

Polish Catholic publisher defends Holocaust book

by [Jonathan Luxmoore](#)

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Warsaw, February 18 (ENInews)--Poland's largest Roman Catholic publishing house has defended its decision to issue a controversial book, which accuses Poles of profiting from the Holocaust by betraying Jews to the Nazis and stealing their possessions.

"This book challenges our collective memory, especially our willingness to forget, and our sterile recollection and our vainglorious pride," said Henryk Wozniakowski, president of the Znak publishers in Krakow.

"The duty and crowning labour of memory is an unceasing caution that this memory does not slump into forgetfulness or empty repetition. This duty has a moral dimension, which involves offering justice to people, known and unknown," he said.

The lay Roman Catholic was reacting to angry reviews of "Golden Harvests" by Jan Gross, a Polish-born Professor of History at Princeton University in the US, which cites witness accounts that hundreds of Polish peasants dug up burial pits at the abandoned Treblinka and Belzec death camps in a hunt for Jewish gold and diamonds, and took sacks of ashes from the Auschwitz camp to search for valuables, while the country's Roman Catholic clergy remained silent and indifferent to the wartime mass murder.

In a statement, shown to ENI on 18 February, he said Znak and other Catholic groups in Poland, including the Krakow-based Tygodnik Powszechny weekly, saw it as their mission to "overcome prejudices and stereotypes," adding that he believed accusations that "Golden Harvests" was an "anti-Polish book" were "totally without sense and unreal."

"The book concentrates on the most appalling things that happened, on robbery and murder, and attempts to understand them against a background of parallel

atrocities elsewhere in Europe," the publisher said.

"It isn't the last word on this matter and doesn't aim to be. Its ambition is to bring these cruel facts, and reflections on them, out of the studies of historical researchers and into public awareness. This is the key reason why Znak is publishing it."

Poland's predominant Roman Catholic church has often faced accusations of tolerating anti-semitism during and after the Second World War, when most of the country's large Jewish minority were killed by German occupation forces, although Roman Catholics are also conspicuous among 6000 Poles since awarded medals for saving Jews by Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Institute.

"Golden Harvests" is one of a series of controversial Holocaust-related works by Gross, who emigrated from communist-ruled Poland after an anti-student crackdown in 1968. The historian's previous books, Neighbours (2001) and Fear (2006), also exposed anti-Jewish actions by Polish villagers, including a pogrom at Jedwabne in July 1941, when 340 Jews were burned alive in a barn.

However, the book was criticised by a leading Catholic historian, Jan Zaryn, who accused Gross of "cynically directing his work at ignoramuses" and undermining the "image of Poles."

The historian said most Roman Catholic convents had sheltered Jews during Poland's Nazi occupation, while the country's bishops had also saved the lives of Jews by converting them to Christianity.

"This author offers the world an insinuation - that our nation was particularly liable to murder, rob and inform on Jews because it was Catholic," Zaryn told the Catholic information agency KAI on 31 January. "In reality, there's no doubt it was Catholicism which provided the strongest motivation for rescuing Jews."

Meanwhile, the book was also condemned by the president of Poland's Roman Catholic Bishops Conference, Archbishop Jozef Michalik, who accused Gross of being motivated by "hatred of a nation which paid the supreme price for its help."

"Anyone wanting to write such a book objectively should say there were abuses, but also people who gave their lives for defending Jews," Michalik told his Przemysl diocese's Catholic radio on 12 February.

"It's dishonest to generalise, such as by saying you know a disreputable Pole or Jew, and therefore all Poles and Jews are disreputable."

Speaking at a Krakow press conference on 8 February, Znak's director, Danuta Skora, said the company had received messages of "shock and concern" that a Roman Catholic publisher was releasing the book, and was sorry to anyone "feeling insulted."

She added that Znak would donate the proceeds to charity and also hoped to publish a riposte. "I personally share the view that this is a tendentious book," Skora told journalists.

"The only real answer is another better book, and I hope this will be written and published. But recently conducted research also suggests anti-semitic attitudes haven't much diminished in Poland. If this book helps turn this around, it will be our success."