

Saint Patrick

By Roey Cohen

PARIS - The name Patrick Desbois doesn't mean anything to the Israeli public, or to the public in France, Desbois' homeland. But in fact, Desbois, a Catholic priest, is doing some extraordinary holy work: For over two years now, this short, energetic man and his team of investigators have traveled to Ukraine every other month with the goal of locating the mass graves throughout the huge country, where Jewish victims of the Nazi extermination campaign were buried over 60 years ago.

Desbois and his assistants roam from village to village and town to town, with one question to ask: Where are the Jews buried? According to expert estimates, more than 1.5 million Jews were killed and tossed into enormous pits by the Nazis in areas conquered from the Soviet Union. Desbois has taken it upon himself to find the graves, whose location has remained secret for many years, and erect gravestones upon them.

Born in the small town of Chalon-sur-Saen in Burgundy, Desbois has twinkling brown eyes and a gentle expression that gives no hint of the difficulties with which he is dealing. It is not easy for him to begin talking about the project that occupies him day and night. Desbois, who with his dark hair and slim build looks somewhat younger than his 50 years, usually flees from publicity. This is the first time the Israeli media has been allowed to get close to what he is doing, and he is wary of the exposure, concerned that publicity may harm the operation's chances of success.

"When I was young," he says, "my parents always told me that there are two types of people in the world: those who want to be someone, and those who want to do something. I believe with all my heart that my actions will speak for me." But he also understands that without publicity, it will be hard for him to raise the funds necessary to complete his search.

At first, the mission he has set for himself sounds almost impossible: locating all the sites where Jews murdered by the Nazis were buried in Ukraine. The magnitude of the task is practically inconceivable. In a firm voice, the determined priest estimates that there are no less than 1 million victims buried in 1,200 graves whose exact location is unknown to any Holocaust researcher. Here is another reason why the scrupulous work being done by Desbois and his team is of vital importance: This is basically the only way to corroborate the demographic estimates of the number of Jews who perished within the bounds of the Soviet Union, where the Nazis did not build concentration camps.

Father Desbois knows that the only people who can help him locate these graves are

aging Ukrainians, either eyewitnesses or people who heard something of what went on then. For more than two years, he has been running a race against time in an attempt to elicit their testimony. He appeals to local priests, asking them to use their influence on their parishioners to persuade them to reveal whatever they know. Meanwhile, dressed in his priestly robes, he waits for them in the church courtyard, equipped with a camera and a microphone.

"I definitely take advantage of the fact that I'm a priest," he says almost apologetically, commenting on the use he makes of his religious authority. "I ask the local priests to announce at the end of the Sunday mass that we are waiting outside and are interested to hear testimony from people who were here during the war. The older residents, most of whom are religiously devout, usually comply without hesitation, as if they've been waiting to unburden themselves for many years. When they stand in front of the camera, we always ask them the same question - Where are the dead Jews? And they, ashamed, lead us straight to the killing fields."

How do you go about searching for mass graves?

"It's not a simple thing at all. Over time, we've come up with some guidelines to ensure that the information we have is accurate. In the first stage, we rely on the documentation made by the Germans, who kept a daily record with details of the killing sites and the number of victims, in order to decide where to start searching. In the second stage, we look for district registries that have records of the number of dead in each village. These books were kept by the Russians during the war. A third and absolute requisite as far as I'm concerned is to find at least three different witnesses who don't know each other, who all confirm the information we have. Only if all these conditions are met, and of course in accordance with the findings in the field, do we officially mark the place as the site of a mass grave.

"In many cases, there's nothing at all below the surface, just dust and ashes, because the Germans destroyed all evidence of a massacre," adds Desbois. "In such cases, we have to basically rely on the Nazi documentation in estimating the number of victims. With time and experience, we've found that the reports to Berlin were encoded under the cover of an innocent daily meteorological forecast: The number of clouds stood for the number of graves and the amount of rain indicated the number of victims."

Desbois also notes that he asked for and received the blessing of the chief rabbi of Kiev, Yaakov Bleich. He explains that he and his team do not touch the bodies; they only locate them and leave the Jewish burial ceremony for the future, when they plan to return to the site together with Jewish clergy. "It's important to understand that the priest's robe is of tremendous value when meeting with the local inhabitants," says Desbois. "Sometimes, when someone is hesitant, the people around him encourage him, saying: 'It's okay, he's a priest. You can tell him without fear.' In all modesty, it's hard for me to believe that a Jewish rabbi would achieve similar results."

He says that up to now he has only once met with refusal to cooperate on the part of an

Ukrainian. "And I believe it was only because he was ashamed of having helped the Germans back then," he says. "You have to remember, the Nazis forced many of these people to dig the pits or to cover them up afterward. I explain that I haven't come to judge them or to punish them. I'm only interested in one thing: the graves."

Most of the costs of "Operation Ukraine" are being borne by the French Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah. It was established five years ago by French President Jacques Chirac, in coordination with Jewish organizations, as part of an effort to restore Jewish property confiscated during the war to its rightful owners. The foundation is chaired by Holocaust survivor and former health minister Simone Weil, and administers a fund of 393 million euros.

The woods of hell

The foundation's offices are located in an impressive building with an ornate facade, in the prestigious Eighth Arrondissement, behind the Church of St. Augustine. This is one of the city's most expensive neighborhoods. The downstairs tenant is none other than the private law firm of Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy.

In effect, the foundation is only entitled to use the interest accumulated by the fund in the various banks in which it is deposited. Even so, the sums available to Anne-Marie Revcolevschi, the fund's general administrator, are nothing to sneeze at. Just this year, the foundation distributed close to 20 million euros to almost 400 different projects around the world. Among the most prominent were the reconstruction of the ramp in Auschwitz upon which Josef Mengele stood when he carried out the selection of who would live and who would die; the renovation and expansion of the French Holocaust Museum (which was officially inaugurated this year in the presence of President Jacques Chirac), and the construction of a memorial wall in the yard of the museum with the names of the 76,000 French Jews who perished in the Holocaust etched on it. Yad Vashem in Israel also receives financial support from the foundation; in the past year, it received over 1 million euros.

Revcolevschi, who is in her fifties, with blue eyes framed by fashionable eyeglasses, has a piercing look and an authoritative manner of speaking. But when she talks about the campaign to which Desbois invited her, her voice softens and her expression relaxes. Her family is of Ukrainian background and she was moved to tears during a visit to a wrecked cemetery there, where, at the edge of the yard she found a tombstone with the name of her grandfather's brother carved on it. To her, the priest is a real saint and a man of rare spirit, so much so that she strains to find the words in French to describe him and resorts to Yiddish: "Patrick is a real mensch."

Does it surprise you that a priest has taken on a mission that is so Jewish?

Revcolevschi: "Desbois and I have become very close in recent years and we've talked about it a lot. When he had just begun investigating the truth of what happened in Ukraine, he, too, didn't know what he had gotten into. As he saw it, he just wanted to look into the stories that he had heard from his grandfather as a child, and no one

imagined what he would end up finding. It's also important to know that he served for many years as a liaison between the Church and the Jewish community and he currently works with Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, who was born a Jew to a family that was destroyed in the Holocaust. He has been close to Judaism for years and frequently visits Israel.

"Beyond that, he also told me once that in his view, he is first of all a human being and only afterward a priest, and therefore he is motivated by the mission to obtain historic justice for the Jewish victims. I think he simply has a special agreement with God," Revcolevschi lowers her voice as if about to impart a secret, "that he serve Him in the loftiest manner."

Revcolevschi says that Father Desbois has an uncanny ability to get people to talk and that it often happens in Ukrainian villages that he arouses such curiosity among the younger people that they ask the older folk to tell them about what happened. "Moreover, as awful as it sounds to us, in a lot of places, the stories about the period have become something of a local legend, to the point that people talk of 'the wood of hell' or 'the forest of the Jews' near the village, and such names have become routine to everyone. When you hear the names, it's easy to guess what's buried underneath."

Has your organization begun to think of what to do with all the findings?

"As soon as the project is completed, we plan to publish a book with the photographs and testimonies that were collected. Then we'll mount a traveling exhibition that will go all over the continent and tell the story of the slaughter of the Jews in Eastern Europe, and we'll also produce a documentary film about the search. As for the graves themselves, unfortunately, nothing can be done without the cooperation of the local authorities, and it's still too early to tell how they'll react. For now, we're gratified that they are enabling Desbois to work and not placing any special obstacles in his path. He has already told me that he is interested in continuing the searches in the Baltic countries. The problem is that we don't have the money to fund a continuation of the searches on our own. So far we've invested close to 150,000 euros in this and the time has come for other organizations to join in the effort. Personally, I think that since we're dealing with the shared past of the continent, that the European Union should also share in the financial burden."

Another hundred graves

Beneath the surface, there is also a personal motive for the colossal effort being mounted by Father Desbois. His beloved grandfather was expelled to the Rawa Ruska internment camp in the Ukraine, as one of 25,000 French troops considered a danger to the German occupation. At the camp, his grandfather got to know Jewish prisoners who disappeared one after the other. Not one of them ever returned. For many years, Desbois heard from his grandfather, who eventually returned to France, that what he went through was nothing compared to what happened to "the others." It wasn't until years later that he learned that "the others" were the Jews.

After he was ordained as a priest, the Cardinal of Lyon, Albert de Courtray, appointed Desbois as his special secretary for affairs involving the city's Jewish community. As part

of his work, he organized trips by Church personnel to the extermination camps and gave special seminars on the Holocaust. Then, one day, all the loose ends came together. After a memorial ceremony in 1997 at the camp where his grandfather had been interned, he asked the mayor of the neighboring town of Rawa Ruska where the graves of the town's Jews were, and didn't get a clear answer. The knowledge that 15,000 local Jews had been murdered, many of them in the town and its surroundings, and that their bodies had disappeared without a trace, continued to disturb him. In subsequent visits, year after year, he continued to press for answers - until he came to a critical turning point.

Desbois: "For three years, I kept pressing, until the elderly mayor retired. His replacement, Yaroslav Nadyk, a modern young man who knew the nudnik from France who came to the memorial service every year, took me by the hand and said: 'Come, I want to show you something.' He had gathered 110 people and at his instructions, they had uprooted an entire grove of trees and uncovered an enormous mass grave. It was a moment I'll never forget. I clutched my head in both hands and said to myself: Dear God, if there's a grave here, then I'm going to overturn every stone in this accursed land until I find all of them."

Desbois says that when he asked the locals why they hadn't said anything up to now, they answered simply that no one had ever taken an interest before. He knew then and there that he would ask and search and find. "I wouldn't have gotten anywhere without Nadyk. When this dear man saw how the discovery affected me, he solemnly informed me that he would show me another hundred graves. We spent a lot of time together and I realized that I was fortunate to have happened on the right person. In Ukraine, you have to know how and whom to ask, but it's also important to have the right person by your side; then you can really work wonders."

The mayor of Rawa Ruska accompanied Desbois for more than a year, using his extensive connections and senior status to help open doors. He also came up with the idea of seeking help from priests, which paved the way for invaluable cooperation with the local residents. He did all this asking nothing in return.

Eventually, Desbois got an opportunity to repay his benefactor. Nadyk's wife suffered from a serious illness and, a few years ago, with the help of his connections in Israel, Desbois was able to arrange for her to visit one of the healing centers on the Dead Sea.

A seven-hour conversation

The origins of the close bond between Patrick Desbois and the Jewish people go back to 1991, when Desbois was appointed aide to Dr. Charles Favre, a psychiatrist and special adviser for Jewish affairs to the Cardinal of Lyon, Albert de Courtray. Cooperation between the two came about as a consequence of a traumatic event indirectly linked to the Nazi regime. That year, masked men attacked Dr. Favre in the driveway of his home and when he refused to give them what they wanted, they beat him for almost two hours, nearly killing him.

The anonymous attackers, whose identity was never discovered, were interested in the

investigative file that Cardinal de Courtray had prepared, with the help of Favre, against Paul Touvier, who was an officer in the Vichy government during the time of the German occupation (Touvier was first apprehended and jailed in 1973; he was freed temporarily in 1991 and then imprisoned again until he died five years later). Dr. Favre was left severely disabled by the attack. He therefore asked the Cardinal to appoint for him a young aide, preferably a priest, with basic knowledge of the Jewish religion, so they could work together to bridge the gaps between Judaism and Christianity, with the aim of fighting anti-Semitism. After a prolonged search, the name of Patrick Desbois seemed to suddenly pop out of nowhere.

Favre, 77, who now holds the title of vice-president of the Christian-Jewish Friendship Association in France, vividly recalls their first meeting. "He came to my office for a formal introduction that was supposed to last just a few minutes. That very day, I felt that fate had decreed a meeting with someone exceptional. And I'm very glad to say that my senses did not mislead me. Patrick turned out to be a brilliant person with broad horizons and an extraordinary thirst for knowledge. And despite his young age, he already showed such impressive maturity and intellectual ability that today I must confirm that the student has definitely surpassed his teacher."

How do you explain his attraction to the Jewish religion?

"We talked a lot about that and discovered that we both have the same starting point. We grew up in Catholic families that helped Jews escape from Germany when that was still possible. The education we received in our parents' homes was that Nazism is absolute evil and that everything must be done to see that it fails. When you are raised and educated toward ideals of equality and brotherhood, you cannot remain indifferent when you understand that the Jews were exterminated solely because of their faith. Our efforts to bring the communities closer in order to fight anti-Semitism are in some way our answer to that dark period in the history of Europe and France."

At Kibbutz Lohamei Hageta'ot, there is a special commemorative plaque citing Favre's contributions to the Jewish people. Until her death in 1984, Favre's wife Denise was very active on behalf of Prisoners of Conscience in the Soviet Union.

Father Desbois continues to work very hard to strengthen the foundations of the bridge that Favre, the psychiatrist, talks about. When he has the time, he studies the Hebrew language. After years of study, he can now read Israeli newspapers and sometimes peppers his French with some modern Hebrew expressions. Desbois follows events in Israel, has many Israeli friends and says that on his frequent visits to Israel, he feels "right at home."

In Paris, he lives and works in a somewhat derelict building in the Eleventh Arrondissement, with peeling paint and a rusty iron gate that screeches loudly when opened. His office is also quite Spartan: The furnishings consist of a very plain desk, an old computer, a small bookcase and a map of the world tacked to the wall.

This modest appearance can be deceiving: The smiling priest who warmly greets a visitor is a clergyman of high standing in the Christian establishment. Desbois essentially wears four hats at once: He is Secretary of the Episcopal Committee for Relations with Jews of the French Bishops' Conference; he is a personal aide to Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger; he still holds the position of adviser to the Cardinal of Lyon and he was recently also appointed as Consultant to the Vatican on Relations with Judaism.

The murdered women

Father Desbois is an extremely busy man and a long wait was necessary before this interview could take place. During the meeting, his eyes are bleary from lack of sleep, and he explains that he just got back the day before from a two-week trip to the United States. He'll have to pack his bags again soon, though, since at the beginning of next week he is flying to South America on behalf of the Vatican.

And if all that weren't enough, he is also active with Cardinal Lustiger in the Yahad - in Unum Foundation, which was established as a result of a collaboration that evolved between Lustiger and the President of the World Jewish Congress, Israel Singer. The goal of the partnership is to create for the first time a framework in which Jews and Christians could together aid the needy all over the world. Several projects have already been launched, including the construction of aid centers for those affected by the economic crisis in Argentina, the distribution of medicines to AIDS patients in Africa and, of course, the search for mass graves in Ukraine. Sources in the Yahad - in Unum administration say that Desbois became so immersed in the search for the killing sites in Ukraine that even Cardinal Lustiger asked him to slow down a little.

How do you deal with the psychological hardship?

Desbois looks out the window at the view of Paris. "It's certainly not easy," he says finally. "This is the reason, for example, that I'm the only one of the team to have taken part in all the search expeditions so far. The others just couldn't take it. I think that the experience I've accumulated helps me in dealing with the difficulties, and being a man of faith also helps me. I believe with all my heart that despite the horror there is a Divine hand guiding the path of history, one that we mortals are not always capable of understanding."

What is the feeling like when another grave is exposed?

"It's odd - on the one hand you feel satisfaction that the searches and efforts weren't in vain. On the other hand, you're finding more bodies. I think that in some way this is perhaps the toughest thing: When you finally achieve the target, instead of being happy, you get a bad feeling. In any case, we don't stay too long. The historian on the team makes only a narrow opening, of one by two meters, to make certain that it is indeed a mass grave, enters the exact location in the GPS device and quickly closes it up."

Why the fear?

"One mustn't forget that the danger of grave-robbing is quite common in Eastern Europe today. This is why we don't leave any external signs on the ground. Each time, I personally vow to return quickly in order to complete the work: to cast a real gravestone so that the victims can rest in peace."

To date, Desbois' group has found over 400 graves in the western part of Ukraine. Some are very small, while the largest contain tens of thousands of bodies. On each sortie, he is accompanied by a team of six: a historian, a translator, a photographer, a recording technician, a ballistics expert and a driver-bodyguard. While the historian estimates the number of bodies buried in the grave, based on its size and depth, the ballistics expert collects evidence left behind by the Germans in order to prove beyond any doubt that the victims are indeed from the period of World War II.

Aside from the field workers, Father Desbois also has a team of Jewish, German and Ukrainian students who do research in the archives preserved from the Nazi period. They are tracking the extensive correspondence that occurred between the various Einzgruppen companies that carried out the massacres and the main command in Berlin, and helping to connect names of places with the killing sites. So far, they have covered about a third of the area of Ukraine, and Desbois reckons that they need at least another two years to complete the job.

What drives a person to devote himself to such a demanding mission?

"What drives me is the desire to do a final kindness to the victims, those Jews who were murdered like mice all over Europe. In my view, they were done a double injustice, because they are still shrouded in darkness. The public at large doesn't know enough about the extermination that occurred here in cold blood. There are so many testimonies that haven't yet been publicized. For example, the story of the Einzgruppen companies that used to maintain groups of Jewish women to sort through the clothing of the victims. When they all became pregnant - and in this case it wasn't by the Holy Spirit, they would just kill them and replace them with others."

Sometimes, he says, the testimonies are so hard to bear that he has to take a break and come back the next day to continue. "Despite the differences between the stories, there is one, shocking thing that is always the same. All of the witnesses, without exception, described the mass graves as a living thing. It took a while, due to translation difficulties for one thing, until I realized what they were referring to. Apparently, it takes three whole days for a grave to die. For all that time, the ground doesn't stop moving because of the movements of the victims. The Germans, to save ammunition, sometimes buried a lot of people who were still alive." Tears well in his eyes. "It's just horrible."

Is there something that was particularly etched in your mind from the searches?

"There are so many things that I don't know where to start," he sighs. "For example, on the last trip two months ago, we came to a village where, according to official German records, 2,760 Jews were killed, but in the beginning we couldn't find anyone who would

agree to tell us what happened there. From experience, I know that this is a clear sign that one needs to push a little harder, and in such cases we don't move on until we've uncovered the whole story. For three days, we went from house to house without any real results, until one woman hinted to us that we ought to try asking the people who live close to the nearby train station.

"By the tracks we found a 91-year-old woman who seemed to have been just waiting for a chance to ease her conscience. Evidently, the Nazis informed the local Jews that they were going to travel by train to Palestine. And so, on the designated day, they came to the train station dressed in their finest. The journey lasted just one kilometer and by the side of the tracks we found a long and narrow mass grave with the bodies of the people who thought they were traveling to the Holy Land. What's so chilling is that this woman who told us the story saw the Germans preparing the pits the day before and realized what was going to happen. On the day of the murder, she tearfully bid farewell to her Jewish neighbors, who were all excited about the journey and didn't understand why she was crying, as they promised to come back and visit her soon. We subsequently learned that the 'journey to Palestine' story was repeated in other villages, too, but for some reason it was never made public knowledge."

Desbois' office is situated on the fifth floor. He moved in here shortly before the search operation for the graves began. One of the windows affords a view of the famous Pere Lachaise cemetery. Desbois suppresses a smile. "I'm a priest, you can't sell me stories about coincidences because everything is determined from above." He is quiet for a moment and then says in Hebrew, with a heavy French accent, "Be'ezrat Hashem" ("God willing").