
BOOK REVIEWS

The Ravine: A Family, a Photograph, a Holocaust Massacre Revealed

By Wendy Lower

Houghton Mifflin Harcourt (Illustrated 2021, 258 pp.)

Reviewed by Leora Bilsky

Based on a photograph taken in 1941 in Miropol, Ukraine, Wendy Lower provides a micro-history of a mass murder in what is now Ukraine, Belarus and the Baltic states. She presents a panoramic narrative of the “Holocaust by bullets,” in which more than one million Jews were murdered in ravines and fields in the outskirts of towns and villages. The book analyzes one harrowing photo from the Holocaust, highlighting “the potential of discovery that exists if we dare to look closer,”¹ and asks us to ponder the role of photography in the Nazi genocide.

In 2009, Wendy Lower, a prominent Holocaust historian, received an anonymous photograph. All she knew was that it was taken on October 13, 1941, in Miropol, Ukraine. The photo features several men shooting a woman who, bent over, grasps the hand of a small barefoot boy, just before they tumble into a black ravine. The photo captures the killers in the act, where smoke from their gun obscures the face of the woman, serving as incontrovertible evidence of their participation in her murder. Lower explained that she wrote this book in order to “unmask the killers and restore some kind of life and dignity to the victims.”² The photo provides the author with a rare opportunity to overcome the gulf between historiography based on German archives and historiography based on Jewish testimonies, and to offer an “integrated history” of the Holocaust.³ Importantly, the photo captures the Ukrainians standing side by side with Germans, holding long rifles and shooting, thus shedding light on information that had been obscured during the Cold War, when access to the archives and testimonies of local people was not permitted. This book forms part of what is now known as “the material turn” in Holocaust studies, anticipating the death of the last witnesses, and turning to objects as potential witnesses.⁴

Lower’s goal is to identify each of the participants in the photo, to provide each with a name and tell their story. The power of photographs, as explained by

historian Jan Gross, lies in the fact that “[t]hey remind us most directly of human agency in what otherwise we would know only as a numerical phenomenon. Photographers literally put a face to people – sometimes victims and sometimes perpetrators.”⁵ The book weaves the individual stories of the participants in the photo into the larger history of the Holocaust in East Europe.

Lower’s book leads us to imagine a trial in which this photo would serve as evidence – can it rectify some of the injustice, the silencing of individuals? Can it put right past legal failures to judge and punish the people who perpetrated the Holocaust?

The pictured event (the massacre in Miropol’s ravine) was the basis for several trials and legal investigations over the years, against the German perpetrators, the Ukrainian collaborators, and even against the photographer of this very photograph, a Slovakian soldier. However, the photo itself was never entered as evidence in trial. In writing her book, Lower is not limited by any statute of limitations, as 80 years have passed, nor is she limited by territorial jurisdiction or rules of

-
1. Wendy Lower, *THE RAVINE: A FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH, A HOLOCAUST MASSACRE REVEALED* 20 (Apollo Press, 2021).
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 3. The term “integrated history” was suggested by Saul Friedlander, *THE YEARS OF EXTERMINATION: NAZI GERMANY AND THE JEWS, 1939-1945* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), calling to integrate the points of view of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims.
 4. For elaboration on the material turn and Holocaust literature, see Bozena Shallcross, *THE HOLOCAUST OBJECT IN POLISH AND POLISH-JEWISH CULTURE* (Ind. Univ. Press, 2011).
 5. Jan T. Gross, *GOLDEN HARVEST 65* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2012).

procedure. Writing after the Cold War, she gained access to archives and testimonies from Ukraine. As a result, she benefits from the advantage of new, scientific technologies, forensic archeology, digitation and big data technologies. Using the photo as belated material evidence, Lower addresses the failures of various legal systems.

Lower succeeds in identifying the German and Ukrainian individuals in the photo and transcribes excerpts from the legal proceedings against some of those pictured. We learn that Kurt Hoffmann, a German customs officer, reported a crime in Germany, in 1969, against two of his fellow custom officials, Erich Kuska and Hans Vogt, during the war, but only one was ever located (in Bremen, Germany). The case was closed in 1970 because the suspect denied having ever killed another human being, and no corroborating evidence could be found. Lower claims that this photo could have been used to conclusively refute the statements of the accused. She also notes that the German prosecution did not attempt to locate Jewish survivors, nor bring them forward as witnesses, since the court assumed that all had been murdered. The Soviet authorities in Ukraine, on the other hand, conducted two investigations into the murders at the ravine. The first, in 1944, amounted to vigilante justice by the Red Army, as being a member of the collaborating police was enough to sentence one to long-term imprisonment or summary execution. However, a second investigation was opened in 1986, based on forensic inquiry of the grounds in Miropol and the collection of eyewitness testimonies. We learn that the absence of this photo in the trial was not obstructive, since there were enough testimonies by local people, including by the sole Jewish survivor of the massacre, to allow for a conviction. The trial, however, did not concern the Holocaust, as the charges were for collaboration with the Fascist forces and treason of the Soviet Union, and no one spoke openly of the Nazi genocide of the Jews.⁶ Thus, we see that the Soviet trials also drew a blanket of silence over the Jewish victims, and the story of the “Holocaust by bullets” remained untold.

Lower is aware of the controversy that exists when it comes to over-reliance on photos, given that most were taken by Nazi perpetrators as “trophy photographs.” By contrast, lawyers have long treated such photos as incriminating documents produced by the perpetrators themselves, which have the potential to refute their coordinated lies and deceptions. Indeed, the Allied powers that held the International Military Tribunal

(IMT) in Nuremberg in 1945 sought to introduce film as an “eyewitness” in the trial. Lower writes that Dwight D. Eisenhower visited liberated concentration camps to make himself an eyewitness, and invited journalists and photographers to document the atrocities that were uncovered after the liberation of the camps. He ordered that visual evidence be collected to guard against forgetting and disbelief. “The photograph,” writes Lower, “was invoked as a force of truth and justice.”⁷ Accordingly, the IMT sought new procedures that would reflect the magnitude of the crimes, breaking with tradition by bringing a camera into the courtroom, both to film the trial and to overcome the weaknesses of human eyewitnesses by relying on the “objective” camera.⁸ As it happened, the Americans’ introduction of the film “Nazi Concentration Camps” as evidence in the IMT had mixed results. While prosecutor Robert Jackson⁹ treated the film as objective evidence that “speaks for itself,” in fact, the film was adjusted to the legal framework of “war crimes” and not “genocide,” a term that entered international law formally only after the 1948 Convention. It was hardly mentioned that the prisoners of war were Jewish.¹⁰ The film depicted Jewish victims as mute walking corpses, and the American prosecution preferred to rely on incriminating German documents, refusing to summon any Jewish victim to

6. *Supra* note 1, p. 165.

7. *Supra* note 1, p. 167.

8. For an analysis of the trial’s recording, see Christian Delage, “The Place of the Filmed Witness: From Nuremberg to the Khmer Rouge Trial,” 31:4 *CARDOZO L. REV.* 1087-1112 (2010).

9. In his opening speech Jackson said: “We will show you these concentration camps in motion pictures, just as the Allied armies found them when they arrived... Our proof will be disgusting, and you will say I have robbed you of your sleep ... I am one who received during this war most atrocities tales with suspicion and skepticism. But the proof here will be so overwhelming that I venture to predict not one word I have spoken will be denied.” 2 International Military Tribunal, “Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal,” 130 (Nuremberg: International Military Tribunal, 1947).

10. Lawrence Douglas, “Film as Witness: Screening Nazi Concentration Camps Before the Nuremberg Tribunal,” 453 *YALE L. J.* 105 (1995).

give testimony in trial.¹¹ Thus, the introduction of the film as witness contributed ironically to the continued silencing of the living survivors. In contrast, the Eichmann trial in 1961 relied on the testimony of more than 100 Holocaust survivors. Similarly, when it came to photos taken by the perpetrators, the prosecution in the Eichmann trial summoned Jewish victims forward to testify to their veracity, thus giving the final word to the survivors.¹²

Lower adopts Friedlander's approach of integrated history by devoting each chapter of the book to a different viewpoint: German perpetrators, Ukrainian collaborators, Slovakian photographer, Jewish victims, and even the grounds of Miropol that divulge their secrets. The most surprising chapter deals with the Slovakian photographer, Lubomir Skrovina. Following extensive research, Lower discovered that the picture was no ordinary trophy photo. Although Skrovina took the photo with full knowledge of his German supervisors, he later used it as an act of resistance – documenting the crimes by creating a photo-narrative and delivering the photos to the underground as proof of the mass murders.

The attempt to use the photo as conclusive evidence proved to be tricky. Ironically, the photo was used against the photographer himself in two separate legal proceedings, one by the Slovaks and the other by the Soviets to prove the exact opposite. In 1943, the Slovakian authorities investigated whether the photographer captured "illegal photos" during his army service (as evidence of resistance). Again in 1958, Soviet authorities investigated whether the photograph was evidence of the photographer's collaboration with the Nazis. While the investigations were eventually dropped, Lower concluded that ultimately, the photo indeed was an act of resistance,¹³ leaving her readers with the question of how to use similar photos taken by Nazi perpetrators and their collaborators. Lower mentions that Skrovina cut the faces of his fellow Slovaks out of the picture, leaving only images of Germans and Ukrainians in the shot, in his attempt to protect the Slovakian collaborators who were caught on his camera.

The most difficult challenge in treating the photo as a privileged witness to the Holocaust concerns the Jewish victims. Can the photo help to "save" them from their anonymous deaths? Can it give them back their voice? Notwithstanding Lower's impressive investigation, which leads her to the sole Jewish survivor of the massacre, Ludmila Blekham, the author is unable to conclusively identify the family in the photo. Upon closer examination of the photo, she discovers the shadow of another child,

near the lap of the mother, however even by the end of the book, we still do not know to whom the empty shoes in the photo belonged, nor the identities of the mother and her two children. Nevertheless, Lower recognizes the value of the photo as providing a concrete image of genocide – of the murder of entire families. She dedicates a chapter, "The Missing Missing," to this subject, and concludes, despairingly: "The missing as subjects of history will elude us. Try as I did, with all the advantages of modern technology and access, I could not identify the family with certainty."¹⁴

It is possible that Lower successfully uncovered all that can be revealed from this photo. Some parts of the photo, however, simply cannot be uncovered. Her heroic attempt to defy the Nazi atrocities that sought to obliterate an entire people, including all traces of these crimes, by identifying and telling the stories of each of the individuals in the photo, as well as the ravaged grounds, masks the historical, social, and psychological context that lies behind such crimes.

The individuating power of the photo obscures the collective aspects of the mass-killing. Genocide is a collective crime that requires not only the participation of many people over time, but also the fundamental transformation of social norms. How do ordinary people become complicit in mass murder? What makes them agree to pose for the camera as they shoot fellow human beings? Photos do not unmask these aspects of genocide.

I conclude with a reference to another book that also follows a single photo, yet is done through a different

11. Although three Jewish survivors gave testimonies in the IMT, they were summoned by the Russian and British, and encountered obstacles during their testimonies. The most famous Jewish witness, the acclaimed intellectual and Yiddish-poet Abraham Sutzkever, wanted to describe in more detail the genocide of the Jews, and especially the destruction and looting of cultural Jewish property in Vilna, but the USSR prosecutor refrained from asking questions on that. See Leora Bilsky, "Cultural Genocide and Restitution: The Early Wave of Jewish Cultural Restitution in the Aftermath of World War II," 27 *INT'L J. OF CULTURAL PROPERTY* 354-55 (2020).

12. Leora Bilsky and Rachel Auerbach "Re-imagining the Victim as 'EyeWitness' to the Nazi Camera," *JEWISH ÉMIGRÉ LAWYERS* (L. Bilsky & A. Weinke, eds., forthcoming).

13. *Supra* note 1, pp. 66-67.

14. *Supra* note 1, p. 151.

approach. *Golden Harvest*,¹⁵ written by historian Jan Tomasz Gross, shares much with Lower's. Both authors attempt to tell the history of the Holocaust "from below" and from "the margins." Focusing on a single photo helps both authors to reveal a suppressed social history about the role of local collaborators in the Holocaust. Unlike Lower, however, Gross does not try to identify each of the individuals captured in the photo. Instead, the photo is used to shed light on the collective character of the crime, and the way it so markedly transformed basic social norms. Taking a closer look at what first seems to be an ordinary photo of farmers at the end of a day of work in the fields reveals the memorialization of a gruesome occupation – digging up the death fields of Treblinka in search of gold teeth. The photo is a witness to the ordinariness, the mundanity of this event, to the fact that it had become a communal occupation, undertaken in broad daylight. Noticing a collection of skulls and bones placed at the foot of the "farmers" amid what seems to be an innocent photo – is what is so unsettling for us as readers. For Gross, the power of the photo lies in the way it captures the strangeness of the familiar, or, as Hannah Arendt termed it "the banality of evil." Likewise, philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman¹⁶ suggests that we must remain attuned to the lacunas in Holocaust photos, since the problem is not simply a technological one of obtaining more information. In the Miropol photo we see a bent woman, whose head is covered with smoke from the firing guns. Her body begins to dematerialize together with this smoke. Either, we can treat the smoke as a problem that limits our vision, or we can pause and reflect: what can this image tell us about the limits of representation of the Holocaust?

Rachel Auerbach, journalist, historian, and Holocaust survivor from the Warsaw ghetto, who wrote one of the very first books about Treblinka, describes a strange fog that she encountered when she arrived as part of a Polish delegation of inquiry to the grounds of Treblinka in November 1945. In her book, she emphasizes how fog should become an important part of representing the truth about Treblinka:

Where did this fog come from? Someone in our car asked. "There will always be a fog over this place." One of the Treblinka veterans replied. And I could sense that he was trying to say something, something important and profound. Something he had never said in his life before. But he couldn't say it.¹⁷

The fog literally and figuratively obscures – both the mother's face in the former sense, and the horrors of the Holocaust in the latter sense. ■

Leora Bilsky is the Benno Gitter Chair in Human Rights and Holocaust Research at the Tel Aviv University Faculty of Law and the Director of the Minerva Center for Human Rights at Tel Aviv University. The Israel Science Foundation supported this research under Grant no. 1163/19.

-
15. Jan Tomasz Gross, *GOLDEN HARVEST* (Oxford University Press, 2016).
 16. Georges Didi-Huberman, *IMAGES IN SPITE OF ALL: FOUR PHOTOGRAPHS FROM AUSCHWITZ* (University of Chicago Press, 2008).