**Interview**

Andrea Petö*

# "Good People Sometimes Don't Know How to Stand Together." Interview with Father Patrick Desbois, Founder of Yahad-In Unum and Head of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center's Academic Council

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The interview is available as a Podcast in "Standing Up Against the Assault on Democracy" hosted by the Johannesburg Holocaust & Genocide Center. The interviewers are Tali Nates, a member of the Advisory Board of EEHS (Eastern European Holocaust Studies), Bjorn Krondorfer, Steve A. Carr, and Andrea Pető editor-in-chief of EEHS.

**Tali Nates:** It is wonderful to welcome Father Patrick Desbois and it is a great honor to have you. And you need very little introduction, of course, as the founder and president of Yahad-In Unum, someone who works tirelessly in the field of Holocaust testimonies, witness testimonies, and genocide prevention in Europe, Guatemala, Iraq, and all around the world. But, Father Desbois, perhaps, can you say, in your own words, something about yourself?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** Who is Father Desbois? Difficult to say. I'm not sure I know who I am. I have worked in Ukraine for 25 years now and never imagined I had to work in the war with the Russians. I know all these villages, all these cities: Mariupol and Mykolayiv, and so on. I know the people everywhere, the synagogue, the mass grave, and the church. And suddenly, it's a question of bombing and killing and assassination.

I have been working in Israel and Palestine for 25 years. And in Iraq for eight years. And even when I was young, I was a teacher of mathematics in Burkina Faso.

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And it's a country now taken by the Islamists. I wouldn't even be accepted to land there now.

**Tali Nates:** Certainly, your hard work is being challenged in today's world. We will reflect together about your work and your messages.

**Andrea Pető:** I'm honored that you accepted to give this interview. And let's start at the beginning, with your work in Ukraine, back, 10, 15, 20 years ago. Before you started this work, you took several courses at Yad Vashem on the history of the Holocaust. Then you found an unresearched history of the Holocaust, and the fate of half of the victims of the Holocaust, who were killed by bullets in Eastern Europe, were missing from this story. So, how do you explain this blind spot in Holocaust research of this topic?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** When I was younger, I thought it was easy to understand. But the more I study, I feel it is complicated as to why it has been obliterated. One main reason is that it was the Soviet Union, and nobody could reach the archives, and nobody could spend time from village to village with a microphone and find the witnesses. And I remember, I traveled first to the Soviet Union in 1989. And so it was a completely different Ukraine.

The second reason is that it's difficult to remember mass graves. People are afraid of mass graves. It says nothing, no train, no railway, no gas chamber, nothing. The other part of the problem is that any country can have mass graves. There are mass graves in France, there are mass graves in Guatemala, there are mass graves in Costa Rica, there are mass graves in Italy. So, people are used to building a democratic memory on the mass graves of other people. When it suddenly appears that a huge part of the Jews have been shot and thrown in mass graves, people feel bad remembering that because it brings up questions.

**Bjorn Krondorfer:** From your perspective right now, what is the moral, ethical, historical benefit, or the limits of discovering mass graves from the past as we are digging mass graves right now? What can we learn from doing this kind of work that reconstructs the past when the world in so many places is in turmoil today? This might be a difficult question, but I wonder how you connect the past and the present as we move toward the future.

**Father Patrick Desbois:** What I learned from this study on the past is that anybody can be a victim, and anybody can be a killer. Before I began, I thought that if I found a house of people who saved Jews, they would be nice people, smiling. And people who killed Jews were awful. But it turns out that they have the same face and sometimes the same smile.

I vividly recall an encounter in Poland that left a profound mark on me. As I stood at the doorstep, I realized I had made an error in judgment. My mission was to locate a woman who had been a witness to a tragic event. The man who answered the door inquired about my purpose. Without hesitation, I explained that I was seeking individuals who had been present during the horrific events involving the Jewish community. To my surprise, he revealed that his father had been one of those witnesses. With warm hospitality, he welcomed me inside, assuming I was a priest due to my attire. What followed was an extensive interview, during which the man recounted a chilling account of rescuing three Jews who had narrowly escaped a mass grave, only to be brought back and executed. He also shared details about several mass graves he had been involved in. However, the most unsettling revelation came towards the end of our conversation. It was a picturesque summer day, and the family kindly requested a DVD as a memento of their late grandfather.

This encounter, though seemingly cordial, was a haunting experience for me. I encountered similar situations multiple times during my extensive research. It was surprising to discover that when people are convinced they are not the intended targets of such atrocities – be it due to ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation – they are drawn to witness the grim proceedings. This contradicted my initial assumption that fear would drive individuals away from such horrors.

This phenomenon was not confined to a specific region; it manifested itself across various locations, including Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia, Romania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine, where I delved into the depths of Holocaust history. Initially, I had considered it a Soviet or a Slavic issue. However, my subsequent research in Iraq, a place with few connections to Poland or Lithuania, reaffirmed this disturbing attraction to acts of violence. There, I encountered individuals no older than 25 who openly admitted their involvement in brutal killings. One particular interviewee, a young man who took pride in his actions, maintained an eerie smile throughout our conversation. Sensing my skepticism, he casually mentioned the existence of a video capturing him in the act, his face unobscured. He bid me farewell with a chilling nonchalance, leaving me shaken.

Through these experiences, I came to the unsettling realization that the capacity to kill is intrinsic to human nature, much like a dog's ability to swim. It requires no formal instruction, and it transcends generations.

I believe in the minority. I don't believe in the majority. I believe we have to train leaders. And I think we are missing leaders all over the planet.

I had this experience in Auschwitz. It was an anniversary in Auschwitz, with many presidents and officials present. I was with Cardinal Lustiger, who represented the Pope. By mistake, we entered the cafeteria of the attending presidents. Suddenly, I sat down at the table and asked my neighbor on the right side what his job was. He told me that he was a president. It turned out that everybody there was a president,

except for us. Presidents don't have a special face. They do not look like heroes. For example, if I go to a country where I don't know the president, I will find them when I see the camera running after them. That's it.

We are missing leaders nowadays. So it's a challenge for us to educate new leaders and to have the sense to sacrifice their lives to lead the country or to lead groups with a high level of values. And some young people are ready to take leadership.

**Steven A. Carr:** Could you identify what kind of training one needs for the next generation of leaders? If you had to identify a single concept, or something that would instil a more humanitarian response in the face of genocide or pending genocides, what do you think that training would do?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** I've noticed that some of my young students are grappling with a sense of purpose. In my Georgetown classes, I often ask them why they've chosen to take my challenging courses, as they can be quite demanding. Their responses consistently revolve around a shared curiosity about how they can effect change in the world around them.

I always tell them that if they're constantly asking themselves how they can make a difference on this planet, they're on the right track. Despite various temptations – like lucrative job offers from banks and large organizations – I see a portion of them entering Jewish organizations, NGOs, state bodies, or security agencies, all driven by the desire to contribute.

We need to recognize and support these young individuals who are already searching for a life with a purpose and actively trying to find it, even though they may not constitute the majority. In a recent meeting, someone asked me why there are so many dictators and a woman in the group made a poignant observation: "Because people don't like to think." This statement resonated with me, as I've personally been astonished to witness the acceptance of propaganda, such as that of Putin, even among well-educated individuals in my own country.

Recently, when I observed the actions of groups like Hamas, I immediately recognized the similarities to the methods and religious justifications used by ISIS. It's alarming to see how young people are willing to engage in acts of violence, including killing, rape, and inhumane treatment, while also being prepared to sacrifice their own lives. The unfortunate reality of our time is the resurgence of propaganda with different ideological orientations and the unsettling fact that many individuals are susceptible to its influence. We've learned from history, especially from the Holocaust, the devastating consequences that propaganda can bring. However, I never imagined that we would see its resurgence in Europe, particularly in the context of Russia and Ukraine, which are not as distant as one might hope.

**Tali Nates:** Father Desbois, you are now translating the historical work of identifying stages of genocide in Iraq, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe to nowadays events and looking at Ukraine as a scene of possible war crimes as well. Can you talk to us about how you move from a historical investigation to a much more current issue?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** I would say it is the same evil because when I studied the Holocaust, I decided to focus on micro-history and criminal history. This means delving into details like how the Germans arrived and left, what they were eating, which rifles they used, and the intricate specifics of how mass graves were constructed. This led me to adopt a criminal investigative approach.

Similarly, in Guatemala, I encountered individuals with vastly differing political opinions. However, when I delved into the criminal history, they were more willing to open up. I always made it clear that I was interested in hearing about their neighbors who had been victims, regardless of their political affiliations.

The situation in Iraq is no different. It's a complex country, particularly in recent times. I saw today that the Americans are withdrawing their diplomatic presence from Baghdad. This isn't promising news, as I understand the implications. Despite the challenges, we persist in our focus on the crimes committed against the Yazidi community. It was harrowing, especially dealing with young witnesses.

Interviewing an 87-year-old lady is already a challenging endeavor, but my first encounter with a 12-year-old girl was particularly heart-wrenching. She had been sold many times to ISIS-fighters and subjected to repeated acts of sexual violence. She bravely explained to me the twisted concept of what is considered permissible or forbidden in terms of rape according to the twisted ideology of ISIS. It was a sobering moment, realizing I was listening to a young girl describing, in clinical detail, the conditions under which rape is legitimized in the mindset of these extremists. There were times when one interview turned into three or four in a single day. They speak with a detached technicality, devoid of emotion. Their spirits have been crushed. There were instances when I had to step back and ask a colleague to conduct an interview, as it became too overwhelming.

When I interviewed victims of Russian atrocities, the focus shifted to the tortures inflicted by the FSB (Federal Security Service). A rigorous academic approach is essential. While some may envision me conducting interviews with a camera, the reality is that delving into the operations of the FSB requires extensive reading, consultations with experts, and understanding the broader context, both within, and beyond their territorial boundaries.

Currently, I'm in contact with an organization dedicated to helping victims of torture, based in Canada and Chicago. I'm working to facilitate their entry into Ukraine and similar regions. It's disheartening to witness how young individuals can lose all self-control, committing unspeakable acts under the twisted belief that it is

justified and even commendable. What's equally concerning is that when you encounter these individuals later, they don't appear particularly disturbed.

One individual I encountered was an elderly Romanian man. He proudly admitted to shooting 223 Jews. It was a stark reminder that the face of evil doesn't always conform to our expectations. It's easy to label individuals as monsters, but my experiences have shown me that they can be seemingly normal individuals who have been ensnared by appalling propaganda, ultimately perpetrating criminal acts against certain populations. I once interviewed a young man who aspired to be a suicide bomber. He was around 14, perhaps even younger. He wasn't accepted for the role, as his Emir realized he wasn't up to the task. I saw the sadness in his eyes as he explained his motivation: he simply wanted to reach heaven, no more, no less.

In today's world, there exists a vast population that subscribes to propaganda and justifies crimes against their fellow human beings. It's a daunting reality. Of course, many of us may not directly encounter this, as I do on my holidays in South Africa, where I interact with elephants and enjoy the natural beauty. I consciously avoid venturing into regions that are marked by conflict. If you were to travel to Iran, Russia, Belarus, and similar countries, you'd realize that there are parts of the world we tend to overlook. What truly frightens me is the increasing alignment of non-democratic nations that condone criminal acts. It's a grim development. When I see Russia cozying up to Iran and forming ties with North Korea, it forces me to question our position in the world. We have experts with PhDs worldwide, yet it seems we're unable to stem the tide. I have a list of countries where I'd need extensive security if I were to visit. It's concerning that democracies, bound by international law, can sometimes be slow to act while others operate with impunity. Putin doesn't need authorization for his actions. He acts freely, without constraints. In contrast, the president of Ukraine doesn't enjoy the same freedom. If he were to commit a grave act, it would be plastered across headlines.

This leads us to a perplexing equation in our world today. That's why I'm committed to training leaders and advocating for open-mindedness. It's a small positive action in a world where sometimes, all we can do is feel bad.

**Andrea Pető:** You mentioned that your classroom is full in Georgetown, where you are teaching. So, it's pretty obvious that you have got a very different style of teaching. Your approach to academia and history is very different from the so-called mainstream academic approach to this kind of misery and massacre. In your book, *Holocaust by Bullets*, you very generously recalled the event when you gave your first talk in New York, and the academic audience was not receptive to this new approach to history. If you read that text well, it's very obvious that you felt not accepted and you were criticized because of the lack of methodological rigor and other reasons. How can you learn from this kind of failure when you are convinced that what you

are doing is important and good? And if you have seen any change in the Holocaust research and genocide research as a response or as an inspiration to your work.

**Father Patrick Desbois:** I would say some critiques are positive because they help you improve, work more with archives, and maintain distance. We have now developed a full range of PhD candidates in my team. To be in contact with researchers, to accept their questions, others don't want to question, they want to destroy you.

It's very different. For me, it's very different. I would not give a name, but one historian was sceptic of my work, and now he's a friend because he realized we work a lot with archives, and we have a very standard procedure. Also, the other thing is that, as I said, when I am in a small village at the end of Russia or in Belarus, I didn't meet many historians. From the ground or so, you learn the gap. So, for me, it's a history with gaps. Most of the academics don't like big gaps.

I will give you an example. I did research about the foreign workers in Auschwitz. I met a few of them, French ones. They wrote their memoirs. They're only memoirs, and they are not fascists. They were even left-leaning when they came back to France. Their only problem during Auschwitz, two years in Auschwitz was to buy bread, buy bakery goods, have good food, play with snowballs, go to the church, etc., and have holidays in France and then come back. So, when you meet people like that, and nobody takes it into account, you will see very few books about Auschwitz and the foreign workers from Europe who came to be paid, from France, Italy, etc. They even organized a European show.

So, we have the program paper of this show with troupes of musicians. They also wanted football uniforms. They succeeded in introducing 15 teams' football uniforms. I remember I interviewed one of these men. He was a nice man. I said, "Were you not too scared to be for two years not far from the gas chambers and all that?" I will never forget his answer. He told me, "Father, we were only avoiding the gates of the camps in case they made a mistake." So, when you have this kind of question, you are already in the trap.

So, I found that nearly everywhere. When you work on the ground, even if you are in contact with good historians, sooner or later, you will bring a gap. And also, it will bring many cases that were cold cases. I will give you an example of Babyn Yar. So, as you know, Babyn Yar, we tried to work to reveal the names and the biographies of more than 150 German killers. We published them. A lot of people criticized me and said, "You bring shame to the German family. How can you do that?" I say, when you participated in the killing of 33,771 people, I think the shame is before. It's not after that. We received no requests from any family, no requests from Germany, and I even received a decoration from the Federal Republic of Germany.

But there are taboo questions regarding Babyn Yar. When I say, "Okay, we could go on and reveal many more names of Germans who participated in that. But what happened to the belongings? Where are the belongings of more than 33,000 Jews in these beautiful apartments? What happened to these apartments?" And I'm sure if I wanted to work on that, it's a very taboo question. But I am perhaps not a good historian, but I am an ex-not-bad mathematic guy. When I see a gap, I consider it is an important point to research. I cannot avoid thinking perhaps where people are very happy, a wealthy Jewish family was assassinated. After all, they had a beautiful apartment on the fifth floor in the central part of the city. So, we cannot avoid that. And yes, I have been criticized, but now it's much less. I am in contact now with many historians in different places.

In France, we are a little bit of a special country as far as research is concerned because the biggest name was Lanzmann and he was not first a historian. Klarsfeld, he is first a lawyer, and also a historian. But it helped me, I would say 80 % of the critiques helped me a lot to work in another way, to take distance. It also pushed me to go forward with a more anthropological approach to what happened, which is a purely historical approach. For example, the fact that at every crime, people want to watch. Americans are surprised when I say that the Ukrainians went to watch, the Poles went to watch, and the Russians went to watch. It was not a Ukrainian specialty, but I say, come on guys, I say, you are American.

When 9/11 happened, how many times did you see the planes coming into the tower? Sometimes we saw it 100 times. It was only two planes. Who avoided, who closed the TV? Nobody. I say, in one way, unfortunately, we are attracted. So, I raise these kinds of questions because I think in face of a mass crime, we must bring back humanity to its own reactions which are similar. I think humanity is built on mass graves of other people that we have destroyed, that were classified as bad people.

For example, I'm Catholic. I studied the fight between the church and the barbarians. But if you go to Rome, and ask where the mass graves of the barbarians are, you'll find they have disappeared.

I also had this experience in Costa Rica. In Costa Rica, there are nearly no more indigenous people. When we go to Costa Rica, we see crocodiles and monkeys and butterflies: a beautiful country. And one day, I was visiting a reserve of animals. And I said to the guide, who was an academic, "what happened to your indigenous people"? He said, "Oh, we all killed them". "But I say, where are the mass graves"? And he brought me into the forest to the mass grave of the indigenous people. In no paper will you see advertising to remember the mass graves in Costa Rica. It's a place for butterflies, crocodiles, and parrots.

So it raised a basic question because people tend to think genocide is a national disease. How many times have I been asked to criticize the Ukrainians? How often have I been asked to say "you are too much pro-Ukrainian", etc…? When I was

young, I thought the Germans were the worst people. My father hated the Germans until the end of his life. I thought if we built a big wall around Germany, it would be finished – the genocide. But in Iraq, there are very few Germans, today in Hamas, there are very few Germans.

So it's a human disease. And I'm more attracted, after many years of teaching, to study this human disease with a tendency to suddenly reappear. I say the genocide disease is like cancer. If you don't treat it, you will die.

**Bjorn Krondorfer:** I have worked on and talked about the legacy, history, and memory of the Holocaust for many, many years. It doesn't surprise me that people who were not the actual perpetrators, the active perpetrators, become bystanders, willing collaborators, and onlookers, just as you have described it. I am more confounded by witnesses who speak up years after. You already gave two examples today. In your books, the surprising part is that so many people come forward and talk. They are not reluctant witnesses. And today you mentioned a few examples where people in the next generation are reluctant to witness and still don't want to hear.

How do you explain the fact that people are willing to talk and are willing to witness, and they are even willing to witness when they were themselves implicated in some of the crimes, or at least did little to prevent them from happening?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** You raise a typical Western-side question. You must understand that when you work in Ukraine, Russia, in Moldova, they are post-Soviet countries. I interviewed very old people. They lived for a long time under the Soviets. We forget that democracy didn't happen in '45. It's recent. I mention this because sometimes the grandma says, "No, I don't speak because they will send me to the Gulag." And the family says, "Mommy, mommy, it's finished."

Another thing is that there is a proverb in the Russian Soviet territory that the war is finished when we bury the last victims. So for many people, we came to finish the war. I remember a man who told me, "I have more than 1000 Jews in my garden, and nobody came back since 1942. You are the first one. Why do you come so late?" So the fact that we came to find the corpses… and also I have been trained to show nothing. It means if I meet a killer, I will not show anything.

I will give you the worst example. It was in Ukraine, in Odesa. The lady I interviewed said, "Stop making an interview with me, go to the family in front because they were hosting Jews, and the Jews were dead every day. So it means they killed them." So I stopped the interview. I brought the camera to the next door, and the lady looked at me and said, "Oh, father, I know why you come. Because my neighbor told you Jews were dying in our farm." And I asked, "Was it true?" She told me, "Yes." So she accepted the interview. And I said, "How many Jews died on your

farm"? And it was a big number. She told me, "Surely they committed suicide." And I say, "Even the babies?" She told me, "Yes." I was wondering how to go on.

In this case, I could insert, "you are a family of killers," but I would know nothing. You have the choice between expressing yourself or knowing what happened. I found this way. I say, "Ma'am, it must have been embarrassing to have dead Jews every morning." She told me, "I will show you." She took her boots and her jacket, and she said, "I buried them myself." And we went to the end of the village, and she showed us 18 small mass graves. I remember my cameraman wanted to stop and say, "Oh, those families are awful." I say, "Listen, if you say that, the next family will say nothing."

And, so what is difficult sometimes is to stop judging completely to know the truth and not show anything in here. Because these people have been killers, they are very smart. They smell that if you could be an enemy, and if they smell you are an enemy, it's finished. And they tell you as far as you know. If you know they raped the girls, they will tell it. So they took the belongings. But if you don't know it, they will stop at your limits.

So for me, it's permanent training. Some people in my team stopped working after 10 years because 10 years of testimonies like that can destroy your soul. I have worked with a psychoanalyst for 25 years. If I had not a psychoanalyst with me, I couldn't stay. Actually, I received bad news from Israel and Hamas. Awful stories, but I will see my psychoanalyst tomorrow before going back to Washington.

I say that because people don't go too much on the ground, because to interview 20 people is something. We have interviewed 8000 people. And, so we have all the scripts, from the nicest people to the worst people, and also a big gray zone. A big gray zone of people who were victims and not victims. And so, the question is: do we accept a gray zone?

I read all the books published about Auschwitz, but published just after Auschwitz. The first books from Primo Levi, but also from other writers that are forgotten now. They described the gray zone in Auschwitz, but it became taboo because people didn't want to hear that. They want to hear the story between the very dark men and clean, and that's it. It's not like that. There are a lot of gray zones, and I have never seen a genocide without a gray zone.

**Steven A. Carr:** Father Desbois, let's return to the topic of propaganda. Why do you believe propaganda is making a comeback? It appears that we now have, I mean, there are far more sources of information available to us than ever before in history. While you were discussing propaganda, I couldn't help but think of an article by Charlie Warzel in the Atlantic from last week. He pointed out that with social media, we may feel constantly connected and well-informed, yet in reality, we may not actually be well-informed. Do you think this assessment of social media's impact is a

contributing factor to the resurgence of propaganda, or do you see another force driving this surge in misinformation?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** In the time of the Holocaust, there was no social media, and political parties didn't have meetings. But it's very true that social media is changing the situation because somebody can connect from one side of the planet to the other side of the planet, and you can belong to a group we accept. I will give you an example not connected to genocide.

When I heard what was being said about COVID and the vaccination, I remember a driver from Uber who drove me from here to the airport. He spent 45 min explaining that if I accepted the vaccination, I would receive a secret product in my body that the Chinese would spy on me with forever. It was so frequent to hear this kind of explanation. It was dividing people, even within my own family. Some were anti-Vaxxers. And after Putin, some were pro-Putin or anti-Putin without explanation.

How many times I've been asked whether the Ukrainians were not really Nazis today, and if Zelenskyy was a Nazi puppet, etc. When you hear that, I think about people with PhDs. I'm not talking about close-minded people who don't know much. I don't know anything. I think globalization is perhaps too complicated to understand. When you follow a topic, there needs to be more information. So many people need help to keep up. We end up simplifying things to one answer, one question, and one decision.

I'll give an example of the bombing of the hospital in Gaza. It spread very quickly that it was done by Israelis. You must know that in France, it had an immediate impact. There were demonstrations in the streets, etc. Afterward, they explained the opposite with scientific arguments, but still, many believed it was no accident. They thought it didn't hit the hospital, but the parking lot, etc. Even Al-Jazeera said that, but it was too late. Somebody jokingly said to me, "The fact that so many people believe that a Jew could have done that means that the Jews have the capacity to do awful things."

So, I will give you another example. We had another Uber driver. He was an Islamist. And he told me, "I'm very upset." I asked, "What makes you upset?" He said, "You know, we see everything through our phones. We see the life of billionaires. We see the amount of money in football. We see everything. And my life has not changed. I have a small life with a small family and my small apartment. So we are upset."

I compare social media to a plane. When you fly, there are people in economy class, business class, and sometimes first class. And as soon as the plane begins to fly, they put up curtains, but people don't see each other. And I always think that with social media, there is no more curtain. You can see the life of the Prince of Monaco, and you know the quality of life of the King of Britain. And after you finish buying your bread and soup, you return to your small apartment.

The second thing is that for people who believe in propaganda, social media connects them with thousands of people around them that we could never meet in normal life. They may be a simple family. They might need only 10 people, but suddenly they have thousands of followers. Unfortunately, I think that the dictators now know humanity very well. The dictators know humanity much better than the good guys. And that's why they succeed. We really need to strongly educate people who have the capacity to think and act against that. Because we are only at the beginning.

You know me, I loved Africa. I spoke the language of three or four countries. Now, these three countries are forbidden for me. But the population is growing and growing and growing and growing. So, we will wake up to very special situations in 10 or 20 years.

I saw that in Burkina Faso, they were all pro-Putin. I have a lot of friends on Facebook. They all suddenly cheered, saying, "Long live King Putin. Bless King Putin." I couldn't believe it. And suddenly, it was Mali. And suddenly, it was Burkina Faso. And suddenly, it was Niger. So you cannot say small countries. So it means Putin and Wagner succeeded in influencing these countries and stopping people from thinking.

I am optimistic if we are realistic about the bad guys. Because the bad guys know humanity much better than us. How could they make Auschwitz? Because they knew humanity, unfortunately. How could they make the Gulag? Because they knew humanity. How could they carry out all these shootings of Jews and Roma and Sinti without any hesitation? Because they knew humanity.

And so we must learn what we know to really fight against it. But if we are too simplistic and say, "No, it's black and white. I am for democracy. I am good." One day, I gave a speech in America. It was a big crowd. I said the phrase that everybody could be a killer. Everybody could be a victim. And a man stood up and said, "Me, I couldn't be a killer." So I told him, "you should be very lucky."

**Tali Nates:** That's why your work is so important, not only in academia but also in the field, creating leaders and engaging with critical thinking.

**Andrea Pető:** You are the chair of the Academic Advisory Board of the Babyn Yar Holocaust Memorial Center. I was wondering what your vision is, and how the work will continue after the Russian attack on Ukraine and the site of Babyn Yar itself. So how do you see the future of this center?

**Father Patrick Desbois:** I think we should continue working even now because if we only work when it's peaceful, we might have to wait a long time. Secondly, we should dig deeper into what happened in Babyn Yar, or other places around. As I told you, many enigmas have not been unraveled.

For example, no matter what you say or publish, people tend to believe that the majority of the killers in Babyn Yar were Ukrainian. So we now know that there were Ukrainians involved, but they did not constitute the majority. It's not the general case. In other places, it was different, but in Babyn Yar, it was the case. I believe the fact that in Babyn Yar, over 30,000 people were killed in public, in broad daylight, without any sign of resistance from the population, is significant. It's an important question today.

Killing people in a field is one thing. Killing people in a big city with education, high-ranking individuals, and nobody offering any resistance raises serious questions. Therefore, I think we should raise a new question and continue our work. We should not avoid working on Babyn Yar. That would be a mistake. The advantage of doing so is that everyone knows the name of Babyn Yar. It's the only mass grave that people can name, along with Auschwitz. I believe we should lend more weight to this, as it could also shed light on current events in Ukraine and the surrounding areas because crimes are crimes.

The fact that the Nazis were able to commit such a massive crime in a major city with modern buildings, in the Soviet Republic, in a capital, with artists, music, and many other cultural elements, is staggering. Ukraine was not a country with a narrow mindset. Therefore, I believe we should keep working.

However, it's not easy to remain focused because every time you want to push forward, 20 people want to engage you in a range of present-day questions. But the more we delve into the past, the more we can illuminate the present. Unfortunately, Mr. Putin is committing such awful acts that shedding light on what happened in Babyn Yar might bring some enlightenment.

**Tali Nates:** Thank you so much. We, of course, fully agree with you and appreciate everything that you shared with us today. And Father Desbois, please continue to do this work.

**Father Patrick Desbois:** I will finish with one thing. Every crime is a cold case. Every mass crime is a cold case. And so we must dare to reopen some cold cases because actually, mass crimes are happening today with big cold cases. And so if we don't open them now, in this awful period, I think we will miss the present situation. I spend my time explaining that Hamas is an Islamist organization and not a territorial organization. And they commit crimes legally according to the vision of Islam, much like ISIS. When I say that, people start yelling. I say, I'm sorry, I studied ISIS for eight years. So I recognize exactly the crimes they are committing. The same. And so I think we have to dare to open cold cases to heal humanity. There are very few people who love simplicity, but a mass killer is not a simple person. It's someone who understands the complications and the gray zones and succeeds in doing so.

Let's work together. We have different skills. And I think it's a big blessing that we can also communicate. You are in South Africa, some in Western Europe, some in Eastern Europe. It's magic, you know, we always complain, but it's magic. I'm very, very confident, but we must stand together with our differences. As I said, the good people sometimes don't know how to stand together, but the mafia did not need Zoom, and they always stood together.