

They do not care if they go down in history as barbarians

by Phyllis Chesler



Jewish Romanian deportees, murdered by their Romanian escorts in Transnistria; one of several massacres carried out during the "Holocaust by bullets" phase of extermination behind the Eastern Front.

My paternal grandmother, Perel, of blessed memory, was hacked to pieces by Cossacks in her tea shop in Lutsk. I am named after her. Perhaps a part of me remembers it all.

When he was eight years old, after miraculously surviving pogroms and civil wars, my father, of blessed memory, was finally rescued and brought to America from Ukraine, in the province of Volhynia, in which Odessa is located. This was during or just after WWI and long before the Holocaust. Thus,

in a sense, I am also a daughter of Lutsk, Ukraine, born of sheer luck.

This brings me to the story of the Romanian Holocaust-era massacre of Odessa's Jews, the subject of a demanding and masterful film on the subject.

Are those capable of violent, genocidal massacres also capable of acknowledging and memorializing their evil deeds? Are their descendants able to do so? And, does it matter? Does unearthing the truth about large-scale human evil bring the tortured and the dead back to life? Does it redeem their descendants (if they have any)? Equally important, does it have the power to limit future racist genocides? If not, what is the point of remembering? Is it only to desecrate one's great-grandparents? And is there really one "truth" about "complex" war-time realities or are there many?

Also: Why focus on small massacres, even genocides, when there are larger ones to contemplate? Why look at what happened to Jews in 1941 in Odessa or Jedwabne when millions more were industrially exterminated in German Nazi concentration camps? When the Soviets murdered more than a hundred million of their own people? When the Americans dropped atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Why even focus on the past when there are so many contemporary massacres taking place? Consider the late 20th century and early 21st century in Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Nigeria—not to mention the roving masters of terrorism such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, ISIS, Boko Haram? Isn't obsessively focusing on the distant past essentially diversionary? Shouldn't we instead be attending to the many ongoing massacres in our times that we are obliged to stop?

These are some of the questions (there are many more) that animate the Romanian film [to a real estate developer](#). Only

last year, the existing monument for the Poltava victims was defaced with “Heil Hitler” and “Death to the Kikes.”

Barbarians is a film of agonized conscience. It reminded me of the film [it was banned in some Polish towns](#)—as did Jan Gross’s [Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland](#) and his impeccable research was hotly challenged. Something similar happened to Anna Bikont who also published [Israel National News](#).