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Two faiths together

While the Lefebvrist crisis has soured relations between Judaism and Catholicism, many have worked long and hard to heal divisions. One is the French Catholic priest Patrick Desbois, who has spent seven years identifying the sites and marking the graves of Nazi victims in the Ukraine

As a teenager, Petrivna was employed by the Nazis as a “presser”, forced to walk backwards and forwards over pits packed with the bodies of Jews killed by the Nazis.

A French priest, Fr Patrick Desbois, relates how young women such as Petrivna in rural Ukraine were made to press down the bodies with their bare feet as if they “were grapes on harvest day in wine country”. It was with this and other chilling accounts that Fr Desbois held his Jewish audience spellbound on a recent visit to Britain. Speaking at Yavneh College, a Jewish school in Hertfordshire, he describes the seven years during which he has searched tirelessly for the mass graves of Jews shot during the Second World War in Ukraine.

What began as mere personal family curiosity has become an epic mission and a race against the clock to record the stories of those who remember the terrible events of 1940s’ Ukraine. One and a half million Jews are known to have died there at the hands of the Nazis during the war, but this is a forgotten chapter of history – one which Fr Desbois is now working painstakingly to record.

In his new book, *The Holocaust by Bullets*, Fr Desbois describes how he went from village to village trying to locate every grave and site where Jews were killed. Along the way he talked to those who remembered these events, recording video testimonies from eyewitnesses, many of whom spoke on the subject for the first time.

Fr Desbois and his small team believe they have so far identified 800 of an estimated 2,000 sites in the Ukraine. They have also been in Belarus and the priest soon plans to turn his attention further east. “We are now entering Russia to look for the graves we know are there. If God permits me, I would like to go to the last village that was taken by the Nazis and bring all my Jewish elder brothers together in front of God,” he says. Although the scale of the task seems daunting, the priest says the end is in fact in sight. He continues: “I think my work will be finished eventually because unfortunately it’s a short-term project because witnesses are very old. So in seven, or maximum eight years, it will be finished.”

A small, energetic man who speaks in heavily accented English, Fr Desbois was treated almost as a celebrity by the audience at Yavneh College. However, in a conversation with *The Tablet*, he says that although the attention is

encouraging, this is not what his work is about.

“Tonight I may be treated as a hero for one evening, but next month I expect to be alone at temperatures of minus 17 in a tiny village without electricity or paved roads, without running water and with very poor people,” he says. “For this I need the strength of my faith because that is what this is about – it is about the history that is dying every day and the people who are being forgotten.”

In his book Fr Desbois describes Rawar-Ruska, the first town he visited in the Ukraine. He was drawn to the place by the knowledge that his grandfather had survived internment there. A group of witnesses gathered to tell their stories of the Jewish genocide they witnessed in the town.

“I had only one desire: to scream and beg them to stop. But no one could stop what was



Fr Patrick Desbois and his team have found 800 mass graves of Jews murdered in Ukraine during the Second World War

happening. Each one of them was narrating, for the first time, the history of the execution of the last Jews of Rawar-Ruska,” he writes. “I realised that the memory of the genocide existed, and that it was the humble people, country farmers, who carried it.”

It was this realisation that led to his decision to track down methodically every other mass grave in the country. At each he places a stone of commemoration and a Star of David. During our conversation he explains why he feels compelled to continue until every grave has been identified: “If we build Europe and the modern world on the unknown graves of Jews and gypsies what will we say to Rwanda and Cambodia, because we are no better?”

Ukraine was under Nazi occupation from 1941-3 and its capital, Kiev, was later awarded the Soviet title of Hero City for its resistance against the German invasion. However,

Ukrainians were also known to have collaborated with the Germans in the persecution of the Jews.

Though Fr Desbois has worked more or less from scratch uncovering many of the atrocities committed in the Ukraine, some episodes are already famous, such as the massacre at Babi Yar in 1941, which is commemorated in a poem by Yevgeny Yevtushenko and a symphony by Shostakovich.

Is his faith ever tested by the horrifying stories that he hears? “In fact it has deepened my faith,” he replies. “But I have had to change my life. I have to take time out every day and arrange my agenda to be alone in front of God because I hear such awful stories and I need time to pray for all these people and try to make sense of what I have heard.”

Fr Desbois is president of Yahad-in-Unum, an organisation founded in 2004 by the French Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, whose Jewish mother died at Auschwitz, and Rabbi Israel Singer, former president of the World Jewish Congress. Yahad-in-Unum – which combines the Hebrew and Latin words for “together” – works to heal the wounds between Jews and Christians. But Fr Desbois chooses to steer clear of recent controversies that have soured Jewish-Catholic relations such as Pope Benedict XVI’s recent decision to lift the excommunication of four Lefebvrist bishops including one who denies that six million Jews perished in the Holocaust.

Fr Desbois is working at the grass roots where people are not concerned with what happens at a diplomatic level. In his book he admits that he had to learn to position himself “as a Catholic in an ethical context that was faithful to John Paul II and to Vatican Council II, while respecting the Jewish religion and people”.

His work also has ramifications internationally and he has invitations to speak everywhere from New York to Moscow. He is also working with the Holocaust Center in Washington and the official Holocaust archives in Berlin. “You must understand that this is building a strong spiritual link between the Christians and the Jews. It’s not only about history, it’s not only about memory, it’s not only about justice. It’s also about faith because the Jewish people can see that it is Christians and Catholics who are taking care of the Jewish dead. They can see that we consider ourselves to be in the same boat, Catholics and Jews together.”



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