Wendy Lower, *The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2021), pp. 272.

by *Elissa Bemporad*

I must admit that when I first sat down to read Wendy Lower's new book, entitled *The Ravine: A Family, A Photograph, A Holocaust Massacre Revealed*, I was rather skeptical about the possibility of telling the unique story of destruction and suffering endured by the Jews in the occupied territories of the Soviet Union during Operation Barbarossa through one photograph. How could one photograph of one family being murdered by five perpetrators at the site of one of the hundreds of trenches and pits where as many as 1.5 million Jews were executed by the Germans and their collaborators capture the process and preserve the memory of what is now known as the "Holocaust by bullets"? Many of us who teach about the Holocaust in the territories of the USSR, purposefully steer away from using images of mass shooting operations when we explain the events that unfolded after the summer of 1941; or at least we tend to reduce to an absolute minimum the use of images in the fear that these might deflect the students from the work of the historian's craft, from the real labor of examining and understanding the perpetrators' motivations, the victims' voices, and the bystanders' reactions. In the digital era of visual mass production, I assumed that the focus on Holocaust photographs risks further dehumanizing the victims, demeaning their experience instead of shedding light on it.

In fact, Lower's book helped me rethink this position, as it provides us with some essential tools to effectively analyze the photos of the "Holocaust by bullets" with nuance and care, thereby enriching our understanding of the events. As it turns out, once I started reading the book, I was unable to put it down. This focus stemmed from two main reasons, or two challenging journeys through which Lower guides us, generating between author and reader a deep sense of intimacy. In the first journey, Lower walks us through the experience of genocide of the Jews in Ukraine, by zooming in on the members of one family (a mother and two children) from the small shtetl of Miropol, whose last moments before their death are captured in a photograph. Through a refined sensory analysis of the

photograph, Lower takes the readers by the hand, virtually allowing them to see, to feel, to hear, thus bringing us very close to witnessing the events.

The second journey is the scholar's investigative one. In this case too, Lower takes the readers by the hand so they can witness the obstinate search for truth in first person: she brings us through the different stages of the research journey, from the moment she held the photograph, through the many rounds of her tenacious quest for evidence, archival material, interviews, witness accounts, as she retraces the last moments of the victims, until the very end when together with her we concentrate on one detail of the photograph: the shoes on the brink of the ravine, the only memento of the murdered family. It truly takes a remarkable scholar and an exceptional writer to recreate these two experiences for the reader, the experience of the victims and the experience of the historian in her quest for evidence and truth.

I am deeply appreciative for this book also because Lower gives us the words to describe something that is indescribable, namely the unique experience of Jewish women in the context of the mass shooting operations in Ukraine. Especially when I teach about the female experience in the context of the "Holocaust by bullets" words sometimes fail me. How to convey through words the experience of those last moments, the journey to the pit, standing at the ravine, holding one's children by the hand? In the absence of the more than 400,000 Jewish men who left and joined the Soviet forces to fight at the front, Jewish women became responsible for children and elderly, and for the thousands of Jewish families killed in the ravines of Ukraine and Belarus. It was the mothers who usually carried the children, or the daughters who walked with their elderly parents, to the brink of the pit. When after the war a Jewish Red Army Sergeant reached the Great Synagogue of Kovel, in Ukraine, where Jews had inscribed farewell notes on the walls before being shot, he imagined his mother writing her last pleas and felt ashamed, "You went away and left us. You did not take us with you. You knew that this would happen to us and you left us alone."[1] "You" referred to fathers, brothers, and sons.

[1] Quoted in Arkadi Zeltser, *Unwelcome Memory: Holocaust Monuments in the Soviet Union* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2018), 216-217.

Even the great writer Vasily Grossman, also known as the Jewish Tolstoy of the Soviet Union for the power of his pen, could not bring himself to capture the victims' experience of the "Holocaust by bullets." As a special war correspondent for the Red Army's newspaper, Grossman witnessed almost all the major events on the Eastern front; he reported the brutality of the extermination process in his powerful account *The Hell of Treblinka*; and he captured the last moments in the gas chamber describing the harrowing experience of a Jewish woman in his masterful novel *Life and Fate*. But even though the Soviet Jewish experience of war was marked primarily by the mass shooting operations—and Grossman's own mother was murdered in one of them, carried out in the city of Berdychiv—the writer never used his literary skills to attempt to recreate the victims' experience.

One crucial question is missing from Lower's otherwise superb, and widely accessible, narrative of genocide. The unanswered question pertains to the nature of the region's culture of violence that preexisted World War II, and of how this might have weighed on the events of 1941-1943. After all, Miropol is located in the heart of Volhynia, an area which together with Podolia, was affected in the most brutal way by the pogroms of the Russian Civil War: from 1918-1921, in the wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, a wave of unprecedented anti-Jewish violence destroyed many Jewish communities. This violence, which resulted in the death of as many as 150,000 Jews, was perpetrated by the different armies involved in the civil conflict, in what have been described as military pogroms; but the violence was also the consequence of the messy and chaotic reality of neighbors killing neighbors.[2] The "Holocaust by bullets" was systematically carried out in these same territories, only twenty years after the genocidal violence unleashed by the Russian Civil War. The parents of those who chose to collaborate with the Germans in murdering Jews, witnessed, participated in, or conveyed the story of the violence carried out against Jews in 1919. The story of the scale and nature of the violence of the pogroms of the civil war was narrated and preserved as part of the family history, or local lore. The depths of human cruelty did not emerge in the context of World War II, but in the wake of World War I, when many Jewish

[2] On these pogroms see, for example, Elissa Bemporad, *Legacy of Blood: Jews, Pogroms, and Ritual Murder in the Lands of the Soviets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

families were murdered in their entirety, when rape was used as an instrument of ethnic cleansing, when Jewish homes were demolished and neighbors ripped the wooden planks from the floors and walls to use for firewood, when signs hanging from the telephone posts encouraged "to kill Jewish children because when they grow up they will become communists." In a way this violence, which featured neighbors killing neighbors, and also targeted, albeit not systematically, the family unit, lays the groundwork for what Lower describes, giving rise to practices and memories of violence that deeply affected the events of 1941-1942.

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