

7. The Holocaust by Bullets



*A German policeman aims his rifle
at a woman and her child, Ivangorod, Ukraine, 1942.*

Photo Credit: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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Father Patrick Desbois

Patrick Desbois (France) is a Catholic priest and President of the association Yahad-In Unum. He also serves as Director of the Episcopal Committee for Catholic-Judeo Relations, under the auspices of the French Conference of Bishops. The grandson of a French prisoner held in the Rawa Ruska Nazi prison camp on the Poland-Ukraine border during the Second World War, Father Desbois began in 2004 to investigate the story of the Jewish, Roma and other victims murdered in Eastern Europe during the Second World War by the Nazi mobile killing units, the Einsatzgruppen, and their allies.

Father Desbois has devoted his life to researching the Holocaust, fighting anti-Semitism, and furthering relations between Catholics and Jews. The organisation he co-founded in 2004, Yahad-In Unum, sends research teams to Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Poland to interview the aging local residents who witnessed the mass murders of their neighbours. In 2008, he published the book *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*. The Jewish Book Council awarded the book the 2008 National Jewish Book Award. Father Desbois has received recognition around the world for his work with Yahad-In Unum.

The Holocaust by Bullets

by *Father Patrick Desbois*

Catholic priest and President of the association "Yahad-In Unum"

The old man gazes at the young woman standing before him in the road that runs through his rural Ukrainian village. He appears unsurprised by her question. "Yes, I lived here during the war", he says. "Yes, I can tell you what happened here."

And so begins another journey back in time. It is a journey of memories as dark as the shadows in the woods nearby, of a day almost 70 years ago when the old man, then a 12-year-old boy, watched as his neighbours were shot and buried in a mass grave at the edge of his village. Another interview with another witness to the "Holocaust by Bullets".

In July 1942, my grandfather, Claudius Desbois, was deported as a French prisoner to a German camp of Soviet prisoners in Ukraine. He returned home silent. Much later, I came to understand that he had been held in a region where many Jews had lived prior to the war and that, as a prisoner, day after day, he had seen Jews being shot.

At the end of the 1990's, I returned to Rawa-Ruska, Ukraine, the town of the camp in which my grandfather had been imprisoned, to look for the mass graves of the Jews who had been killed. Unexpectedly, the mayor of the town gathered 50 people who had witnessed the shootings, and brought me to the site of the mass grave to listen to their testimony about the last 1,500 Jews of Rawa-Ruska. All at once, I realised that the shootings in Ukraine had been carried out

in public and witnessed by Ukrainian people who now wanted to speak to let us know the truth. The same evening, I was alone in the forest with the mayor. He told me, "Patrick, what I did for you in one village, I can do for 100 villages." I will never know why he said that. And I will never know why I said, "Yes".

So was born the organisation "Yahad-In Unum", the name formed by the words in Hebrew and Latin for "together". Or, as the late Cardinal Lustiger said, "We will not say 'unum', because we are not 'unum' Catholic and Jews but we are 'in unum' and 'unum' is God".

Before the death camps of Auschwitz, Treblinka and Sobibor, the Nazis were already at work in their quest to annihilate the Jews and Roma of Europe in the territory of the former Soviet Union. In the wake of the Third Reich's invading armies came the *Einsatzgruppen*, mobile killing squads moving from village to village to carry out mass shootings of Jews, Roma and other civilian victims of Hitler's regime. The victims, some not yet dead, were buried in pits and ditches.

Unlike the secrecy surrounding the camps, however, the genocide carried out in the towns and villages of Eastern Europe occurred in full public view, witnessed by the victims' neighbours. These people, farmers or woodsmen, often live today in the same village where, as children, adolescents or young adults, they saw the shootings occur, sometimes requisitioned by the killers and forced to perform some task: to gather; to drive; to dig.

Unlike the Holocaust of the camps, the bodies of the victims in the East were not burned. "Operation 1005", a massive effort by the Nazis to conceal their crime by exhuming the mass graves and burning the corpses was cut short by the faster than expected advance of the counterattacking Red Army. The aging witnesses whom we meet in Eastern Europe know where the bodies are buried. They lead us through fields or forests to the mass grave sites, often overgrown with weeds and rarely marked. "There", they will say, pointing at the slight depression in the ground; "that is where the Jews are buried".

For the past nine years, teams of mainly young people from Yahad-In Unum have travelled the back roads of Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Poland videotaping interviews with non-Jewish eyewitnesses to shed new light on the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. Our focus is identifying the mass grave sites of the genocide – we are not hunting for the killers or seeking to assign culpability. Instead, we are looking for the victims, too often cast aside and forgotten in the historical reconstruction of events. We patiently pull on the threads of memory of the witnesses to establish crime scenes and identify the precise locations of the mass graves – while we still can.

We are indeed in a race against time to interview as many of these witnesses, most today in their 80's or 90's, before they and their memories are gone. To date, Yahad teams have covered approximately 60-70 per cent of Ukraine, identifying more than 650 mass grave sites, many previously unknown, that contain the remains of more than 1 million victims. Videotapes of our interviews with more than 1,850 witnesses can be seen at Yahad's headquarters in Paris, at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington and soon online at www.yahadinunum.org.

The stories recounted by the witnesses during the interviews are sometimes horrible beyond imagining. Yet, the interviewer continues asking the questions. When the interview is concluded, the team moves off to meet another witness. Once the history and mass grave sites of a village are confirmed, the search continues in the next village. This year, Yahad teams will make 15 two-week research trips, interviewing 40-50 new witnesses each trip.

Sometimes I'm asked the question, "But why do you do it, Father?" It is an understandable question. The Holocaust is not something that most of us are inclined to think about when we wake

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up in the morning. It is unpleasant, tragic, frightening, revolting. There is so much to live for, why focus on the terrible deaths that happened so long ago?

Part of the response is found in the reaction of the old people whom we meet. "What has taken you so long to come?" they sometimes ask. It is as if they have been expecting us. The events that they witnessed have remained locked inside them – many of them tell us that it is the first time they have ever spoken of these events. For the first time, the voices of those who can confirm the facts first-hand are being heard, bringing another perspective to the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and adding a powerful element to the body of evidence. Their memories oftentimes fill in the details we have gleaned from archival accounts of Soviet and German war crimes investigations, details that would otherwise soon be lost forever.

They are details about real people. The Jews, Roma and others whose existence the Nazis sought to erase from the earth, were thrown like animals into anonymous mass graves that are disappearing beneath the grass and trees. It has been said that these victims suffered death twice, the first time as human beings, murdered by the Nazis and their allies, the second time as dead persons forgotten by the world. The Russian proverb that a war is not over until the dead are buried spurs us on. Our work seeks to preserve the memory of the lives of these people and to ensure that they are not forgotten. By identifying the mass graves, we enable dignity and respect to be restored to the victims and the memory of their existence, re-integrating them with humanity.

Yahad's work is also about education, about increasing awareness and understanding of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe and building human resistance against genocide. The fact that the Holocaust by bullets occurred in plain view of everyone, that the evidence of the atrocities exists not somewhere far removed from our daily lives but rather, "just behind this wall" and that genocide, sadly, did not end with the Nazis, should serve as a warning that it is an ever-present danger requiring vigilance, assertive action and

the power of conscience, to prevent it. Locating the mass graves also is important for humankind as a whole: if military cemeteries are a lesson against war, mass graves are a lesson against genocide. A failure to act, a failure to remember, provides the next mass murderer with a license to commit genocide.

Yahad's educational efforts now extend around the world. In the past year, Yahad has taken its message to Latin America, Asia and Australia. While it may seem that these audiences are far-removed from the Holocaust in the camps and fields of Europe, their interest and engagement with the subject speaks to universally shared values. They remind us that the history and lessons of the Holocaust are not unique to a certain part of the world. Yahad seeks to connect to the suffering experienced in every country; in speaking to students at 14 schools in Hong Kong earlier this year, I began each presentation by recalling the horrors of Nanking.

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Whether investigating, researching, educating, working to remember the victims or taking a stand against genocide, those who become involved in Yahad's work find a purpose that is self-propelling. The aging witnesses who are waiting for our teams when we come to interview them seem to understand this. And I am never asked the "Why?" question by anyone who has sat listening to a witness tell what happened the day the Germans arrived.

After thousands of kilometers of travel, through Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Poland, it seems clear to me that genocide is a temptation of humanity. It is not only a national question; it is a human one. In Eastern Europe, Yahad continues its work to find each of the victims: Jews, Roma, Soviet prisoners, partisans... A modern Europe cannot be built on top of thousands of mass graves of the unknown victims of genocide.

After a war, there is usually a military cemetery. After genocide, there is no cemetery. If we succeed in burying correctly and protecting the mass graves of each of the victims of the genocide which occurred on the territory of Europe, it will make a stronger Europe, a Europe that can say we are not predators, we are noble nations, and we will have made our best attempt to help restore the dignity and honour to those who have until now been forgotten.

Burying the victims and protecting the mass graves is the greatest barrier we can build against future genocide. Himmler said often, "Who remembers the genocide of the Armenians? Nobody." It must never be said anywhere that no one remembers the victims of the Holocaust. Europe is ready to stand, not above, but before, the mass graves of the victims of the genocide that occurred on our territory, and to say to the world, "Here we are, the victims and the living, and together, we say, "it is time to stop."

Please see page 86 for discussion questions



Father Patrick Desbois during one of his first research trips to Moldova.

Photo Credit: Yahad-In Unum Photo Archives



Yahad found cartridges used by the Nazis to murder 1,400 Jews. Motol, Belarus.

Photo Credit: Nicolas Tkatchouk/Yahad-In Unum Photo Archives

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Discussion questions

1. During the Holocaust, how did the Nazis' policy toward Jews and other minorities in Eastern Europe differ from their policy in Western Europe?
2. Why does Father Desbois state that "the victims in Eastern Europe suffered twice"?
3. Unlike Poland or Germany, where the Holocaust remains visible through symbols of extermination camps, the horrors of the war remained untold throughout most of Eastern Europe. Why do you think this was the case?
4. Father Desbois spent the last ten years interviewing witnesses and identifying mass graves in Eastern Europe. Why do you think this research is important?
5. How can understanding of the Holocaust as it took place in Eastern Europe help foster genocide awareness and education in other parts of the world?