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## French priest does Holocaust research 'to give these dead back to their families'

PREV

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Author who looks 'to give these dead back to their families' will speak in Tulsa

By Bill Sherman World correspondent Apr 8, 2018 1



Father Patrick Desbois is seen in the Ukraine, where he has conducted Holocaust research. I Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration in Tulsa. Courtesy/Kate Kornberg/Yahad

A defining moment in the life of French Catholic priest Patrick Desbois occurred years ago in a forest outside the village of Rawa Ruska near the Ukrainian-Polish border.

Desbois, who will tell his story Monday at the Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration in Tulsa, had visited Rawa Ruska earlier to see the place where his grandfather, a French soldier, had been imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp and to pay his respects to Jews executed by Nazis in that village.

To his amazement, on the earlier trip, the town's mayor denied any knowledge of the murder of the Jews.



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Desbois returned several times, determined to find out how more than 10,000 Jews could be killed in one village without anyone remembering it.

Finally, a new mayor led him into a forest where about 50 elderly men and women awaited him, standing in a semicircle over the mass burial site of the last 1,500 Jews of Rawa Ruska.

One by one, they told him about the executions they had seen there when they were children or teenagers — and the stacks of bodies in pits they had been forced to cover.

His experience in the forest, and his realization that killings had taken place in public and not in secret, cemented his commitment to document what happened in the Holocaust.

In 2004, he formed an organization, Yahad-in Unum, to identify and commemorate sites of Jewish and Roma mass executions in Eastern Europe during World War II.

Desbois, now a professor at Georgetown University, has interviewed more than 5,300 eyewitnesses of executions by Nazi mobile units at 2,100 sites in Eastern Europe outside the concentration camps.

He has been featured in several New York Times articles, appeared on “60 Minutes” and written books, including “The Holocaust by Bullets: A Priest’s Journey to Discover the Truth Behind the Murder of 1.5 Million Jews” and “In Broad Daylight: The Secret Procedures Behind the Holocaust by Bullets.”

His research is still important today, he said, in order to “give these dead back to their families.”

“Whole Jewish families are still looking today for their relatives lost during the war,” he said. “When we investigate, we can find the place where they were killed. Sometimes we can find their neighbors who knew them and who now know where their bodies are buried. This kind of information is extremely important to their family members today.”

He said it also is important to “give those dead back to the Jewish community” and to “gather evidence against the deniers and those who minimize the facts of the Holocaust.”

Desbois said his research focuses on individuals, not numbers.



“Today, for instance (March 28), while investigating in Romania, we discovered the story of the Klein family. We now know where their house was, where they were arrested, and where they were killed and buried.

“When the families are looking for their relatives, they are not asking about the millions, they are asking about their mothers, fathers, uncles, cousins.”

His research has implications beyond the Holocaust.

“The kinds of killings that we have been investigating in Eastern Europe for such a long time became a template for today’s mass killers. In 2015, 130 people were killed in Paris in only 40 minutes. This kind of ‘personal’ killing continues, and the methods used to carry them out are not very

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different from the ones that were once employed by the Nazis.”

Desbois will be the featured speaker at the Tulsa Council for Holocaust Education and Tulsa City-County Library’s 21st Annual Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust Commemoration at 7 p.m. Monday at the VanTrease Performing Arts Center for Education at Tulsa Community College’s Southeast Campus, 10300 E. 81st St. The event is free and recommended for ages 12 and older.

University of Tulsa composer Joseph Rivers, J. Donald Feagin professor of music and film studies, will perform his original musical elegy inspired by “Babi Yar,” a poem by the late Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, also a University of Tulsa professor.

Candles will be lit in memory of Holocaust victims.

Holocaust artwork by Tulsa-area students will be exhibited.

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Desbois  
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### Yom HaShoah/Interfaith Holocaust commemoration

Father Patrick Desbois will be the featured speaker in the 21st annual commemoration. Joseph Rivers, a professor at the University of Tulsa, will perform his original musical elegy inspired by “Babi Yar,” a poem by the late Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, and holocaust artwork by area students will be exhibited

**When:** 7 p.m. Monday

**Where:** VanTrease Performing Arts Center for Education at Tulsa Community College's Southeast Campus, 10300 E 81st St.

**Information:** The event is free and recommended for ages 12 and older.

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