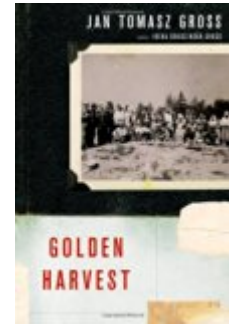


Jan Tomasz Gross, with Irena Grudzińska Gross. *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. xv + 135 pp. \$16.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-973167-1.

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Published on H-Genocide (July, 2014)

Commissioned by Elisa G. von Joeden-Forgey



## A Photograph and Its Implications

*Golden Harvest*, written by Jan Tomasz Gross with Irena Grudzińska Gross, traces the history of a photograph and its wider context: the plunder of the Jews by non-Jewish Poles during and after the Holocaust. Jan Tomasz Gross's previous books, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (2001) and *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz: An Essay in Historical Interpretation* (2006), sparked controversy and debate in Poland about Polish anti-Semitism and postwar anti-Jewish violence. *Golden Harvest*, in many ways, links both works. Twenty-six short chapters provide a compelling history of the scope of the "collusion of the Polish population in the pillaging and killing of Jews at the periphery of the Holocaust" (p. xiv).

The photograph under discussion depicts a group of peasants posing for the camera in a half circle, resting after a hard day's labor during harvest. Yet the landscape, and even more so, the skulls and bones in front of the group, are disconcerting. The authors reveal the image's location and protagonists: peasants "standing atop a mountain of ashes" of eight hundred thousand Jews murdered at Treblinka (p. 3). They were digging through the remains to find gold and other valuables overlooked by the Nazis. A writer, who, in November 1945, as part of an official delegation, witnessed the widespread practice, called it a "gold rush" (p. 21). The digs continued for decades after the war and were not limited to Treblinka. Similar evidence also exists for Belżec and Sobibór.

The photograph was first printed in Poland's largest daily newspaper in 2008—in the same month in which Gross's *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* was published in Polish—and illustrated an article about postwar digging through mass graves at Treblinka. The journalists had received the photograph from the former director of the Museum in Treblinka. Prior to the publication of *Golden Harvest*, the photograph sparked controversy in Poland. Attempts were made at discrediting what the picture was showing and where it was taken, which served to distract from the actual subject matter of the book.

According to the authors, the photograph "links two central events of the Holocaust: the mass murder of European Jews and the accompanying looting of their property" (p. 4). It is the latter that is the book's main focus and it puts particular emphasis on a material dimension to the Holocaust. The central argument is that the plunder of Jews was widespread and constituted socially sanctioned behavior. It included local elites, was done openly and often in groups, and its memory was passed on. The authors thus challenge the notion that these were isolated incidents committed mainly by criminals or that they could be seen as deviant behavior. Though relying largely on anecdotal evidence from a range of sources, including archival records, eyewitness accounts, and memoirs, it serves as "an indication of a shift in shared norms concerning acceptable behavior toward the Jews" (pp. 76-77). They use the method of "thick descrip-

tion” to “convert episodic knowledge into a general understanding of what happened” (p. 18). The local population benefited and profited from the murder of Jews in many different ways, ranging from forced sales to trade with guards of death camps, to hiding Jews for money, to blackmail, and to digging for gold after the war at the sites of mass destruction. In addition, the crimes against Jews committed by Poles encompassed torture and rape, taking part in “Jew hunts,” looting Jewish property, and killing Jews.

To the authors, the photograph epitomizes the collective character of the plunder and murder of Jews. Though ultimately, the Nazis were responsible for the Holocaust, if the Jews had any chance and hope to survive, they depended on the local population. In Jedwabne, shortly after the Germans began the mass killings of Jews following the attack on the Soviet Union, villagers not only failed to protect their Jewish neighbors but also initiated the murder of them. The central photograph of *Golden Harvest* also “conveys a deeper truth about the golden harvest made possible by the Nazi occupation of Europe. The local population living alongside the Jews for centuries by and large appreciated the Nazi policy of cleansing the area of Jews and figured out it could enrich itself in the process” (p. 73).

The final chapter concludes that the Holocaust was possible because it was consented to in many different countries occupied by the Germans. In these places there was no solidarity with the Jews; on the contrary, many people got directly involved in the expropriation of the

property of their Jewish neighbors. The authors argue that “the plunder of Jewish property became a common European experience” (p. 121). Though their focus is on Poland, they frequently point to instances of murder and plunder in other countries: in Ukraine and Belorussia, local men who had joined police organizations were involved in the killing of Jews in the ghettos; and in France, French gendarmes rounded up and imprisoned more than thirteen thousand Jews at the Velodrome d’Hiver. Local people thus acted not in a deviant way but in accordance with the norms of the time. We are reminded that the perpetrators were humans just like us, which is the reason that the photograph is so unsettling.

The book’s structure could have been more cohesive, as the book skips inexplicably between prewar and postwar plunder, between plunder and murder, and between the photograph and more theoretical considerations. Its strength lies in providing rich and detailed anecdotal evidence demonstrating the scope and degree of the plunder of Jews in Poland during and after the Holocaust. The authors never lose sight of the context and emphasize on a number of occasions throughout the book that the responsibility for the Holocaust ultimately lies with the Germans. The plunder of Jewish property was also not limited to Poland but widespread across Europe. The fact that a large number of non-Jewish Poles profited from the persecution and annihilation of the European Jews—even after their deaths—and, in some cases, partook in the torture, rape, and murder of Jews, is sure to remain a contentious issue in Poland, as it challenges the established postwar narrative.

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**Citation:** Stefanie Rauch. Review of Gross, Jan Tomasz; with Irena Grudzińska Gross, *Golden Harvest: Events at the Periphery of the Holocaust*. H-Genocide, H-Net Reviews. July, 2014.

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