

Irena Grudzińska Gross / Konrad Matyjaszek (eds.)

# Breaking the Frame

New School of Polish-Jewish Studies

Introduced by Jan T. Gross



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## Editors' Note

The New School of Polish-Jewish Studies is a way of historical thinking that integrates the history of the Holocaust with the history of Poland. Founded on a thought that past violence can be overcome and prevented in the future if it is documented, intellectually and emotionally addressed, and perceived in its cultural context, the New School provides tools to understand the origins of anti-Jewish violence perpetrated through the recent Polish history.

In facing the Holocaust, the New School opposes two intellectual frames that kept this task unaddressed. One of them is the framework of Polish nationalism, built around the myth of Polish innocence that conceals and justifies centuries-old antisemitism. The other is the post-Cold War conviction that the history of Polish Christians' anti-Jewish violence is an obstacle along Poland's path towards its Western future and that this history should be told as the country's harmonious and tolerant past.

The work of the New School consists in a shift that is exactly the opposite: it looks at the testimonies, narratives and histories of Jewish witnesses, victims and survivors of the Holocaust, at their thoughts and feelings that resulted from suffering, resistance or survival, that were articulated, but more often silenced and repressed. The New School analyzes too the cultural mechanisms that caused this silencing and repression.

In performing this shift, the New School follows the groundbreaking *Neighbors* (2000) by Jan T. Gross. There he proposed to change the approach to testimonies of survivors "from a priori critical to in principle affirmative," in order to gain the capability of "listening to lonely voices reaching us from the abyss."<sup>1</sup> It relies on knowledge established by the work of contemporary historians, particularly from the Polish Centre for Holocaust Research. It also follows the principles set by survivor historians, who in the immediately post-war years collected Holocaust testimonies and described the post-war landscapes. Particularly important is the survivor historians' requirement to include into the collective historical knowledge the emotional, ethical and moral reactions to the violence, both of survivors, and of those who read, listen, and understand their thoughts and voices. This principle was perhaps most directly expressed by the Warsaw Jewish Historical Institute's director Nachman Blumental, who wrote in 1948: "too close

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1 Jan T. Gross, *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 139–140.

we are to this era and too heavily it weighed on us to perceive it only objectively.”<sup>2</sup> This inclusion gives space and legitimacy within Polish culture to the survivors' voices, and allows such space for the thoughts and feelings of those who today make efforts to break the frame of violence and repression.

The present volume is a selection of some of the most incisive texts produced by scholars who contribute to this direction of historical thinking, representing various fields of research. It also includes an extraordinary poem by Jacek Podsiadło, translated and commented upon by Alissa Valles. The poem is based on documents related to the death in a post-war pogrom of Bela Gertner, Auschwitz survivor. The editors' intention is to make all these texts available for English-language readers, adding them to the significant volumes previously published in the Peter Lang series of Eastern European Culture, Politics and Societies, notably *Limit Experiences: A Study of Twentieth-Century Forms of Representation* by Jacek Leociak (2019), *Polish Literature and the Holocaust (1939–1968)* edited by Sławomir Buryła, Dorota Krawczyńska and Jacek Leociak (2020), *Pogrom Cries – Essays on Polish-Jewish History, 1939–1946* (2017) by Joanna Tokarska-Bakir and her *Jewish Fugitives in the Polish Countryside, 1939–1945* (2021), and others.

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Irena Grudzińska Gross, Konrad Matyjaszek

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2 Nachman Blumental, “Wstęp do badań nad ruchem oporu wśród Żydów pod okupacją niemiecką,” *Nasze Słowo*, III, 6–7, 38 (1948): 21.