

Backstory: A priest's crusade on Holocaust

Patrick Desbois is a conscience and chronicler of little-known massacre of Jews in Ukraine.

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The confessions that Father Patrick Desbois receives don't come from his parishioners. They are not made behind closed doors. They don't even come from his countrymen. The words the French priest hears are the unburdening of villagers from Ukraine - the last witnesses to the mass killing of Jews in a little-known part of the Holocaust more than 60 years ago.

He recounts one story - just one of a thousand he's heard - of a Ukrainian woman who was ordered by Nazi soldiers to cook them dinner. As they ate, the 25 Germans went out in pairs to kill Jews. By the time the meal was over, they had shot 1,200. It was the first time the woman had ever told the story. "These people want absolutely to speak before they die," says Father Desbois of the bystanders. "They want to say the truth."

Father Patrick Desbois has become one of the world's foremost chroniclers of what the French call the *Shoah par Balles* - the Holocaust of bullets. Though neither Jewish nor Ukrainian, he spends half his year combing the poverty-stricken landscape of Ukraine to document the annihilation of tens of thousands of Jews at the hands of traveling bands of Nazis called the *Einsatzgruppen*.

It is a self-appointed task that led the Israeli newspaper Haaretz to decree him "Patrick the Saint." Embarrassed, Desbois calls the characterization a *midrash* - Hebrew for exaggeration.

The priest, who has devoted his clerical life to fighting anti-Semitism, is uncovering, village by village, unmarked mass graves from the Holocaust era. Here the Jews were shot, one by one, mother in front of child, child in front of father.

The "Holocaust of bullets" was every bit as brutal as the extermination of Jews by gas chamber, starvation, and other means at Auschwitz and elsewhere in Europe. Yet the depth and details of the tragedy in Ukraine have only recently surfaced.

In the local villages, teenagers and children were forced to help dig graves, pull gold teeth from the mouths of neighbors, and take piles of clothes away as their friends shivered, awaiting death. These children, now old men and women, have never been asked about what they saw, what they were forced to see. Never, that is, until they meet a humble priest walking through their woods in his clerical collar.

"This is very, very important," says Edouard Husson, a historian at the Sorbonne in Paris and a project consultant. The originality of Desbois's work is that "he was the first to have the idea to talk to the Ukrainian witnesses - the bystanders."

In his early 20s, as he crept toward a life of faith, Desbois was dogged by a question: "What does God want me to do?" Little did he know then, in the mid-1970s, that he would eventually answer that for himself by becoming a human bridge between the modern Jewish world and the Catholic Church and a major conduit through which the Holocaust would be remembered.

Desbois's journey to the woods of Ukraine is rooted in an unusual faith, an expansive humanity, and a personal tie. He was born in Burgundy, France, in 1955 to a family deeply affected by the German occupation. Two of his cousins were deported by the Nazis. His grandfather, like 25,000 other French soldiers, was held at a camp on the border of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. "We felt ourselves to be in the same story as the Jews," says Desbois. Yet his grandfather always said his internment was not nearly as awful as it was for "the others."

Desbois studied mathematics and spent several years teaching in the West African nation of Burkina Faso. At 21, he joined Mother Teresa for three months in Calcutta, caring for the dying. When he decided to make his life in the church, his secular-minded family was horrified.

After seminary, he briefly led the life of a "normal" priest - conducting baptisms and giving weekly sermons. He was soon appointed by the Cardinal of Lyon to aid the church's liaison to the Jewish community. Desbois was already studying Judaism. He had begun to learn Hebrew.

To this day, he helps organize conferences between Catholics and Jews, and leads Holocaust study tours for young Catholics and other students. On one of those trips in the late 1990s, he stopped at the site of his grandfather's prison camp. A memorial there was all but destroyed.

Over the years, as he worked to repair the marker, he kept asking about "the others." The mayor of the village showed him where the camp's Soviet prisoners were buried. "I said, 'OK, [and] where is the mass grave of the Jews?' " Desbois recalls. "He told me, 'I don't know. I don't know. We never found it.' And I said, 'How could it be that more than 10,000 Jews were killed in the village ... and you don't know?'"

A newly elected mayor remembered Desbois's question. The next time the priest returned, 110 farmers were waiting. "In one day, I discovered we could not only find mass graves with precision, but we could also find witnesses who ... were present at the execution." The mayor said he would help Desbois find the mass graves in 100 nearby villages. In 2004, with seed money from the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah, a French group, the Ukraine project was born. Desbois's team has mapped 500 unmarked graves so far. He believes another 1,700 exist. "We have a duty to ask, 'Where are the graves?'" he says simply.

Desbois's offices are as modest as the man. Deep in working-class Paris, in a drab modernist building, a rickety elevator opens to a ramshackle office suite. The walls are laden with images of Jerusalem and a 2006 calendar of Jewish holidays. On a table sits a massive bronze menorah that B'nai B'rith International recently awarded him for his human rights work.

Desbois answers the bell himself. He has a full head of dark hair, and his hands move continuously as he explains his project. He is busy. He is tired. Wednesday he was in London meeting nine rabbis. One will oversee the research in Ukraine. Desbois is cautious that his work adheres to halacha, or Jewish law.

Desbois runs a lean team. A student in Germany combs police archives, which are cross-referenced against Soviet archives in Washington D.C., for period recollections. Then Desbois searches for three, unconnected eyewitnesses. He approaches them as a priest, in his collar, in his gentle manner. He reconstructs the massacres through their accounts - where the Jews walked, where the killers stood. Ballistic experts analyze shell casings found on the graves. Each witness is interviewed, photographed, and filmed.

"He never made anyone feel guilty," says Anne-Marie Revcolevschi, director of the French Shoah foundation, who has traveled with Desbois. "He is just trying to understand what happened."

Desbois takes out a series of black albums filled with photographs that could pass for 19th-century images. In rural Ukraine, the roads are unpaved, the faces of the people deeply lined. When Desbois's team arrives in the most remote areas, blocked by rutted roads, the people tell him: the Nazis made the same journey, simply to kill. He shows one photo of an elderly man weeping. Like other witnesses to the massacres, this man saw the grave "still moving" after three days: In every village, many were buried alive.

"It is not always easy," says Desbois of his work. "And when it is much too difficult, I always think [of] my grandfather [who] was here three years in a camp and saw everything. Me, I am free." He sighs. "What I want is for the place to be respected as human places," he says. "I want to recover the memory because nobody was witness [to this] except those people I find. And they are very old. So we have to run to save the memory."