A French priest’s battle to document and preserve the killing fields of Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe

Murder before Auschwitz

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One bullet at a time

French priest finds graves, unearths stories from Europe’s killing fields
Father Patrick Desbois keeps all expression off his face when people tell him the most horrible things. If he let his feelings show, the people wouldn’t talk. And he wants them to talk: He asks them questions again and again, pinning down details. Where did this happen? What window were you watching from? Who was there? Listening without reacting is a core competency for a Catholic priest like Father Desbois. But in a confession booth, the priest’s face is shielded. Father Desbois interviews people in their homes, speaking face to face, if often through a translator.

“You have a choice,” he said last week. “You can express yourself or you can know the truth.”

The truth he seeks to uncover is a horrible one: the story of how more than two million people were murdered, one at a time, by Nazis and their Eastern European collaborators.

This Wednesday marks the 70th anniversary of the day that the Soviet army reached the gates of Auschwitz, the date selected for Holocaust commemoration by the United Nations. Yet the Red Army liberated only 7,500 Jews there; tens of thousands had been marched west by the Nazis to Bergen-Belsen. Most of them died along the way. In the 28 months that Auschwitz had operated as an extermination camp, more than one million Jews had been murdered there. Auschwitz and the other death camps, however, were not the beginning of the Nazi machinery of death – they were its culmination. First had come the Einsatzgruppen, literally “task forces” – squads of SS officers assigned to follow the advancing Nazi front and do clean up, by murdering local leaders, intellectuals, communists, and Jews of all ages.

In all, the Einsatzgruppen and other German units killed more than two million people, the vast majority Jews, one bullet at a time. In the Ukraine alone they killed more Jews than died at Auschwitz, including, as always, women and children. “Every Jew was killed by one person. Every victim saw his killer. Every killer saw his victim,” Father Desbois said.

During the war, Germans’ direct involvement in the murders proved too much for many of them to handle. Auschwitz and the other death camps were created to spare Nazis the emotional anguish of individualized murder. Better to transport millions of Jews by rail than to exterminate them one by one, as had been done in Lithuania, Belarus, Russia, Ukraine, and other Soviet republics – throughout Nazi territory in what today are seven different countries.

After the war, only 14 Einsatzgruppen leaders were tried at Nuremberg for crimes against humanity. However, several hundred German soldiers who were involved were prosecuted in Eastern and Western Germany for murder.

Now, Father Desbois works to collect testimony from eyewitnesses and to mark the exact location of mass graves. Last week he was in Englewood, describing his work at a parlor meeting to raise support for the organization he founded 10 years ago, “Yahad – In Unum.” Yahad means “together” in Hebrew, as does “in unum” in Latin, and the organization reflects cooperation between Father Desbois and his superiors in the French Catholic Church, and Jewish organizations in
France and America.

Patrick Desbois was born in 1955. This story begins, however, in 1942, with his grandfather who was arrested by the Germans after the invasion of France. He escaped from his prison camp — and then was reported to the Germans, who deported him to a disciplinary camp in the Ukrainian town of Rava-Ruska. Later, he would not speak of his wartime experience.

But, recalled Father Desbois, “when we said Rava-Ruska everyone was crying in the family. ‘I said, ‘Why do you not speak? Perhaps you did something bad? Perhaps you killed somebody?’ ‘He said: ‘No. I was in a camp. We had no food or drink. Outside was worse than that.' I thought: ‘What could be worse than that?’”

Patrick forgot the conversation as he grew up and became a math teacher and a priest. Then he organized a pilgrimage to Poland to meet Pope John Paul II. In Poland, he got lost. Trying to find his bearings, he heard the place again: “Rava–Ruska.” It was the name of a border crossing; the village where his grandfather had been imprisoned was only five miles past the border. “In one night, my life changed,” he said.

He was determined to learn what happened there. He had to know what happened.

The facts were not hard to discover. “In that village they shot 15,000 Jews and 18,000 Soviet prisoners,” Father Desbois said.

The villagers were not eager to remember. There was no memorial. And when he came to talk to witnesses, no one would talk. He knew, though, that they had known what had happened, as it happened.

“In my village” — in Burgundy — “we killed two Germans and everyone knows.”

Father Desbois didn’t accept silence as an answer.

“I came back three more times to the same village with the same question. I was the nudnick of the village,” he said.

Then came a change of regime. A new mayor was elected, who was not affiliated with the old Communist regime.

When Father Desbois returned, the new mayor took him to a small hamlet outside of town. Here, the mayor told him, was the mass grave of the last 1,500 Jews of Rava-Ruska.

And there was a surprise: a row of people, lining up to tell their stories. “They came one by one to speak because all were present at the killing. They are not historians. They are neighbors,” he said.

“One guy named Martin said ‘I was alone with my mother, keeping my cow. I saw a German arrive with a motorcycle,’” he said.

This was how it began: One German sent a week before the massacre, to find out how many Jews are still alive in the village. Once they knew how many people they plan to kill, the SS could calculate the volume of the mass grave.

The following week, five Germans arrived. They rounded up 30 Jews and forced them to dig the pit.

“Martin remembered everything,” Father Desbois said. “He said the Germans were worried during the digging. One was playing harmonica and he broke his harmonica. Later with a metal detector we found the piece of German harmonica in the ground.”

Martin remembered all the details, Father Desbois continued. How the Germans asked the villagers for two chickens, which the Germans grilled themselves and ate. Then they commanded the Jews to leave the pit, and the Germans entered it. They laid down explosives.

“After a moment the Germans said to the Jews, now you can go on digging, and the 30 Jews exploded,” Father Desbois said.
top of the just-shot corpses. Then that new layer of Jews was shot.

“In ‘41 they established this rule: One Jew, one bullet. If people were only injured they pushed them in and buried them alive. People say always that it took three days for a mass grave to die,” he said.

Father Desbois had finally learned some of what his grandfather wouldn’t tell him. “It could have been finished this day,” he said of this journey.

“The witnesses went away. I was alone with the mayor. He said: ‘Patrick, what I did for one village I can do for a hundred villages.’”

When he returned to Paris, he spoke with his superior in the church, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, who told him: “I know the story because my Polish Jewish family was killed the same way.” They set up Yahad – In Unum together with the World Jewish Congress.

Ten years later, the organization has a full-time staff of 25. It has interviewed 3,900 people and found 1,700 extermination sites, working in 10 countries, traveling as far east as Azerbaijan.

Yahad’s research starts with reports from the Soviet Union. “In 1944 the Soviets reopened all the mass graves, took pictures, and interviewed people,” Father Desbois said. The result was 16 million pages of documentation. Little was actually needed for the Nuremberg trials. Yahad has scanned and translated these archives.

It also has the typically meticulous German reports of the killings.

“Before we go to a village we have the German version and the Soviet version,” he said. “The Soviets, most of the time they have a sketch to say where are the mass graves. We know exactly where are the spots.”

The team stays in a hotel nearby and at 6 a.m. begins knocking on doors and asking questions. “Only positive questions, because people remember the KGB,” he said.

“You were here during the war? You were during the day of shooting of the Jews? Can you help us? Will you accept to speak in front of the camera?” team members ask.

“Ninety-nine percent of the people say yes,” he said.

The interviews focus on the specifics. Where did the Germans come from? Where did they park? Do you remember the color of their car? Who was the translator?

Detail by detail, the team exhumes the ghosts of memories and the memory of ghosts. Afterward, “most of them want to go to the mass grave,” he said.

There are three categories of witnesses, he said. The first are the neighbors who saw the shooting from their window. The second are the people who went out to see the slaughter. Most of them were teenagers then. Now they’re in their 80s. They climbed trees to get a better view. They borrowed binoculars from the Germans.

The third category are the people the Germans requisitioned to assist. There were farmers who dug the mass grave. Farmers who carried Jews in their carts. Farmers who pulled the gold teeth from Jews before they were shot. In all, there were 50 categories of jobs for which local residents were used.

And also in that third category – the group with at least some blood on their hands – are those who pulled the trigger.

One time, Father Desbois said, a man said, “I am in a Jewish house. If you want to see a Jewish house, come.”

Could the cameraman film?

“Yes, yes.”

Father Desbois asked how he got the house. The man told of his family coming to the house when he was a teenager, and seeing bullet-ridden bodies lying on the floor.

What did he do with the corpses? “I don’t remember. I buried them far away,” he said.

It sounded strange to Father Desbois. A woman arrived and told him “Father, he’s lying. Come with me into his garden.”

One yard behind the door, she stood and said: “The corpses are under my feet.”
The man said: “She’s telling the truth.”
Father Desbois recalled: “He began with a pen to write on the wall of his house the list of Jews buried in his garden.”

“You have to show nothing,” said Father Desbois, describing his emotional response, and how much of it he is prepared to reveal to the interviewees. “As if it is normal to have a mass grave of Jews in your garden and your parents killed them. We need to know the truth and where are the corpses. If they were working with the Gestapo they are my best witnesses.

“People speak. Our particularity is that we are not Jews. They know I’m a priest. They know I would not call the police. 

“I recently interviewed a killer. He was 104 year old. His memory was as good as mine. He was in a military unit of Romanians. He himself killed 220 Jews. I asked him, ‘Are you sure you remember more than 200 Jews?’ He said, ‘I got a free box of cartridges when I killed 100.’”

He allows himself to show no emotion because “you can express yourself – or you can know the truth. You have to be more like playing poker. A family of killers I have interviewed three times still does not know my position.

“This is the challenge of the organization. We want to know the truth, to find the last mass grave.”

Once a mass grave is located, then what should happen next?
The designs were selected describing his emotional response, and how much of it he is prepared to reveal to the interviewees. “As if it is normal to have a mass grave of Jews in your garden and your parents killed them. We need to know the truth and where are the corpses. If they were working with the Gestapo they are my best witnesses.

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It is a problem so vast — there are so many graves – that when the Iron Curtain fell and Eastern Europe opened up, Jewish organizations shied away from it.

“Before Patrick undertook his work, many people understood that there was an advantage to not be confronted with this problem, because it’s an overwhelming one,” said Rabbi Andrew Baker, director of international Jewish affairs for the American Jewish Committee. “He forced many of us to confront a problem that in the past people didn’t want to confront.”

Given the choice between spending money to aid hungry elderly Holocaust survivors and memorializing the graves in Europe’s killing fields, the Jewish community chose the former.

The American Jewish Committee has gotten involved.
In Ukraine, they’ve started a pilot project “of taking Patrick’s data and memorializing and protecting sites.” Five sites are involved at this stage. The AJC has sponsored a design competition with local architects. “The idea is to have something that is modest, not expensive, that would make it clear that it’s a special site and to ensure that the full area of the mass grave is demarcated and has proper memorial language,” he said.

Every time Yahad finds a grave, the organization transmits the GPS coordinates to the American Jewish Committee. “In most cases where we find a mass grave, we hide it,” Father Desbois said. “Often mass graves are opened by neighbors, hoping to find gold.”

Preserving the graves requires marking them and then covering them over with concrete to stop grave robberies. Sometimes, if they are not marked, the graves simply are destroyed to make room for construction. “In a city like Kiev they built a bank over a mass grave,” he said. “They found bones and threw them away.”

Why is this project important for Father Desbois? “We can’t accept that we build modernity on the mass graves of Jews and gypsies,” he said. “If we accept it, what can we say to Rwanda and Darfur and Syria?”

Another motivation is religious.
“I worked a lot with religious Jews. They say these are tradikim, righteous martyrs. “They are tradikim buried like animals. It is an attack on the Jewish religion and the Christian religion. In the beginning of the Bible, the first question of God is to Cain: ‘Where is your brother?’ “Since I was a child, I hear the question, ‘Where is your Jewish brother?’ coming from Russia, from the Ukraine, from Moldova.

“He is under the bushes like an animal. We cannot build a modern world, a modern country, and ask two million Abels to keep silent,” he said.