

JEDWABNE'S CALL

By Michael Ventura

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We do not study history, history studies us.

We turn the pages, do the research, examine, compare, consider, in the arrogance that it is we who are keeping history alive; but the truth may be that history calls out to us, grabs at us, uses us as it demands to be heard and known. Even the most unconscious feel this call; it is no accident that as a species our holidays are almost without exception historical observances: Martin Luther King Day, President's Day, Easter, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Thanksgiving, Christmas -- days when we make way for history's entry into the present, exposing ourselves to the past that we may be awakened. Even New Year's is a historical rite, celebrating Time's wheel as it moves forward. Our very birthdays and wedding anniversaries are historical observances, a recognition that our own pasts call out for remembrance and accounting. Yes, most such celebrations are trivial; yes, often we want to ignore history or to re-write it to reflect our self-serving notions about ourselves; and, yes, people argue about history (the Confederate flag, for instance) as a way to vie for power in the present. But these too are proofs that no one can wholly avoid the force with which history reaches out to us. That force is all the people who have gone before looking at us with their myriad eyes. Studying us. Accompanying us. Questioning what we've made of their fates, what we're up to with their heritage.

The dead are hard to bury. They keep rising and insisting on their say. The white American South doesn't want to remember that mobs of them lynched about 5,000 black men circa 1900-1950, but someone is always throwing that history in their faces -- for those dead keep calling out, reminding us how they died and why. The tribal people of the Americas keep calling out, reminding us that ours is a stolen land, and that the one freedom we cannot have is freedom from the stains of what we've done. And I doubt a week goes by in which a literate person is not faced with a reference to the Holocaust, because those dead somehow have the power, exerted through the living, to keep facing us with what we're capable of. I don't feel that they call for revenge, which, for better or worse, is not possible. I feel their call is generous. I hear them saying: "Save yourselves. Know yourselves. For you cannot save yourselves without knowing yourselves, and you cannot know yourselves without taking responsibility for what happened to us. There is no other way for you to avert the catastrophes that could destroy you as they destroyed us."

I am thinking of a Polish town that has been in the news lately, a place called Jedwabne. It isn't only the people of that town, or the Poles, who'd rather forget Jedwabne. No one can learn of it without wishing they'd never heard of it. But again history has exerted its force, working through a man named Jan Gross who wrote a book called *Neighbors*. Through his book, the dead of Jedwabne have been calling out, as so many of the dead have called out to the living: "Know yourselves. Save yourselves."

On July 10, 1941, the Christians of Jedwabne killed their neighbors, the Jews. Half the town slew the other half. Of 1,600 Jews, no more than a dozen survived. A few German soldiers entered the town and apparently were asked by the town leaders if the killing of Jews was allowed. The question seems unthinkable, all the more so because

these people weren't asking about strangers; Jews and Christians had lived side by side in Jedwabne for quite a while. These were people the Christians knew, had lived among, worked beside. The decision was, God forgive us, democratic. A town meeting was held. In a recent *Newsweek* article, George Will quoted from Gross' book: "When the Germans proposed to leave one Jewish family from each profession, local carpenter Bronislaw Szlezinski ... answered: We have enough of our own craftsmen, we have to destroy all the Jews, none should stay alive. Mayor Karolak and everybody else agreed with his words." Some of the killing was done with tools and farm implements. The town was scoured for sick Jews and Jewish children who were in hiding. "They roped a few [children] together by their legs and carried them on their backs, then put them on pitchforks and threw them onto smoldering coals." Most of the Jews were herded into a barn, then the barn was set afire. A German soldier is reported to have instructed the killers, "Do not kill at once. Slowly, let them suffer." They were glad of the instruction and followed it.

I do not want to be writing this, I do not want to remember this, because it makes me afraid. These people were human beings and I am a human being, so I do not have the right to feel superior to them -- nor to the Southern lynchers, nor to anyone of their kind. The dead of Jedwabne are calling out to me -- to me in particular, and to you in particular -- to remember what a human being sometimes is, that we may save ourselves from that part of ourselves. That we may know: Anything any human being does is the charge, the responsibility, of every other human being, forever.

This July 10, 60 years after the massacre, there was a ceremony in Jedwabne. Polish President Aleksander Kwaniewski said: "For this crime, we should beg the souls of the dead and their families for forgiveness. As a citizen and as the president of the Republic of Poland ... I beg pardon in my own name and in the name of those Poles whose conscience is shattered by that crime." Hearing his words I shudder almost as badly for the killers as for their victims: The innocents died horribly, but their killers brought upon their own souls an eradicable stain to bear into Eternity. Kwaniewski's words sound so insufficient, so lame, but they are so very necessary, if only for their capacity to make people squirm and decide for themselves how they feel. Just because we are not Polish we don't have the luxury of saying this wasn't our crime; we have plenty of sins just like it to expiate; no matter who we are, souls of many of our people have been just as terribly stained, and we are the only ones through whom they can be even partly redeemed -- not by our sentiments, which count for nothing, but by our behavior.

Many Poles are angry at their president for his words. *The New York Times* reported that on the day of the ceremony several doors in Jedwabne bore signs saying, "We do not apologize." Though the evidence is irrefutable, the town priest, Father Edward Orlowski, brought shame upon his faith by saying, "These are all lies. I am spending the day quietly at home. This is Holocaust business. It is not my business." And I thought of how churlish many white Southerners become when faced with the sins of their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. It's a human enough response. But it is also cowardly and small. And more than anything it is a way of joining the crime, of taking the stain needlessly and expensively upon oneself and leaving the necessary redemptive behavior for yet another generation.

But again, even to feel superior to the deniers and the churlish is not an option. There is no option but to take the responsibility of their humanity upon oneself. Or we cannot know ourselves, cannot save ourselves. *The New York Times* quietly made a point of this by its juxtaposition of stories: One headline read, "At Site of Massacre, Polish

Leader Asks Jews to Forgive"; the headline of the story directly below it read, "Israel Bulldozes Houses in a [Palestinian] Refugee Camp in the Gaza Strip."

One attendant at the Jadwabne ceremony was Judith Kubran, an American whose father, Janek Kubrzanski, was saved from the massacre by a Christian of the town named Antonina Wyrzkowska. That, too, is what it means to be a human being. And that, more than anything, requires our responsibility. To take responsibility for the behavior of the killers is to recognize the abyss within ourselves. To take responsibility for the mercy and courage of an Antonina Wyrzkowska is to commit oneself to mercy and courage -- a frightening prospect, but without it hope is merely a sentiment. There is no hope but in deeds.

We do not study history, history studies us. The presences of the massacred and the stained alike are always rising toward us, through someone's testimony, following us relentlessly into the crevasses where we try to hide from our responsibility to them. We hide, they follow; we recognize them for who they are, and we admit that or we don't; they recognize us for who we are, and we admit *that* or we don't; we hide again, they follow again -- a relentless rhythm of recognition and denial, responsibility and irresponsibility, atrocity and mercy, cowardice and courage. No one knows for sure how they will act until they are tested. The words in the Lord's Prayer that are commonly translated, "Lead us not into temptation," mean literally, "Do not subject us to the test." But sooner or later, publicly or privately, we are tested. No prayer can avert that. Then one day we too join the dead, in honor or in shame, and call out to the living, "Know yourselves. Save yourselves."

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