

YAHAD IN UNUM

“SEARCH FOR THE MASS GRAVES OF THE JEWISH VICTIMS OF THE *EINSATZGRUPPEN* IN THE WESTERN AND EASTERN REGIONS OF UKRAINE AND THE REGISTRATION OF EYEWITNESSES TO THE EXECUTIONS”

Note: This overview of Father Desbois’s work was prepared by his organization, Yahad In Unum, for a 2006 grant proposal.

Introduction

The project, “Search for the Mass Graves of the Jewish Victims of the *Einsatzgruppen* in the Western and Eastern Regions of the Ukraine and the Registration of Eyewitnesses to the Executions” (*Recherches des fosses communes des victimes juives des Einsatzgruppen en Ukraine de l'Ouest et de l'Est et enregistrement des témoins ayant assisté aux exécutions*) began in 2000 as a private initiative of Father Patrick Desbois whose grandfather was deported during the Second World War to a German camp for Soviet POWs located in today’s Ukraine. During the course of restoring the camp memorial, Father Desbois’ identified dozens of sites of mass executions and the Jewish mass graves they contain in the vicinity of the former POW camp.

The project has grown dramatically in the six years since. With the encouragement of several French Cardinals and Dr. Israel Singer, Chairman of the World Jewish Congress, Father Desbois in 2004 founded the organization Yahad In Unum whose mission is to further understanding and cooperation between Catholics and Jews. Yahad In Unum is currently engaged in an ambitious, multi-year effort to identify and document all of the sites of Jewish mass executions perpetrated by Nazi mobile killing units in the Eastern and Western Ukraine during the Second World War. Yahad In Unum systematically locates and verifies the physical location of the sites, collects ballistic evidence, and records interviews on digital video with local non-Jewish eyewitnesses who still live in the surrounding villages. This evidence and documentation is then registered and

processed with the aim to make it available to major Holocaust institutions for research and exhibition purposes.

This grant proposal submitted for consideration by the Claims Conference includes a historical background overview, explains the progress made by Yahad In Unum in this complex documentation effort, and provides a listing of project work that still needs to be done together with a cost outline. Yahad In Unum is requesting financial support from the Claims Conference in the amount of 100,000 USD in order to be able to continue this important project.

Historical Background

Einsatzgruppen (Nazi mobile killing units) were squads of German SS and police personnel. Under command of Security Police (*Sipo*) and Security Service (*SD*) officers, the Nazi mobile killing units were responsible for the murder of those perceived to be racial or political enemies found behind the front lines in the occupied Soviet Union. It is generally believed that the systematic killing of Jews in the occupied Soviet Union by Nazi mobile killing units and Order Police (*Ordnungspolizei*) battalions was the first step of the Nazi program to murder all of the European Jews.

During the invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, the Nazi mobile killing units followed the German army as it advanced deep into Soviet territory. The Nazi mobile killing units, often drawing on local support, carried out mass-murder operations. In contrast to the process of deporting Jews from ghettos to camps, *Einsatzgruppen* came directly to the home communities of Jews and massacred them. Wherever the Nazi mobile killing units went, they shot all Jewish men, women, and children, without regard for age or sex, and buried them in mass graves. By the spring of 1943, the *Einsatzgruppen* and Order Police battalions had killed over a million Jews.

The mass executions of Jews in the Ukraine took place in open view of and often with the assistance of the local non-Jewish population. Jews were either shot by the Nazi mobile killing units in ditches dug for this particular purpose, in granaries, in irrigation wells, in

anti-tank ditches, in slaughterhouses, or they were pushed to their deaths from high cliffs. The scale of the mass murder is stunning: Yahad In Unum has identified and documented relatively small ditches with less than one-thousand victims, mid-sized ditches holding up to ten-thousand victims, and large sites of extermination with over ten-thousand victims.

Project Description and Methodology

As stated above, the primary mission of the project is to identify and document the sites of mass executions in the Ukraine and the Jewish mass graves that they contain, while securing tangible proof of the genocide committed by the Nazis in the Western and Eastern regions of the Ukraine. As the project has grown in scope over the years, a more and more structured and systematic approach was developed. Yahad In Unum now employs a staff of experts and uses a variety of investigative techniques in its research and documentation work.

The project and its components can be described as follows:

a. Archival research

Yahad In Unum employs two researchers in Germany who systematically research original archival documentation from war crimes trials in German archives looking for testimonies of former *Einsatzgruppen* policemen. This research provides information about what happened and when from the perspective of the perpetrators. However, rarely is there information about specific places and villages in the testimonies. In order to identify the exact location of sites of mass executions, one has to consult Ukrainian eyewitnesses who are still alive today. This becomes increasingly important as one travels east because archival source information on the execution of Jews in Eastern Ukraine is scarce to non-existent.

The archival research in German archives is slow and costly because the archival material has not been microfilmed or digitized and is available only in original format, and the archives charge 0.50 Euro per photocopied page.

At the invitation of the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Father Desbois and a core staff of researchers visited Washington in December 2005 to conduct archival research on the Holocaust in the Ukraine in the Museum's Archives and to engage in a series of discussions regarding the resurgence of antisemitism in Europe. The Museum has recently microfilmed and acquired hitherto inaccessible archival records of various Jewish communities in the Ukraine that are helpful in the project's mission. Follow-up activity will include scholarly work on the Museum's archives from Ukraine to provide documentary underpinning to the video testimonies of the Ukrainian eyewitnesses, which will then be provided, together with artifact evidence, to the Museum and other major institutions of Holocaust research.

b. Site visits and the recording of eyewitness testimony

The vast majority of mass executions took place in plain view of the local Ukrainian population. As part of Yahad In Unum's effort to secure proof of the massacres and document the genocide, Father Desbois and a team of experts - composed of two translators, a professional photographer, a professional cameraman, a ballistics specialist, and a local driver/body guard - regularly travel through the Ukrainian countryside in order to identify eyewitnesses to the genocide who are still alive today. Eyewitness statements are then recorded for posterity on digital video.

Most of the eyewitnesses alive today are around 75 years of age and still live in their ancestral villages near the places of execution. At the time the mass executions took place the eyewitnesses were either curious children or adolescents who were following the columns of Jews as they were being marched to the sites of execution, were perched on trees to see what was going on, were observing nearby executions from their houses,

were guarding cattle near the place of execution, or they were initially swept up by the Nazis together with the Jewish population.

In other cases the Nazis used young adolescents from the local population as manpower for transporting the Jewish inhabitants from a village to the place of execution; digging ditches and covering the bodies with earth; transporting the dead bodies of Jews who had been murdered in the villages during the round up to be dumped into the mass grave at the execution site; and collecting and hauling the clothes of the murdered Jews from the execution site.

Yahad In Unum uses a direct and personal approach in its effort to collect eyewitness testimony. As the research team arrives at a village, the older people encountered in the village are informed by Father Desbois of the purpose of his visit and are asked whether there is anyone who could be of help in providing personal testimony. Quite often a person can be found who is willing to provide testimony and/or take the team to the eyewitnesses. If this is not the case, the Ukrainian team members go from door to door in order to find who was present at the times that the executions took place in the region. Once an eyewitness is found an interview is recorded on digital video while in the meantime the rest of the team is looking for other witnesses. As a general rule, Yahad In Unum accepts the existence of an heretofore unknown place of execution only when at least three eyewitnesses can be identified who independently certify that they also saw the execution take place at that site.

Yahad In Unum has found that the local parishes and the Roman Catholic or Greek Catholic (Uniates) priests are also helpful in identifying eyewitnesses. Local priests have helped by making appeals to the congregation during mass. In the eastern region of Ukraine there exist no or very few churches. In the villages of this area it is the main store or the local school that serves as the community's meeting place. So it is by talking to the storeowner or teacher that Yahad In Unum identifies eyewitnesses in these places. The fact that Father Desbois had a grandfather interned in a German camp for Soviet POWs has proven very important in earning the trust of the local population.

An average of 30 to 35 witnesses are recorded in a 17 day travel period. While experience has shown that most eyewitnesses are willing and often relieved by the opportunity to talk about what they saw, in some villages Yahad In Unum is met with a stubborn silence and a general refusal to cooperate. The research team has found that this is usually a telltale sign that a particular village played an active part in the war crimes perpetrated against its Jewish population, such as during a pogrom or by rounding up the Jewish inhabitants on behalf of the Nazis. In these cases, Yahad In Unum invests a few more days in order to coax information out of the village's inhabitants.

c. Identification of Jewish mass graves and the retrieval of ballistic evidence

In cases where the eyewitnesses are unsure of the precise location of a Jewish mass grave, test digging is done in a two square meter area. Oftentimes, several of these test diggings are required in order to find the location of a mass grave. In one particular instance, eighteen test digs were needed. The Nazis buried their victims at a depth of at least three meters, which makes the identification more difficult. According to the eyewitness testimonies, the digging of the ditches took an average of five hours and was done by peasants who arrived very early in the morning. The depth of the mass graves also explains why it was exceedingly rare for any survivors of the shooting to escape from the mass grave after it was covered with dirt and the Nazi mobile killing units had moved on.

Once the first bodies are encountered they are left in situ and not disturbed. The bodies are photographed as evidence and any bullets and other ballistic evidence retrieved from the site before the grave is covered up and camouflaged in order not to allow graverobbers to loot and desecrate it. Yahad In Unum's purpose in identifying and excavating a portion of the mass graves is to document the evidence, provide proof of the mass grave's existence, and mark the site by GPS. Yahad In Unum has obtained the authorization for this part of the work from the Lubawitscher rabbis of Ukraine.

The presence of German cartridges in a mass grave is important evidence that the mass murder was perpetrated by the Nazi mobile killing units. It is clear from the archival testimony in the German archives that in the majority of cases the Nazis did not collect the spent cartridges after the carnage. With the support of a Ukrainian ballistics specialist, Yahad In Unum has identified a great quantity of German cartridges, each having its own mark with original date of fabrication. To date, about 7,000 cartridges have been collected and registered. The cartridges are preserved and labeled as well as marked with the GPS coordinates of where they were found. During the final stage of the project, the cartridges will all be reproduced in a 3D computer program.

While some German cartridges were made from iron, the majority are made out of copper. Copper cartridges are better preserved and can be identified and dated with precision. These cartridges originated from German-made pistols, Mauser guns, and machine guns. Yahad In Unum has also found many magazines for Mauser guns and machine guns. These cartridges and magazines provide the identity proof that the perpetrators were indeed Nazi mobile killing units and not Soviet forces, as some may want the public believe. It is important to note that not a single Russian-made cartridge has been found at the execution sites in the Ukraine.

d. Project status report (Western and Eastern Ukraine)

In Western Ukraine, in the former *Generalgouvernement*, the research is nearing completion with only two large regions left unexplored. The *Generalgouvernement*, which was to serve the Nazis as a “racial dumping ground” and an endless supply of slave labor, had a wealth of Jewish communities, such as in Lviv, Tarnopol, Ivano-Frankiv, and the region of Transcarpathia. Yahad In Unum is researching the fates of Jews from these major communities and is currently identifying and documenting Jewish mass graves surrounding the city of Kiev and at Babi Yar.

In Eastern Ukraine, research in the Crimea region was completed, an area which before the Holocaust contained over one-hundred Jewish farms within an autonomous Jewish

administration. Mass graves were also found and identified in the Kherson region in the North of Crimea. In this region, it appears that the majority of the Jews were not evacuated by the retreating Soviet forces and were subsequently murdered by the advancing Germans by being thrown into irrigation wells.

In Crimea, Yahad In Unum has also been successful in locating the mass graves of Krimchaks, Jewish Tartars who were nearly exterminated by the Nazis, and the research team has registered and interviewed a number of Krimchak survivors.

In the East, the research team also found many eyewitnesses of the testing of the gas vans by the Nazis. These eyewitnesses consist of the once young women and children who had remained behind in the villages while the men had been drafted into the Red Army. In the region of Kherson, Ukrainian eyewitnesses have testified that they saw the Nazis load the gas vans with Jewish children while their parents and the other adults were marched out of town, to be shot at the execution sites. The research team has also encountered Krimchak survivors who testified that they saw Jews exit a gas van gasping for air and being summarily shot by Nazi machine gunners.

e. Evaluation, registration, and future use of evidentiary material and findings

Based on the progress made so far, Yahad In Unum estimates that the research team will be able to cover all of the remaining regions in the Ukraine in terms of the systematic identification of execution sites and the collection and transfer of evidentiary materials, including cartridges and eyewitness testimony, by the end of 2008. The recording of testimonies is an especially urgent task before the eyewitness generation passes away and its collective memory is lost.

The cartridges and guns recovered from the mass graves have to be inventoried in the Ukraine and transferred to France in order to be properly processed and stored. So far, about 7,000 cartridges have been collected and transferred but several more trips are required in order to collect more artifacts and ship them to France. The CDJC in Paris is

planning to use some of the artifacts in a special exhibition currently being planned, which is tentatively named “*Kaddish pour les Juifs d’Ukraine*” (“Kaddish for the Ukrainian Jews”). This three month exhibit, funded by the *Memorial pour la Memoire de la Shoah*, will document the different phases of the extermination of the Jews in rural Ukraine.

In addition to the exhibition, Father Patrick Desbois, together with historian Edouard Husson and journalist Jean-Francois Bodin, are planning to publish through the publishing house Calmann Levy a book on the extermination of Ukrainian Jewry based on the research findings of the project. The book is tentatively titled “*La Shoah Oubliee (Extermination des Juifs d’Ukraine)*.”

Conclusion

The Holocaust in the Ukraine is a chapter of the destruction of the Jews for which relatively little forensic and testimonial documentation exists. The window of opportunity to collect the evidence of this aspect of the Holocaust is rapidly closing. Without eyewitness testimony it will be impossible to identify the location of a majority of the Jewish mass graves and collect the evidence of the war crimes committed by the Nazi mobile killing units.