

Father Desbois interview with Gitta Marnach
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The unknown Holocaust
The French priest Patrick Desbois researches the evidence

Moderator:

When the German Wehrmacht attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, it systematically persecuted the Jewish population. The victims were not transported to Auschwitz or Bergen-Belsen, but killed immediately on the spot. Village by village, they were gathered in the town square and then led to previously dug pits where they were shot - 1.5 million Jews.

The 55-year-old French priest, Patrick Desbois, has made the search for traces of this terrible crime in Ukraine his life's work. He also has been given responsibility for Jewish relations by the French Catholic Bishops' Conference.

Gitta Marnach met with him in Paris.

In 1942, Patrick Desbois' grandfather, a French soldier, was deported by the Germans to a prison camp in Rawa-Ruska, a small village on the border between Poland and Ukraine.

Father Desbois: *"He survived; the Red Army liberated the camp, and he returned home. But he did not want to talk about it, about what he had seen, not with his wife or his daughter or anyone else in the family. When I was a child, I asked him numerous times in what had happened at Rawa-Ruska? 'Why don't you say anything?' Finally, he told me only that it was difficult to survive because there was only one water faucet in the camp, that they had nothing to eat, that they had eaten cabbage and grass, but he always said: 'for others, it was much worse.' And I always wondered what there could have been that was even worse than a prison camp?"*

Patrick Desbois, who became a Catholic priest, made his first trip to Poland in 1990 to prepare a trip for French youths. By chance he stayed in a rectory near the Ukrainian border and came across the name of the place referred to by his grandfather.

It is as if I closed the circle with him, says Patrick Desbois: the research for the traces of the Jews murdered in the East became his life's work. He learned Hebrew in Israel, attended courses at Yad Vashem and in the U.S., participated in an education program at Auschwitz and finally began his own investigation. He returned to Rawa-Ruska with a small team.

Father Desbois: *"It was in the immediate post-Soviet era and the people did not want to say anything. They told me then, that the shootings of the Jews took place in secret, somewhere in the woods. Suddenly, the mayor changed his mind and asked us to come along to Borowe, a small hamlet near Rawaruska, where he had arranged a meeting with about 50 villagers who had watched as the Germans shot 1,500 Jews. And they had seen everything."*

From then on, said Patrick Desbois, he knew that the shootings had taken place in public, that the villagers have been forced to participate and that they had witnessed the worst of human cruelty. Several times a year, he and his small team of investigators visit Ukraine, Russia, Belarus and Poland. More than one thousand witnesses have now been questioned and more than five hundred mass graves identified. Patrick Desbois suspects there are another thousand. What he hears goes far beyond the investigations of the Soviet Special Commission of 1944, buried in Moscow archives and accessible since 1989.

In 2004, Paris Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, whose own family was murdered in Poland, and Israel Singer, president of the World Jewish Congress, proposed the organization Yahad – In Unum. The name combines the Hebrew and Latin words for "together." And it is together that the Jews and Christians - many young volunteers are involved – search, with financial support from around the world, for the mass graves in the East. Time is running out, says Patrick Desbois.

Father Desbois: *"I would say that we are in the final moments of action for our organization, because the witnesses are now 80, 85 or 90 years old. But they want to talk, absolutely, before they die."*

The French priest does not treat the testimony as a judgment trial. His intention is to collect the facts and bring the truth to light to help prevent the recurrence of other such genocides. And, for the people who were so brutally murdered, to return to them their dignity.

Moderator:

Gitta Marnach, with French priest Patrick Desbois. "The Forgotten Holocaust," published in German by Berlin Verlag, recounts his research for evidence in Ukraine, with a foreword by Arno Lustiger.