



**UNIVERSITY OF  
STIRLING**

DEPARTMENT OF  
**HISTORY**

## **THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN POLISH HISTORY**

**Director : Professor Peter D. Stachura**, *D.Litt., F.R.Hist. S., Professor of Modern European History*

*University of Stirling, Stirling FK9 4LA, Scotland, UK.*

tel: 01786 467580/85 fax: 01786 467581 email: [p.d.stachura@stir.ac.uk](mailto:p.d.stachura@stir.ac.uk)

### **JEDWABNE : A REPLY to ANTONY POLONSKY & JOANNA MICHLIC**

The following statement is in response to a letter, dated 5 June 2007, and written by Dr Anthony Polonsky and Dr Joanna Michlic, which was published recently in the UK academic periodical, *History: The Journal of the Historical Association* (1).

The letter criticises my very positive review of Professor Marek Jan Chodakiewicz's monograph, *The Massacre in Jedwabne, July 10, 1941: Before, During, and After* (East European Monographs, Boulder, CO. ; distributed by Columbia University Press, New York, 2005) that appeared in the same periodical last year (2), and also explicitly criticises the periodical's editor, Dr Joseph Smith, for commissioning the review from me. Furthermore, the letter challenges my description in the same review of Jan T Gross's book on Jedwabne (3) as being 'sensational but now largely discredited'.

At one level, the letter, whose length is obviously wholly disproportionate to my 450-word review (the maximum allowed by the Editor), might be taken as a backhanded compliment, in the sense that what I wrote hit a raw nerve because it constitutes accurate comment which Polonsky and Michlic are loathe to admit. From a different perspective, it was initially tempting for me to ignore the letter completely as a rather pathetic, if outrageous, example of *chutzpah* that should not have been published in a respected journal in the first place. It does leave a bad taste in one's mouth, and its discursive, tediously convoluted and stylistically mediocre character reinforced that particular reaction. However, after further reflection, I finally decided, perhaps against my better judgement, that a reply was necessary, if only to set the record straight for any misguided reader who might be disposed to regard the Polonsky/Michlic letter as having substantive validity.

It is most regrettable that Editor Smith ignored my thrice-repeated request to have my reply published in *History*, thus to follow the best practice of major journals, such as the *American Historical Review*. He justified publication of the Polonsky/Michlic letter to me on the grounds that *his* judgement had been directly challenged, adding, somewhat ironically, that, in any case, the letter lacked credibility, (4) and that 'I know only too well that many of my readers will be astounded' [by the letter's publication]. (5) At least, I can agree wholeheartedly with his evaluation. Nonetheless, there is bound to be speculation about the means and/or pressure that was brought to bear on Dr Smith to publish the letter, thus creating a self-confessed precedent in his 8-year tenure as editor of *History*. (6) Consequently, it might not be unreasonable to believe that, in future, potential reviewers will consider very carefully before committing themselves to writing a review for this journal, given that a critique of the review might well also be published in due course, with the right of reply denied.

For those readers unfamiliar with the theme or historiography in question, it might be helpful to intimate that both Polonsky and Michlic are perceived in certain academic circles as being uncompromising advocates of a tendentious interpretation of Polish-Jewish relations in the modern era. Polonsky, who was a lecturer at the London School of Economics from the early 1970s until allegedly implicated in a well-publicised financial scandal in his university department in the 1980s, then found a position at a Jewish institution in the United States, namely, Brandeis University, Massachusetts, where he edits the Jewish-funded annual publication, *POLIN: A Journal of Polish-Jewish Studies*. Since its inception in 1986, this journal has earned an unenviable reputation among some historians for publishing articles, reviews and other contributions that are invariably highly critical of one side only of the Polish-Jewish symbiosis. Polonsky, it might be thought, therefore, is a historian with a large axe to grind. Michlic, on the other hand, is less well-known, having published to only a limited extent since completing her doctorate at University College London and the London School of Economics less than a decade ago. This Polish-Jewish born historian worked at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and the Yad Vashem Archives for some years before moving to the United States. Following a short period at Brandeis University (*sic*), she is now at Lehigh University's Department of History and Berman Center for Jewish Studies. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to muse that this general but pertinent background influences, to a lesser or greater degree, the manner in which both Polonsky and Michlic treat the history of Polish-Jewish relations.

Polonsky and Michlic try to justify their criticism of my Chodakiewicz review by invoking the work of a carefully selected number of historians and commentators, including Andrzej Rzepliński, Andrzej Żbikowski and Gunnar Paulsson, without making it clear that their views are themselves not only controversial but also rejected in large measure by some other historians because of serious flaws of one kind or another. The same stricture applies to

Polonsky and Michlic's citation of publications from Poland's Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), above all, *Wokół Jedwabnego*, (Warsaw 2002),(7) and in the left-of-centre Polish daily newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, whose Editor-in-Chief, Andrzej Michnik, is a former Marxist of Jewish extraction. In an act of striking vanity, Polonsky and Michlic also cite their own jointly-edited volume in support of their 'argument'. (8) How convincing can that be expected to be? What is even worse, however, is their endeavour to marginalise, if not to come close to exonerating, the role in Jedwabne of the *Einsatzgruppen*, the notorious Nazi-SS murder units. This at least breaks new ground in the historiography of that otherwise universally reviled outfit! Finally, and significantly, their 'argument' is interspersed with quite a few 'may be's and 'if's, thus emphasising how much they are, in effect, blowing in the wind.

All this amounts to a totally futile and unimpressive approach, of course, by Polonsky and Michlic. Most of the 'evidence' adduced in support of their claims has serious weaknesses of various type, and falls well short, therefore, of being authoritative, as they try to make out. On the contrary, the most recent and reliable research, particularly from Polish-language sources, supports the principal conclusions in Chodakiewicz's book, which has been praised by a large number of historians, within and outside Poland, who, like him, base their judgements on hard evidence and rational argument rather than preconceived bias and partisanship. These include Tomasz Strzembosz, Piotr Gontarczyk, Richard Lukas, Tomasz Szarota, Ryszard Tyndorf, Bogdan Musiał and Leszek Żebrowski. It is also understood that the IPN is preparing the third volume of *Wokół Jedwabnego*, which will include definitive anthropological and forensic medical evidence from Professor Kola's classified report. The overall message is that the credibility of Gross's book has now been destroyed, leaving only those, such as Polonsky and Michlic, who see some perverse merit in defending the indefensible.

In this context, it is relevant to point out further that Gross's latest book, *Fear. Anti-Semitism in Poland After Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (Random House, New York, 2006), has been, since its publication in Poland in January this year, the subject of intense and damning debate and criticism, to the point where it has been widely reported in the Polish and international press that the Public Prosecutor's Office in Kraków is giving urgent consideration to bringing criminal charges against him for the statutory offence of 'slandering the Polish nation'. (9) A number of leading politicians have called for him to be banned from setting foot in Poland ever again as a *persona non grata*. This is the crass notoriety of the person defended so stoutly by Polonsky and Michlic.

It goes almost without saying that it is utterly preposterous for Polonsky and Michlic to claim that my review constitutes part of 'a neo-nationalist agenda', whatever this nebulous, quasi-political term is supposed to mean, just as, in turn, it would be equally preposterous, would it not, for anyone to allege that they were pursuing a 'Jewish agenda' or an 'anti-Polish agenda'? More to the

point, any attempt, from whatever quarter, to politicise this or any other historical debate must be emphatically repudiated: 'ganz überparteilich' must be everyone's watchword, *nicht wahr?*

What is more worthwhile to mention is that from the end of the Second World War until 1989/90, Poland's enslavement under Soviet-imposed Communism resulted in her history, especially of the modern era, being systematically misrepresented, distorted and traduced in order to conform to the political and ideological imperatives of Moscow-dominated 'People's Poland' - a position that was eagerly endorsed or reaffirmed to one degree or another by many left-wing historians in the West. Poland's regaining of her freedom and independence allowed at long last a fresh avenue of enquiry to be initiated by a small but brave and talented group of historians in Poland and abroad who are untainted by her ignominious Communist past and Communist-era historiography, while being devoted, instead, to ascertaining the truth about the many contentious matters of Polish history. It seems that it is those who are engaged in this unqualifiedly admirable and much-needed exercise whom Polonsky and Michlic choose to deride calumniously as 'neo-nationalist'.

In conclusion, Polonsky and Michlic display a reprehensible degree of arrogance, intolerance and susceptibility to conspiracy theories. They want to close off opinions they do not share, thus in contradistinction to the liberal academic values to which they doubtless formally subscribe. On the evidence of their letter, however, they do not practice what they will claim to preach. The important debate about Polish-Jewish relations must continue to develop on the basis of informed, impartial scrutiny, analysis and interpretation, with reference to authenticated, solid evidence, as Professor Chodakiewicz has so ably demonstrated, and just as Polonsky, Michlic, Gross and their ilk so graphically have not.

## NOTES

1. Volume 93, Issue 1, Number 309, January 2008, 'Letter to the Editor'.
2. Volume 92, Issue 2, Number 306, April 2007, pp. 276-277.
3. Jan T Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2001). My review of this book was published in *History: The Journal of the Historical Association*, Volume 87, Issue 2, Number 286, April 2002, pp. 312-13.
4. Email message from Dr Joseph Smith to Professor Stachura, 25 January 2008.
5. Email message from Dr Joseph Smith to Professor Peter Stachura, 17 January 2008.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Essays in this volume, such as those by Urynowicz and Dariusz Stola, provide estimates of the number of Jedwabne victims without having taken into account the results of the forensic exhumation, Soviet population censuses, some Jewish

accounts, and other documentary evidence which corroborate Chodakiewicz's estimate of no more than 400 Jews killed.

8. A. Polonsky and J. Michlic (eds), *The Neighbors Respond: The Controversy over the Jedwabne Massacre in Poland* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2004).

9. For instance, in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16 January 2008, and *Der Spiegel*, 18 January 2008.

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Professor Peter Stachura  
Professor of Modern European History  
& Director of the Centre for Research in Polish History  
University of Stirling  
Stirling  
Scotland, UK