

The window is closing.

The mass graves aren't going anywhere, and neither is the forensic evidence - cartridges and bullets and bones. The archives are safe. But Father Patrick Desbois has but a few years to *talk* to people who saw the murders, and only they can identify the exact locations of the bodies and illuminate the problematic accounts in German and Soviet documents.

"We are in the small window I would say, because it's the end of the life of the witnesses, but it's also perhaps the only period in which ... they begin to feel free from the Soviet Union," Desbois said last week in a phone interview. "It's a short-term project. We think six, seven years maximum"

Desbois, a Roman Catholic priest from France, has since 2004 conducted investigations into the "Holocaust by bullets" - the murder of eastern-European Jews by German soldiers during World War II. He will speak at St. Ambrose University on August 27.

While most people associate the Holocaust with camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau, few people know about this aspect of the German killing machine.

"They know the Holocaust according to the story of the extermination camps," Desbois said. "In the east, there were no camps, only shootings."

As Timothy Snyder summarized in <u>a July 16</u> <u>New York Review of Books</u> <u>essay</u>: "All in all, as many if not more Jews were killed by bullets as by gas, but they were killed by bullets in easterly locations that are blurred in painful remembrance."

Desbois' work seeks to make sure this part of the Holocaust isn't forgotten. In 2008, he published *The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest's Journey to Uncover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews*, and the National Geographic Channel debuted *Hitler's Hidden Holocaust* - which features Desbois - on August 2.

In all, Desbois' team has interviewed more than 1,000 people, and has covered half the territory in Ukraine.

There's a consensus that 1.5 million Jews were shot in that country. Beyond that estimate, "it's too early," Desbois said. "We've only begun in Belarus, ... and we have not begun in Russia"

Open Secrets

"In the beginning, it was a private story," Desbois said of his path to documenting the Holocaust.

He was born in 1955, so he didn't experience the war firsthand. But his grandfather was a French solider who was deported in July 1942 to Rawa-Ruska. His grandfather didn't speak much about his experiences, except to say: "For us, the camp was difficult; there was nothing to eat, we had no water, we ate grass, dandelions. But it was worse for the others!"

That cryptic pronouncement stuck with Desbois. At age 12, he found a book about the Holocaust, and he recognized the connection between his family and European Jews.

Although he studied math and worked for the French government as a teacher in west Africa, he also assisted Mother Theresa there, and upon his return to France he announced that he was joining the priesthood. He was ordained in 1986, has studied Judaism, and since 1992 has held several positions in the Catholic church concerning Jewish relations. He is also the president of Yahad-In Unum, which was created in 2004 and supports his Holocaust research.

Desbois' first visit to Rawa-Ruska in 2002 was eye-opening. The village had no memorial for the thousands of Jews who were shot, and the mayor said that nobody knew anything about the massacre. Desbois writes that he now ignores anybody who makes such statements, because they're rarely true: "Throughout my research for this project, I was often told that the camps, the ghettos, the synagogues, and the stones of the Jewish cemeteries had disappeared, and that nothing remained. Eventually, I no longer paid any attention to these claims, and looked, with dogged determination, for the ghettos, the synagogues, and the stones of the Jewish cemeteries by myself. I always found them."

The reality is that the "Holocaust by bullets" isn't really any secret; documents from the German and Soviet governments sketch out the horrors, and the people Desbois interviews help fill in the blanks.

The German archives are "reliable in one way," Desbois said. These records say in what towns killings happened, but they don't provide a complete picture.

The Soviet archives are "not better" in terms of reliability, he said. "It's another source. ... Very few people open these archives because people were afraid of Soviet propaganda."

Those two sources help Desbois' 10-person team create a file for a town. They then visit and collect testimony.

The mass graves are typically not marked. They're located through interviews with witnesses, and their accounts are confirmed with forensic evidence.

"Everybody was thinking that these killings were secret," Desbois said. "We didn't realize that all the village was gathered around, and that many children were employed to dig the mass graves, to fill the mass graves, to carry the suits [of murdered Jews], to sell the suits, to take the gold teeth, and so on. And these people we want to speak to before they die."

Desbois' team collects cartridges in conjunction with interviews to estimate the number of people killed without disturbing the graves. "'A bullet, a Jew. A Jew, a cartridge," he writes. "The Germans did not use more than one bullet to kill a Jew. Three hundred cartridges, 300 bullets, 300 people executed here. ... The proof of genocide was so flagrant and so real."

"Make Everybody Silent"



The interviews are, of course, sickening. Many Jews did not die from their gunshot wounds or were thrown into the pits alive, and the book includes stories of the graves "breathing" for three days.

Beyond the stories themselves, one also wonders about the people telling them - whether they feel guilty or complicit, and how what they saw or did affected them.

Here is one of Desbois' descriptions of testimony from his book: "The first went forward and said: 'I saw the execution of the last Jews, shot by the Germans. They brought them here in trucks. I remember the blood that ran like a stream after the execution, along the path that goes down to the village. The Germans asked me to come and cover the pit with chalk to dry the ground out; it smelt so bad.' A small, frail woman stepped forward and started speaking; she was crying: 'The Germans had grenades that they threw in the pit after the shooting of the Jews because many of them were not dead yet. One day I saw the dismembered body of a woman on the top of a tree. That tree you can see over there. They made me climb up in the tree to bring the body down and put it in the pit.' She fell silent and withdrew, in tears, her face buried in her hands."

Much of the witness testimony has a chilling matter-of-fact quality: "They were shot in the pit itself. They made them climb down into it and then they shot them directly in the pit, then threw earth on top of the bodies. The pit was very long."

One woman Desbois talked to, he said, claimed to be "very sad in the morning [when the Jews were killed], [but] very happy in the evening when we received the clothes of the Jews."

One goal, Desbois said, is not to react to the stories. He views himself as an investigator, and "my main task is to rebuild the crimes."

Still, trips to communities where mass killings took place are limited to 17 days, he said: "Psychologically, after 17 days listening to horrors morning to night, we cannot go on. ... We cannot get used [to it]."

Interviews have lasted as long as three hours. In one town, Desbois said, a citizen identified each house in the ghetto and described the Jews who lived there.

Despite the valuable information they have, witnesses to and survivors of the "Holocaust by bullets" had rarely if ever told their stories.

In part, Desbois said, this is a function of the Holocaust narrative that has penetrated the culture - of extermination camps and gas chambers and Anne Frank and Oskar Schindler. "When your private story in a catastrophe is not fitting with the general story, it is difficult to speak," he said.

But part of it is also the nature of the crime, he added: "The strength of a genocide is to make everybody silent."

Desbois asked a German historian why these mass killings were done in public view, and the historian responded that Hitler's military figured: "Who would believe a Ukrainian farmer?"

The witnesses until recently *have* been silent. But Desbois has gotten them to speak, and to verify and document, helping him to ensure that this part of the Holocaust was saved before it was likely lost forever.

Father Patrick Desbois will speak on Thursday, August 27, at 7 p.m. at St. Ambrose University's Rogalski Center (at the corner of Ripley and Lombard streets in Davenport). A book-signing will follow.

For more information about Desbois' work, visit HolocaustByBullets.com.

Hitler's Hidden Holocaust next airs on Sunday, August 9, at 2 p.m. Central on the National Geographic Channel.