

Laudation of Father Patrick Desbois door Karel Berkhoff, Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing 25 januari 2023

Excellencies, Distinguished Guests and Friends, Dear Father,
Good Afternoon.

In 1942, the German occupier in France deported prisoners of war east, to Rava-Ruska. Over three thousand Frenchmen ended up in this city near Lviv, today western Ukraine, at the Polish border. In Rava-Ruska, local Jews were imprisoned as well, in a ghetto from where, in that year and in the first half of 1943, many thousands were deported to their deaths in Belzec. Thousands of other local Jews were not deported, but were murdered on the spot, locally – in mass shootings and other murders. No one else present in the city failed to notice.

Once released, the French military men who survived talked about what they had gone through, and what they had seen. The horrendous persecution and murder of the local Jews appeared in these testimonies and tales, given first to Soviet investigators in the area. But they talked mostly obliquely, and rarely in a way that today would seem adequate.

One of the French survivors of Stalag 325 had a grandson who questioned him about the war, at the early age of seven. Some years later, the child put 2 and 2 together, when seeing photographs taken at Bergen-Belsen. Years later, already immersed in the history of the Holocaust, he decided to go and see the former camp for himself. Crossing from Poland into Ukraine with a travel group he organized, he found a pitifully small memorial stone. The association of survivors in France concluded that a proper memorial was needed. In 2002, therefore, a special factfinding visit began, with unforeseen and magnificent consequences.

This person was our honoree of today, Father Patrick Desbois. I thank the jury of the Annetje Fels-Kupferschmidt Award for asking me to give the laudation of him.

Patrick Desbois used to be, by his own account, a militant atheist. But one day, at the age of twenty, belief in God struck him. Already blessed with tremendous energy and drive, Desbois became a Roman Catholic priest, and soon a personal aide to another, older convert to Christianity, the Jewish-born Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger. In 1999, Father Desbois became president of the French Episcopal Committee for Relations with Judaism, working for many years to combat antisemitism.

In Rava-Ruska in 2002, Father Desbois heard for the first time what he would hear elsewhere as well: no, there are no more remains. The denial proved to be unjustified. There *were* remains of the camp. But where was the mass grave of the Jews? The next year, the deputy mayor helped out, by drumming up witnesses to the Holocaust. Right away, a plan was forged that began in 2004: to systematically trace the mass graves of the Holocaust in Ukraine and to film interviews with witnesses. The sponsor was the association Yahad – In Unum, meaning “together” in both Hebrew and Latin, initiated by Cardinal Lustiger as a means for improving relations between Catholics and Jews.

Father Desbois became Yahad – In Unum’s president. Nowadays, based in a suburb of Paris, it is a globally active humanitarian organization, dedicated in particular to identifying and

commemorating the sites of mass shootings of Jews, and Roma, in all of Eastern Europe during World War II.

A majority of the Jews who died in the Holocaust in Europe, about 2.6 million, was murdered in death camps such as Auschwitz. About one million died in ghettos and other detention places. And about 2.2 million were killed in mass shootings, mostly in eastern Europe. In Ukraine, where Father Desbois began his investigation, three of every four Jews died as a result of such mass shootings.

As the tide of the war turned, the German murderers attempted to cover their tracks by forcing prisoners to exhume and burn the corpses. But the job was too big. For decades and decades after 1945, most of these murdered Jews remained in the ground like neglected dead animals. Really detrimental here was that the Soviet Union had become increasingly antisemitic, and that Moscow deliberately marginalized the suffering and murder of the Jews. Most of the sites were unmarked, and they were not infrequently covered with garbage. It was not rare for the sites to have been vandalized by looters, scavengers who hoped to find valuables. In this sense, the Nazis seemed to have achieved their goal of dehumanizing the Jews.

When Ukraine became independent, in 1991, interviews about the war and Holocaust began. One Ukrainian citizen, himself a survivor (Boris Zabarko), systematically interviewed survivors, and support and initiatives arrived from the United States and Israel. These became major collections, such as the Visual History Archive of Steven Spielberg's Shoah Foundation, and the oral and video collections at Yad Vashem and the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

All this time, there was no major initiative from a European country, and virtually no one suspected that Ukrainian or other non-Jewish villagers would want to say anything on the record about the Holocaust, and that this would be valuable information.

It is here that Father Desbois and his dedicated French-Ukrainian staff made a truly outstanding contribution, one that will be of lasting value. The drive, care, multidisciplinary approach, and fundraising talent of Father Desbois have made it all possible.

Was it a smooth ride? No. Let's not overlook the skepticism and criticism that the French priest and his team encountered in the early years. Is anyone surprised that this criticism was sometimes less about the work, than about its presentation, and about the attention it gained once it went public? For instance, there were comments that the general public should be informed more systematically of existing historical studies of the Einsatzgruppen and other Nazi murderers – that is, that the project did not operate in a total void. Some other people were annoyed by the extravagant claims made by persons who were little familiar with the topic, and who claimed that the mass shootings had been *forgotten*, and that this priest had *discovered* them. There were also those who objected to the term “Shoah par balles,” Holocaust by bullets”, coined by Father Desbois, arguing that there was just one, single Holocaust.

Such comments sometimes seemed to mask something else. Some critical historians seemed miffed that a person without the years of professional training they had gone through could come, take on this difficult topic, and gain national and international acclaim, rapidly.

Other historians were skeptical about interviews as a historical source, thereby prolonging, mistakenly, an influential suspicion of memories recorded decades after the fact. And finally, I notice that to this day, some historians are uneasy about meticulous descriptions of the most lethal stage of mass murder. They will say, by way of argument, that such a high level of granularity explains little.

The "Holocaust by Bullets" project took the witnesses very seriously. And it turned out that they often were *eager* to talk, and that their perspective provided entirely new insights into the Holocaust.

There existed a French precedent for going into the field with a microphone and film camera. But Claude Lanzmann, author of the monumental film *Shoah* (1985), could not work in the Soviet Union, and Yahad – In Unum's trips were preceded by meticulous searches through postwar German judicial investigative records (the famous office in Ludwigsburg), and by combing through underused or previously unavailable sources, produced years ago by the Chief Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation, and by the Extraordinary State Commission of the Soviet Union. The latter had questioned over 25,000 people about German crimes, in the 1940s.

From the start, the fieldwork was set up as a criminal forensic investigation. The travelers included a photographer, a French interpreter, and the recording of GPS coordinates. At first, they worked in secret.

The interviews were and are not after any "why," or about who may have been indifferent or at fault, those many decades ago. Early on, Father Desbois set the line that interviewers must be discrete, showing interviewees nothing of their own opinion or emotion.

Yahad – In Unum has made available online a magnificent resource: "In Evidence: The Map of Holocaust by Bullets." It shows 2,001 documented sites and offers, for over well over half of them, detailed information in the form of historical overviews, photographs, and excerpts from archival documents and the video interviews conducted by Father Desbois and his team.

Let me share my sense of how this research has not only re-stimulated interest in studying the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, but also vastly improved our understanding of it.

One set of key findings has to do with the graves and their location. Yahad – In Unum initially assumed that at each shooting site, there would be one large pit. But often, they were told of other pits, nearby, but distinct, and unmarked. That is why Father Desbois says we should use the term "site of mass graves." Such sites were often found in forests. Often the few extant memorials were misplaced in a literal sense.

The team meticulously laid bare, like no one before, the numerous, methodical steps at each locale producing mass murder. This was, as Father Desbois calls it, a "script," played out before, during, and immediately after each mass shooting.

Finally, Yahad – In Unum fully laid bare what up to then had been obscured or ignored, in other sources – the presence of many non-Jewish neighbors close to the shootings. One reason for this presence was that the murders did not always take place in remote locations, but often right in the middle of a village. Many witnesses heard the last words of their Jewish friends.

Among those neighbors who saw, heard, and smelled were some whom the murderers *conscripted*, before, during, and after the murders. Before Father Desbois made his findings known,

no historian had realized how closely the killers involved the villagers in their atrocities. For example, some of these locals, who were ordered to help, laid boards, planks, across the pits and moved them as instructed, during the shootings. This enlistment, a truly sickening story, constitutes a major finding.

Here I recommend our honoree's two books on the topic, *Porteur de mémoires: Sur les traces de la Shoah par balles*, from 2007, translated into multiple languages such as English (*The Holocaust by Bullets*, 2008), and the second book, from 2018, called *In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures behind the Holocaust by Bullets* (French version *La Shoah par balles. La mort en plein jour*, 2019).

Father Desbois soon broadened the scope of his work. Since 2010, together with the NGO Roma Dignity, Yahad – In Unum has also been documenting the Nazi-led genocide of the Roma.

Our honoree has said many times that the “Holocaust by bullets” is a model that has been used again. This conviction was one inspiration for organizing every year a training seminar on the Holocaust, held at varying locations in Europe, for History teachers in high schools and secondary schools. Father Desbois also teaches at Georgetown University.

In 2012, Yahad – In Unum began investigating mass violence in Guatemala, focusing on the early 1980s. The Guatemalan army in those years killed entire villages, suspecting their Mayan inhabitants of supporting anti-government guerillas. Father Desbois and his team interviewed people and even founded a Holocaust Museum, which offers courses on antisemitism.

And the contemporary mass crimes came into focus. Together with Nastasie Costel, the president of Roma Dignity, Father Desbois conducted over one hundred interviews with survivors of the 2014 genocide of the Yazidis in northern Iraq. This ethno-religious minority was persecuted and exterminated by ISIS, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. There also came an exhibition (*La voix des Yézidis*) and a book (*La fabrique des terroristes. Dans les secrets de Daesh*, 2016; in English as *Terrorist Factory: Isis and the Yazidi Genocide, and Exporting Terror*, 2018).

Father Desbois has said that research can help prevent mass crimes today. Let us maintain the hope that it is true. Certainly no one will disagree these days when he writes that fortunately, “sooner or later, wherever the mass murder of humans has taken place, someone will return.”

How devastating for him, and all of us, that Yahad – In Unum, which had been received well in Ukraine, also with the Ukrainian version (2011) of its exhibition, felt compelled last year to return to the country with a new mission: recording interviews about a *new, anti-Ukrainian* genocide – or, if we want to be more cautious, new war crimes and crimes against humanity. Dozens of testimonies have already been collected.

Our honoree has received many awards and other forms of public recognition. The list includes the Medal of Valor from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, the Humanitarian Award of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, the Prix Mémoire de la Shoah of the French Judaism Foundation, the Légion d'honneur, and also, by my count, seven honorary doctorates in Israel, Canada, and the United States.

Father Desbois, you have been in the Netherlands before. The Kamp Vught National Memorial hosted the exhibition “The Mass Shooting of Jews in Ukraine 1941-1944: The Holocaust by

Bullets,” and you were on our public television then. Your book *Porteur de mémoires* appeared in Dutch at that time, 2009. You and your colleagues have also taught at the Anne Frank House.

It is good to have you here. Your work, done at your initiative, sparked by awareness of your grandfather’s suffering in a camp in Ukraine, has created a truly priceless record. This record provides us, and generations to come, with important insights. It heightens awareness of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, and of other mass crimes. It is really hard to see who else could have done all this. Thank you so much.

Karel Berkhoff