and were confined in a ghetto set up by the Germans. The ghetto was eventually closed and the remaining Jews were transferred to Łomża before being sent to death camps.

An 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 (approximately forty) participated. Recently found German documents confirm that the Germans employed paid thugs and incited persons whose relatives had been denounced by Jews to the Soviets. These were not spontaneous events by any means.

Radosław Ignatiew, the prosecutor in charge of the investigation, 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.”

The earliest reports by Jews who escaped from Jedwabne confirm that the Germans played a decisive role in the massacre:

“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 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)]

After the war, Jewish survivors were able to reclaim and sell their property in Jedwabne. The *American Jewish Year Book (1947–1948)* 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.” *It cannot be stressed enough that even one death is too many.* The authorities were justified in punishing the culprits, though the methods they employed, such as the use of torture to secure confessions, did not further this goal.

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.”

The Jedwabne massacre was neither the first nor the last of thousands of large-scale massacres of civilians – both Jews and non-Jews – during the Second World War. Most of these massacres are little known and have long been forgotten. They will never become the subject matter of plays.

Neighbour-on-neighbour violence against an entire community was pioneered in the small village of Brzostowica Mała, about fifty kilometres east of the city of Białystok. As many as fifty Poles were murdered by a Jewish-led band of local pro-Soviet Jews and Belorussians. This occurred the 20th of September 1939, *before* the arrival of the Red Army. Armed with blades and axes, the band entered the village 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.

The entire population of the Polish village of Koniuchy, situated south of the city of Wilno (now Vilnius), was earmarked for total destruction by the Soviet partisan movement. At least fifty Poles, including children and women, were killed. The village was selected for collective punishment on January 29, 1944, because of isolated resistance put up by a few villagers during the incessant and violent supply-gathering expeditions carried out by the Soviet partisans from their base in Rudniki Forest. The largest component of the Soviet partisans attackers were Jews, and Jewish partisans considered this to be their largest “military” operation in the entire area. One of the participants, Chaim Lazar, wrote:

“The signal was given just before dawn. Within minutes the village was surrounded on three sides. On the fourth side was the river and the only bridge over it was in the hands of the partisans. With torches prepared in advance, the partisans burned down the houses, stables, and granaries, while opening heavy fire on the houses. ... Half-naked peasants jumped out of windows and sought escape. But everywhere fatal bullets awaited them. Many jumped into the river and swam towards the other side, but they too, met the same end. The mission was completed within a short while. Sixty households, numbering about 300 people, were destroyed, with no survivors.”

Unlike in the case of Jedwabne, the culprits who murdered the civilian population of Brzostowica Mała and Koniuchy were never brought to trial or punished.

The most comprehensive treatment of this topic is found in Marek Jan Chodakiewicz’s scholarly monograph *The Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Before, During, and After* (Boulder, Colorado: East European Monographs; New York: Columbia University Press, 2005). Another important source is Mark Paul’s study *Neighbours on the Eve of the Holocaust: Polish-Jewish Relations in Soviet-Occupied Eastern Poland, 1939–1941*, Internet: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/2011/files/SOVIET_OCCUP_39-41.doc, as well as his study *A Tangled Web: Polish-Jewish Relations in Wartime Northeastern Poland and the Aftermath*, Internet: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/fundusz_obrony.html.

A critique of the Canadian Stage / Studio 180 *Our Class* Program, which contains historical background information, is available online: http://www.kpk-toronto.org/fundusz_obrony.html

OTHER MASSACRES FROM THE BLOODIEST CENTURY IN WORLD HISTORY

The peaceful Palestinian village of Deir Yassin, which lay outside of the area assigned by the United Nations to the Jewish State, was attacked by 130 commandos of the Irgun and Stern gang on April 9, 1948, several weeks before the end of British Mandate rule in Palestine. Some 200 Palestinians were slaughtered. The massacre of children, women and men commenced only after the village was seized and was accompanied by maiming and widespread looting. Some of the survivors were loaded onto a truck and paraded through the Jewish quarters of Jerusalem before being executed.

Jacques de Reynier, a Swiss doctor working for the International Red Cross, witnessed the aftermath of the massacre and reported the “mopping up” operations in these riveting words:

“The first thing I saw were people running everywhere, rushing into and out of houses, carrying stun guns, rifles, pistols, and long ornate knives... They seemed half mad. I saw a beautiful young girl, with criminal eyes, carrying a dagger still covered in blood. She displayed it like a trophy. This was the ‘cleaning up’ team, which was obviously performing its task very conscientiously. ... Here the ‘cleaning up’ had been done with machine guns, then hand grenades. It had been finished off with knives, anyone could see that. The same thing in the next room, but as I was about to leave, I heard something like a sigh. I looked everywhere, turned over all the bodies, and eventually found a little foot, still warm. It was of a little girl of ten, mutilated by a hand grenade, but still alive... everywhere it was the same horrible sight... [The population of the village] had been deliberately massacred in cold blood for, as I observed for myself, this gang was admirably disciplined and only acted under their leaders’ orders.”

The village of Deir Yassin was subsequently resettled by Jews, who took over the homes of the Palestinians who had fled for their lives. It was renamed Givat Shaul Bet and the opening ceremony was attended by cabinet ministers and chief rabbis. Streets were named after the Irgun and Sternists who took part in the attack. The cemetery was bulldozed, and like hundreds of other Palestinian villages to follow, Deir Yassin was wiped off the map. There are no markers, no plaques, and no memorials at Deir Yassin. The slaughter took place within sight of the national memorial for Holocaust victims at Yad Vashem.

According to Menachem Begin, the leader of the Irgun at the time, this horrific act served the future state of Israel well. In his book *The Revolt*, Begin claimed: “Arabs throughout the country, induced to believe wild tales of ‘Irgun butchery,’ were seized with limitless panic and started to flee for their lives. This mass flight soon developed into a maddened, uncontrollable stampede. The political and economic significance of this development can hardly be overestimated.” Special tours of Deir Yassin led by surviving underground fighters are organized on the anniversary of the “battle.”

[Daniel A. McGowan and March H. Ellis, eds., *Remembering Deir Yassin: The Future of Israel and Palestine* (New York: Olive Branch Press/Interlink Publishing Group, 1998)]