

Priest seeks witnesses to killing of Jews

JERUSALEM - Perhaps in retrospect it was inevitable that Father Patrick Desbois dedicate a part of his life to seeking out the last witnesses to the Nazis' mass executions of Jews in remote Ukrainian villages.

As a young child he alone among all his family was privy to his paternal grandfather's stories about his imprisonment as a French soldier in Ukraine's Rava-Ruska Nazi prison camp.

It was bad for the soldiers, his grandfather said, but it was worse for "the others on the outside."

"Since I was a child I wanted to know who those 'others' were," said Father Desbois, 52, a member of the French Prado Fathers who was in Israel in mid-October leading a French pilgrimage group.

For the past four years, Father Desbois has trekked through the Ukrainian countryside, listening as the remaining elderly witnesses recall the gruesome murders of their Jewish neighbors - those "others" of whom his grandfather spoke.

His goal, Father Desbois said, is first and foremost to "establish the truth" of what happened there.

"I want to reintegrate into humanity the Jews who were killed like animals," Father Desbois told Catholic News Service.

About 1.5 million Jews were killed by the Nazis in the Ukrainian forests and ravines in what Desbois calls in French "the Holocaust of bullets" - a lesser-known part of the Nazi machine that killed 6 million Jews, most gassed and burned in

concentrations camps.

Raised in a decidedly secular family that had been active in the French resistance, Father Desbois shocked them when, as a young man, he decided to join the priesthood after a three-month stay with Blessed Mother Teresa in Calcutta, India.

While leading a pilgrimage to Poland as a young priest in 1990 it became apparent to him that the group knew painfully little about the Holocaust. He began studying Judaism to counter this ignorance, taking part in seven seminars on the Holocaust at Jerusalem's Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial and spending time in Israel learning Hebrew.

Since then, combating anti-Semitism has become an integral part of his clerical life. He currently serves as director of the French bishops' office for relations with the Jews.

He started organizing Catholic Holocaust study tours to Auschwitz and other Nazi concentration camps in 1997. Soon thereafter, while with a group at the Rava-Ruska camp, he discovered a memorial to the imprisoned soldiers in shambles.

Later, when he came back to repair the memorial, it dawned on him that a memorial was also needed for the 12,000 Jews murdered in the village.

He asked the mayor where the graves of the Jews were, and the mayor told him that he did not know. The following year Father Desbois came with another group, and a new mayor approached him. Not only could he take the priest to one grave site, said the mayor, but he also could provide 100 witnesses to the slaughter.

The elderly villagers began telling Father Desbois how the Nazis made them, as children, witness the massacres, sometimes even forcing them to do the "dirty work" following the murders: They had to sift through the piles of bodies and pull out gold

teeth, carry piles of clothing away as their friends awaited execution, and bury the bodies of their neighbors.

“It is as if they were waiting for us,” said Father Desbois of the elderly villagers who were relieved that someone had finally allowed them to unburden themselves of their memories.

The first time he heard the stories, said Father Desbois, he realized the murders had taken place quite publicly.

“It was unbearable, I felt like I had reached my limit,” he said. “They were speaking very directly without mincing words. I was in shock. I decided to come back with the goal of finding the (other) mass graves where the Jews were buried.”

Since then Father Desbois and his team of 11 Ukrainian and French researchers – including ballistic specialists who analyze the shell casings found around the graves – have recorded testimony from 800 people and located some 700 of the unmarked mass graves, cross-checking testimony with Soviet archives in Washington and police archives in Germany and searching for corroboration from three separate witnesses.

Some witnesses have told how the soldiers were allowed only one bullet per person, and many people were buried alive in the pits; children were simply tossed in after their parents. Some villagers have broken down crying as they described the pits writhing for three days after the massacres as the injured died a slow, suffocating death, Father Desbois said.

One woman told Father Desbois how she was forced to retrieve the body of a man propelled into a tree after a Nazi soldier threw a grenade into the pit.

Another woman recounted how the Nazis used the village children to walk on the

bodies of the Jews who were shot in order to pack them down to make room for the next group of Jews. She recalled how, as she walked among the bodies, she realized with horror that she was trampling on the naked bleeding body of her classmate.

Father Desbois credits the fact that he asks only factual questions with enabling the villagers to open up to him.

“It is a concrete interview. I try to rebuild the scene of the crime. My only question is what happened. We ask for details: the color of the cars, if (the Nazis) brought dogs, which way the soldiers came from, where the people stood, how close they were,” he said, noting that the interview, which is filmed, usually takes place at the site of the mass grave. “The only way (to conduct the interviews) is not to judge. I am not there to judge. There is only one question: What happened and where are the corpses.”

He said the support he receives from village priests has helped him gain the confidence of the villagers. He also works closely with an orthodox rabbi from England to assure that all his work is conducted in adherence to Jewish burial law, he said.

A French book about his search, “A Priest Reveals His Holocaust by Bullets,” was published in late October, and an English edition will come out in August next year.

Father Desbois said that in three years his work in Ukraine will be complete. Maybe then, he said, he will start searching for the mass graves at other sites in Russia and Belarus.

“When I am tired of the work, of hearing the stories, I remember my grandfather and how he survived three years at the prison camp. I tell myself then it is nothing for me to come back 60 years later,” he said. “Of course it is very tiring. I try to keep my life quiet, with prayers and sometimes to be in solitude with myself in front of

God.”