

**In Search of Lost Meaning: The New Eastern Europe**, by Adam Michnik, edited by Irena Grudzińska Gross, translated by Roman S. Czarny, with a foreword by Václav Havel and an introduction by John Darnton, Berkeley, University of California Press, xix + 225 pp., US\$29.95, ISBN 9780520269231

He is one of the towering Polish public intellectuals of our time, idolised by many in the West, loved — or loathed — by many in his own country. Adam Michnik, born to (Communist) Jewish parents in 1946, was a hero of Solidarity and the anti-Communist resistance. He served stints in prison and eventually emerged to help bring about the Round Table that heralded the peaceful end of Communist misrule in Poland and played not a small role in the unravelling of the Soviet Union. A keen historian of events and ideas in roughly equal measure, and editor of a major newspaper, he has become a kind of moral conscience for his country, championing magnanimity towards ex-Communists, including his erstwhile tormentor, the country's final Communist president Wojciech Jaruzelski, whom he would like judged by history rather than prosecutors.

This stimulating collection of ten essays is divided into three sections: first, “Anniversaries” (comprising three chapters covering Poland’s period of transformation and one on the Budapest Uprising of 1956, the section of the book that will be permanently indispensable to historians of the period); second, “The Work of Hatred,” which constitutes the book’s core, four major essays, the book’s best, on the evils of gutter politics, witch hunts and inquisitions in *post*-Communist society; and, finally, “The Complex Polish-Jewish Matters.”

Many Jewish readers abroad have occasionally held it against Michnik that he is a “gentile” Pole ready to talk about his Jewish roots, but not to redefine himself as a Polish Jew in the new free environment. Such criticism is ill-founded, grounded in foreign ignorance of the cumulative effects of the Holocaust and Communist rule in

this part of the world, and, more personally, a simply unfair judgment on someone brought up by two parents as a socialist gentile Pole who came over his lifetime to understand the full magnitude of antisemitism, and who is, in this book as in many other writings, a champion in the fight against that singular scourge, as an issue separate from his self-identification or cosmic beliefs whatever they may be.

Still, the special section on Jewish matters, the book's last, is in some ways its least innovative and daring. Its very title ("The Complex Polish-Jewish Matters") is in East European parlance something of a way out, aimed at de-reducing the simple to the "complicated" to avoid the straightest straight talk. Polish Jewry is a near-extinct minority in the country – laudable and priceless work to maintain and grow a vibrant little remnant notwithstanding – and the emphasis in these chapters upon reactions of this or that leading personality, while welcome, do not fully come to grips either with the Kielce pogrom (July 1946) or the Holocaust-era massacre of Jedwabne's Jews by their neighbours (July 1941), an issue in wider Polish society since the 2001 publication of Jan Gross's masterpiece, *Neighbours*. If any single detail tells it all, it is Michnik's "need" to present a "balanced treatment," for example, by taking to task Poland's post-war chief rabbi David Kahane at the time of Kielce:

However, the words of Cardinal Hlond – once again, they are unjust and misleading – provoke another question that needs to be asked: Shouldn't Rabbi Kahane, who was fully aware of the Polish reality in 1946, have publicly appealed to the Jewish community to avoid collaboration with the forcibly imposed Communist regime, and, in particular, with the security apparatus, which for Poles was simply the apparatus of oppression? Shouldn't the rabbi have condemned the violations of human rights, the persecution of Home Army supporters, the harsh censorship, and the falsified results of the national referendum? Didn't the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" apply to the Polish patriots who were murdered by the security apparatus? (187–8)

The abstract moral answer to all these questions is "yes." To be sure, in some kabbalistic heaven for pure-souled martyrs there might now have been one more Kahane. But it is sheer historic unreality to expect a post-Holocaust chief rabbi in Poland, serving at the pleasure of the Communists, to have become the kind of hero whom the overwhelming Polish majority of the population could have produced, and, as Michnik convincingly demonstrates, *did* produce, in some sense, in the figure of one Bishop Teodor Kubina. Still, without a drop of spin Michnik condemns the antisemitism and moral cowardice of the "official respondent," Bishop Czesław Kaczmarek, who prepared the shamefully obfuscating report on Kielce to US ambassador Arthur Bliss-Lane on behalf of the Kielce Curia.

Michnik flirts here and there with what is today called "symmetry," the East European nationalist effort to mitigate local Holocaust history via positing *some kind* of equilibrium between Nazi and Soviet crimes, as if the genocide of the Jews of Poland, leaving the bona fide ethnographic typus *der póylisher yid*, as it is known in Yiddish, an extinct species, is equal to all the crimes of Communism that frankly, for all their many noxious effects, left for Michnik and his people a thankfully splendid nation of tens of millions of able citizens ready for the European Union and NATO: "There is the hostility a Jew feels for a Pole, because the latter did not experience the Holocaust as the Jew did. And there is the hostility a Pole feels for a Jew because the latter does not share his pain at Poland's violation by the Communists"(199).

The stereotype in the first half of the equation would not stand the empirical test. The second half of that first sentence might be amended to "because the latter did

not share his pain at the annihilation of Polish Jewry.” Not because there is a Polish (or other) Jew on the planet who would want Poles or for that matter anyone to *experience* a Holocaust.

Intriguingly, such accommodations to the majority’s habits are wholly absent from the brilliant core of this book where, incidentally, the same Jewish issues are treated with the same moral clarity and unwavering strength as all other issues, and where words like “complicated” and “complex” are not applied by this most forceful and perspicacious of essayists whose very genius is focused on cutting to the simple core. No more so than on the Jewish issue where he fearlessly takes his beloved country to task with a healthy dose of sarcasm:

How did a Pole perceive himself when looking in the mirror? Well, he was convinced of his centuries-old nobility and innocence. If he had ever been guilty of anything, then it was the excess of naive idealism and kindness toward strangers. This Polish kindness has been used by foreigners to destroy Poland. And they were still using it. Otherwise, why on earth would hostile articles appear in the foreign press about Polish antisemitism, or about Polish ill treatment of political prisoners? Surely this must be vile slander! (90–1)

In the chapter “Sadness of the Gutter” Michnik judiciously takes as a point of departure the nationalist right wing’s hate campaign against Polish professor turned politician Gabriel Narutowicz (1865–1922), which culminated in his assassination five days after he became president. Narutowicz’s sympathies for Poland’s minorities and his vision of a greater Poland led him to be called the “Jewish president.” And thus Michnik sets out on the saga of (ultra)nationalist politics of the gutter, demonstrating

(a) its prevalence in the period immediately following upon post-1918 independence, (b) its close tie to right-wing nationalism and (c), very significantly, the power of *ad hominem* campaigns of personal and political destruction, smears and slurs that morph rapidly into the dissolution of order and dignity, that can rather rapidly undo much of the long, hard work of nation-building. From the gutter, Michnik opens the lens to its human occupier —“the crowd”:

A crowd first listens to such cries and then repeats them. Then it exaggerates, intensifies, and adds to them. A crowd already knows who the culprit is, and now it has gathered to mete out justice. A crowd is volatile, emotional, and intolerant; it gladly follows when urged to throw mud at the guilty. It is gullible – it will believe any lie, after enough repetition. A crowd is composed of different people, but all together, gathered together, they are capable of deeds that no single participant would be capable of committing alone. In that anonymous crowd, people feel all-powerful, and simultaneously they feel they can act with impunity – as if subjected to a collective hypnosis, as if engulfed by collective madness. In a crowd, a wise man becomes mindless and cruel, and an ignoramus, a fool, and a jealous man forget[s] their insignificance and feel[s] just [as] strong with the strength of the crowd. (92)

“Accusers and Traitors” puts under the microscope campaigns against figures from the nineteenth century down to Czesław Miłosz. The discourse is further brought into the present with a chapter dedication to colleagues and friends subjected to smear campaigns between 1990 and 2005. Here too Michnik rises to a more sweeping point:

Anyone with respect for his own dignity defends his views in reasoned argument; he despises the filth of defamation. The accusers, both the great ones who are respected and honoured and the second-rate ones who usually are lost in the crowd of mediocrity

and banality, reveal their latent complexes of jealousy and hatred when they join in a smear campaign. In a totalitarian country, such a campaign is also ruled by fear: if I refuse to participate, then the powers that be may punish me. (105)

From this point onwards, Michnik almost subliminally develops a major theme of the book which emerges for the reader, as if by the power of suggestion, without being belaboured explicitly, and is therefore all the more potent. That theme is in short that there is a state totalitarianism, but there is also a totalitarianism of the societal spirit. Long before Poland was taken over by the Communists after World War II, in fact in the early days of the interwar republic when Narutowicz was assassinated, there was a penchant for ultra-nationalist, purer-than-pure witch hunts and campaigns against people, especially eminent people, with diverging opinions, a meanness of spirit that fitted in well with Communist totalitarianism and that has tragically survived it, and that now, often intermeshed with the far right, threatens the fabric of post-Communist society.

This subtle theme is constructed further in “The Accusers and the Non-civic Acts,” which contains a bold confession by Michnik, who is the last to make himself holier than anyone: “This rather extensive self-quotation thirty years ago is a reminder that it is worth considering the beam in one’s own eye before starting to expose the mote in somebody else’s. Well, I felt ashamed, and that shame is still within me. Because of it, thirty years ago I publicly evaluated my own conduct and have never again participated in any campaign against anyone” (118).

Historic rootedness of contemporary discourse is deepened by “A Wound upon Adam Mickiewicz’s Brow,” where Michnik demonstrates how the great Polish Romantic bard himself has been subjected to endless witch-hunting, much of it posthumous – for example, about a less than heroic response in his student days to a Tsarist police interrogation about the illegal student group he was part of. Michnik lashes out mercilessly at the Inquisitors of all times and places, the midgets who abuse the power of the state, or the crowd, or both, to bring down the great over the less-than-perfect character of all humankind.

The Great Lustrator is not satisfied with skimming the surface of the problem. He needs to dig deeper to ascertain the essence of the matter. He searches for it in police archives, and there he finds the key to absolute truth – the one and only truth, the truest truth of all, which leaves no doubt whatsoever. Reports and denunciations from police files have something in common with pornography; blushing like a fourteen-year-old looking at porn, the Great Lustrator studies those denunciations and does not even see that a truly satanic temptation is slowly growing within him. For the devil, according to one philosopher, “is arrogance of spirit, unsmiling certainty, and a truth that is never doubted.” The devil is grim, and so is the Great Lustrator. They both deal in dirt and know where they are going; they are heading for precisely where they came from: from the dirt, through the dirt, searching for dirt.” (163)

The figure of Adam Mickiewicz provides for Michnik a grand platform for another of the book’s profoundest themes. Mickiewicz is hotly claimed by Belarusians, Lithuanians and Poles alike, and he was, in a sense, the last poet of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth at once, even if he was born after the third and final Partition at the end of the eighteenth century. It is a theme that is common to all of Michnik’s Polish heroes, down to Czesław Miłosz.

Czesław Miłosz said over and over that he was a child of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, which was a component of the Polish Republic of many nations and cultures, religions

and languages ... John Paul II wrote that the Polish idea of the fatherland had evolved from the “purely Polish” idea of the Piast dynasty to the idea of the Jagiellon dynasty. (131)

And from there, he proceeds to a Pope John Paul II quotation: “So Polishness in essence is multiplicity and pluralism and not narrowness and insularity. It seems to me, however, that in our time, the ‘Jagiellonian’ dimension of Polishness that I mentioned earlier regrettably stopped being evident” (132).

The multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, gracefully variegated Grand Duchy–Commonwealth spirit is what can make the small nations of Eastern Europe that have successfully shaken off the Communist yoke, with a little help from Michnik himself, truly great, as opposed to being petty ethnocentric ultranationalist entities forever prone to far-right pro-fascist tendencies – based on claims to purity of race, language, land – whenever times get a little rough.

Which takes us to the final point. The book, which is so deeply about the author’s beloved Poland, carries the subtitle “The New Eastern Europe” even though there is precious little, save an important chapter on the Hungarian Uprising, about other countries in the region. That is not unjustified in the least, because throughout these interwoven and excellently translated and edited essays there runs a wisdom that pertains to the whole region, and beyond.

In recent years, as is the wont of the history of ideas, issues have begat other, bigger issues. The (cunningly racist and antisemitic) New Far Right in Eastern Europe has mobilised to rewrite Second World War history as one of “two equal genocides” (Double Genocide or the Red–Brown movement) and has had some success selling it to the European Parliament and further afield. Its chief document is the 2008 Prague Declaration. The idea is to write the Holocaust out of history without denying a single death. Poland has thus far stood out as a beacon of pluralistic coexistence of views on these and related questions. Its own history has in part immunised even its rightists from the kind of Nazi-collaborator glorification sometimes evident in the neighbouring Baltics states. Its own geopolitics has forged a more nuanced view of today’s Russia, without losing sight of the perils. The complex of issues raised, sometimes tying Double Genocide politics with current geopolitics, is just beneath the surface in Polish discourse too. Michnik’s sophisticated humanistic voice on all this is eagerly awaited.

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