

## Priest investigates Shoah to remember the dead and protect the living

By Leon Cohen

Why does Catholic priest Father Patrick Desbois devote his life to finding the often previously unknown sites where the German Nazis and their collaborators shot Jews, Roma and others during World War II?

In his talk on April 21 at Marquette University to more than 200 people, Desbois, 59, said his efforts are partly devoted to “working for the victims,” to be sure they are remembered.

As an example, he spoke about finding a Star of David necklace that a Jewish woman had thrown aside as she was being led to a mass grave to be shot. “Finally, we found you” after 70 years is what this meant to him, he said.

In addition to recalling the past, his work is also a message to the present. The Nazis’ mass shootings of Jews and others was “a prototype of what happens today” in many other parts of the world.

Yet such crimes cannot be hidden, and those who are killed will not be forgotten or removed completely, he said. The Nazis were “sure that nobody would come back,” he said. But the act of returning to these sites shows would be perpetrators that “you are not safe” and “one day people will come back.”

He concluded the event by praising the coming Milwaukee Jewish Federation “KRAKOW SHOFAR Mission” to Krakow, Poland, slated for Aug. 31-Sept. 7. (See March 2015 Chronicle.)

The plans for this mission include the installation of Richard Edelman’s KRAKOW SHOFAR metal sculpture between Krakow’s *Synagoga Tempel* and Jewish Community Center, and the dedication of a mass murder site with Desbois.

“When a community like you decides to go back” to such a site, Desbois said, “you are acting against the mass killers of today.”

### ‘Evidence is everywhere’

Desbois is founder and president of *Yahad-In Unum*, meaning “together” in Hebrew and “as one” in Latin. Created in 2004, this organization, according to its website, seeks to “ensure that mass killing will never



Father Patrick Desbois

again be a silent crime” and “to unsilence a chapter of history that has remained silent for far too long.”

According to the website, some two million of the six million Jews murdered by the Nazis were killed at these sites.

Desbois and his “totally dedicated” team of 25 have discovered about 1,700 mass murder sites, and interviewed and filmed some 4,000 witnesses.

Yet there are more to find. In response to a question, Desbois said that if he had enough money, he could in four years “finish the job” of finding sites in the countries where the organization works, which include Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Russia and Ukraine.

Desbois displayed a map of known murder sites. “All these countries are floating on corpses,” he said.

He said he and his team work carefully to document the events and confirm accounts. “We have to prove everything” in order to refute Holocaust deniers, he said.

But that is not excessively difficult, because “evidence is everywhere” at the sites, in forms ranging from jewelry dropped by victims to spent cartridges of the murderers’ bullets.

However, because of the jewelry and possible gold teeth in the mouths of victims, *Yahad-In Unum* doesn’t mark the exact loca-

tions of the sites for fear of grave robbers, Desbois said.

The investigations have discovered some horrible aspects of the events, which Desbois described. Often, he said, the night before the murder companies arrived, local police or German occupiers would enter the ghettos or other places where Jews were confined to commit rape and steal money and jewels.

Desbois said that some witnesses were emotionally overcome when they tried to tell about these events. But others seemed almost blasé about it; one who as a child saw a mass murder said “it was interesting” to watch.

But the investigations can have lighter aspects. Desbois described how he met with a married couple in one village, both of whom were witnesses, and “the worst is to interview a couple because they always disagree.”

Desbois came to the subject through a personal connection. His grandfather had been a prisoner of war who had been kept in a camp at Rawa-Ruska in Ukraine. But after the war, the grandfather refused to speak in any detail about his experiences.

Not until Desbois visited the site did he learn that 18,000 Jews and 25,000 Soviet POWs had been murdered there. During one later visit, he was shown a site where the last 1,500 Jews had been shot and buried.

The town’s mayor then said he could show Desbois 100 more such sites. “I’ll never know why he said that or why I said yes,” said Desbois.

One result of this work was Desbois’s 2008 book, “The Holocaust by Bullets,” copies of which were sold at the April 22 event. Desbois said a second book will be published in six months.

The event was sponsored by the MJF and the university. In addition, the Milwaukee Jewish community has raised \$150,000 for *Yahad-In Unum* research near Krakow, according to the April 20 Milwaukee Journal Sentinel. ●