

Remnants of the Holocaust on the Eastern Front

by Jean-Marc DREYFUS

The large-scale massacres of Jews on what was then Soviet Territory are not as well recorded as the industrialised mass murder perpetrated in the extermination camps. Since 1945, several initiatives have sought to bring to light the traces of a pre-war Jewish presence and the accounts of the killings, this more urgently so over recent years. Flash back on the work of those memory rescuers.

Reviews of :

Father Patrick Desbois, *Porteur de mémoires. Un prêtre révèle la Shoah par balles [A Channel of Memories. A Priest Exposes the Holocaust by Bullets]*, Michel Lafon, 2007.

Omer Bartov, *Erased. Vanishing Traces of Jewish Galicia in Present-Day Ukraine*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007.

David Pablo Boder, *Je n'ai pas interrogé les morts*, foreword by Alan Rosen, afterword by Florent Brayard, translated from the English by Pierre-Emmanuel Dauzat, Tallandier, 2006 [*I did not Interview the Dead* University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1949]

Father Desbois' Quest in Ukraine

Father Desbois' reputation is growing by the day in France, not because of his positions as head of the French Bishops' National Unit for Relations with Judaism, or as adviser to the Vatican on the Jewish Faith. No: it is due to his wholly exceptional

undertaking of a systematic search throughout the Ukraine for the mass graves where the Jews murdered by the *Einsatzgruppen* (German death squads) rest.

With a small team, Father Desbois turns up in all the towns and villages of the Ukraine and interviews their oldest citizens. They tell him where to find the pits and, when they know something, when they personally witnessed the killings, Father Desbois interviews them at length. They speak for the first time, and probably for the last time too. Hundreds of hours of evidence have thus been videoed. This systematic campaign, which takes up several months every year is a mighty undertaking. It is unlikely to revolutionise what is known of the Holocaust on the Eastern front, that is to the east of the General Government established in Poland, and which started 22 June 1941, immediately as Barbarossa, the invasion of Russia, was put into operation. Nevertheless, it remains an outstanding exercise in remembrance as well as in information gathering on the minutiae of routine killings, eerily never alike.

Patrick Desbois calls these systematic massacres “*Shoah par balles*¹”. They took place in the very village or hard by, in a ditch, a field, or the neighbouring forest and did not call on the advanced methods of transportation and extermination in the camps’ gas chambers. He campaigns for this “forgotten Holocaust which accounts for the death of 1.5 million Jews to go on the record too”. This struggle is bearing fruit: the very formula he has crafted *Holocaust by bullet* is about to enter into the language, in France at least. He already receives letters from Jews all over the world, asking whether he has information on relations whom they know were killed in the Holocaust and from whom they have not heard since 1941.

How does Father Dubois manage to find so much information sixty-seven years after the massacres? First, he does not set off unprepared. His team is made up with highly qualified young people for whom he shows the highest regards and consideration in his book. They have read all available records, in particular those – today available in microfilms – of the Soviet commissions of enquiry that worked in the wake of the Red Army and collected the first testimonies. This is how Father Dubois realized that a great many witnesses still lived at the same place, indeed sometimes in the same house as during the war. This is one of the revelations of this investigation: when the Red Army withdrew before the Wehrmacht, it carried off

¹ Holocaust by bullet

grown up men and women of working/military age (among whom many Jews though their number remains unknown, making the reckoning of the dead on the Eastern front particularly tricky). Remained mostly the old folk, children and youths. Now those youths, sometimes just kids were conscripted by the *Einsatzgruppen* or the *Ordnungspolizei* men for all sorts of jobs: watching over the Jews or murdering them (Ukrainian auxiliaries were happy enough to oblige on their own account), often digging the graves or even preparing the killers' celebration dinners at the end of an operation. For this very reason as well as owing to the curiosity of youngsters seeing their classmates dragged away into the woods, witnesses were numerous. Today, they are all aged at least 75 and frequently willing to talk.

Father Dubois' book is uncomplicated: the story of his involvement meshes in with autobiographical elements. It all begins with the youth a French priest born after the war in a farming family from Bresse, somewhere between Burgundy and the Jura and growing up in the local town of Châlons-sur-Saône. This is not devoid of interest, for he learnt from his holidays spent in the country that, in villages, there are no secrets and that nothing is forgotten. His family, half Catholic, half atheist, took part in the French Resistance. When Patrick Desbois was a child, in the mid-fifties war memories were still fresh, harping back to the Demarcation Line (between occupied France and the Vichy "free zone" and going through the region), the mass arrivals of refugees in Burgundy, the people disappeared in the concentration camps. In French villages, nothing is forgotten: who passed by during the war, from which tree this or that *milicien*² hung. Why would it be any different in Ukrainian villages?

This intuition bolstered Father Dubois' conviction that there was much to be gained from going east. Then, there was the figure of his grandfather, a Rawa-Ruska veteran. Rawa-Ruska, a disciplinary camp for French and Belgian prisoners of war in the Ukraine, has no place in French official records. Headstrong *stalag* inmates, recaptured escapees fetched up in this very harsh camp, where mortality was high. This befell Father Desbois' grandfather, denounced in Strasbourg Station³. He used to tell his grandson that what he and his fellow prisoners had endured over there was as nothing compared to the fate reserved to "the others", that is to say, the Jews.

² T.N. Member of Darnand's Milice, a paramilitary group which assisted the Vichy police in hunting down Jews and Résistants

³ T.N. then in Germany

Patrick Desbois became the Rawa-Ruska Association's Padre. When visiting the Ukraine with the veterans, he sought to locate the place where his grandfather had been locked up and he realized that the French prisoners had been billeted in houses where they rubbed shoulders with Jewish workers before they were taken away and gunned down. He had a further shock when he saw the German cemetery under renovation. A German foundation has recently renegotiated, at considerable costs, the opening of the pits and the reinstatement of the war graves for the men who died there. The bodies are exhumed, stored then buried again in individual graves. A wall is planed where the names will appear by units: Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS or SS. Patrick Desbois writes:

When the mass graves of Jews killed in their thousands can't be found, each German killed during the war has been re-interred under his own name. The cemeteries are on Reich lines: splendid affairs for the Germans – SS included, small graves for the French, white stones smothered under the brambles for the tens of thousands of nameless Soviet soldiers and absolutely nothing for the Jews. So all – underground – is as befits Reich hierarchy. It is unthinkable to allow Nazism this posthumous victory; unthinkable to leave the Jews there buried like animals; unthinkable to accept this *fait accompli* and to allow our continent to be built on the forgotten victims of the Third Reich.

The team from Yahad-in Unum (name of the association running the searches in Ukraine) uses metal detectors: bullets talk. Occasionally – infrequently in fact, Father Desbois has a mass grave opened, observing the Jewish rituals prescribed for such circumstances. The already numerous outcomes of this inquiry have been shown at the *Mémorial de la Shoah* in Paris. The accounts are transcribed in the book *Porteur de mémoires*⁴. It is not the depth of the horror that takes you aback but the manifold forms taken by cruelty. Stories are never quite the same. In one village, the girls were conscripted to tramp Jewish bodies down between shootings “just as you would grapes in the Beaujolais at the grape harvest”. Further down: “The Jews stood on the edge of the pit, the Germans shot them in the back and they fell straight into the pit, then they spread lime. I remember a young Jew who had twins. He held them in his arms. A German drew near, shot one child, then the other the third shot was for the father.” Elsewhere, “village folks were drafted to bang on saucepans to mask the screaming of the Jews. One of them was asked to play the Ukrainian drum every

⁴ TN A Channel of Memories (working title: the book has not been translated yet.)

morning. One day the drummer couldn't take it anymore. When he saw a *Feldgendarme* beat up some Jewish children, he pounced. The German shot him and threw his body in the pit with the Jews from the fifteen villages". Further on, Jews were smothered in cellars. The Soviet prisoners forced to dig out the bodies and burn them in full view of all the villagers (so as to erase all traces of the massacre) were then burnt alive in a henhouse. As readers advance in the book – supposing they can – they come to the conclusion that Father Desbois and his team must really believe in their work to keep on so. The Ukraine has now been pretty thoroughly surveyed. Remain years of trawling around Belarus, Russia, the Baltic States and as far as Chechnya where one *Einsatzgrup* reached the suburbs of Grozny.

Father Desbois is intent on setting down this horror. The respect owed the dead, the corpses, the graves are a matter of the highest concern to him. To his mind, the gesture is necessary to the building of the bridges still needed between Catholics and Jews. His research will be invaluable for historians who will have access to a wealth of detailed statements and data concerning the mass graves, their size and in due course, it will probably help refine the still shaky estimation of the number of victims. The witnesses' recorded statements will offer rich pickings for the understanding of mechanisms that turned "ordinary men" into assassins. They will also be an awesome source to study the way these massacres are remembered in turn of the century Ukraine even though the neutral position adopted by Patrick Desbois releases somewhat easily the Ukrainians from their responsibility in the massacres, as murderers or as "*Neighbours*"⁵. There was no shortage of Ukrainians willing to act as auxiliaries in the massacre of the Jews, to denounce Jews, to hunt Jews down. There was no shortage of witnesses satisfied with the fate reserved the Jews. Those Ukrainians carried out an ethnic cleansing of their own at the end of the war when they expelled the Polish populations settled there and giving Galicia, soon to be reunified with the Soviet Republic of Ukraine, the mono-ethnic complexion it has today.

⁵ After Jan T Gross' title for his book on the Jedbawnw massacre in Eastern Poland, not far from Galicia and where the Jews were massacred by their Polish neighbours as soon as the Soviet troops had withdrawn and before the arrival of Eiasatzgruppen: Jan T Gross, *Neighbors: the Destruction of the Jewish Community at Jewabne, Poland*, Princeton University Press.

Omer Bartov and the town of Buchach

At the same time, another rambler was roaming the Ukrainian countryside in search of Jewish life. Omer Bartov is an American historian, a professor at Brown University who has written a great deal about the Holocaust and the military operations that put it into effect it on the Eastern front⁶. Bartov aims high: he wants to write the history of the town of Buchach, today in western Ukraine, but situated, before the war, in Eastern Polish Galicia and which happens to be his mother's native town.

Buchach was a typical border town with a population split between Jews, Poles and Ukrainians. On the eve of the First World War, more than half its inhabitants were Jews. While on a research trip for his book, Omer Bartov went to the trouble of visiting twenty towns, large and small in the region pushing as far as erstwhile Bukovine, to the South. That region, once part of Romania is today in Ukraine. Everywhere, he sought the traces of pre-war Jewish life and studied the records of World War II massacres.

His findings are sobering to say the least: There is hardly a place where traces of Jewish existence have been preserved, be it by way of plates on the Synagogues or of cemeteries. The wholesale massacre of Jews that almost totally whipped them out of the region is virtually never mentioned. In this frontier region, cruelly tested by 20th century history, remembrance is even more politically loaded than anywhere else. The resurgent Ukrainian nationalism of a country only recently independent allows no room at all for the remembrance of a Jewish presence and the manner of its disappearance. Where a monument or a plate have materialised, that is owed to the initiative of outsiders, survivors who have emigrated to the West. The fate of these plates speaks volumes for the Ukrainian will not to remember: they are removed, and sold for their metal market value, to be melted and traded. Much more frequently, there is nothing, no indication that such and such derelict building, sizeable that it is, was a synagogue. The silence and neglect that engulfs Jewish buildings stands in sharp contrast with the rediscovery of Polish and Catholic sites. In several cities,

⁶ See Omer Bartov: *Hitler's Army: Soldiers, Nazis, and War in the Third Reich*, Oxford University Press, 1992

Catholic churches are being renovated or about to be, under the impulse of the Polish Catholic Church and possibly even of the Vatican.

In the intricate network of memories in presence, Bartov tracks down Communist commemorative practices, which also broadly negated the complex regional clashes witnessed during World War II. In their effort to unify in a broad sweep all Soviet victims of the Great Patriotic War against Nazism, distinctions between soldiers, civil victims killed in the camps or by another party and Jews slaughtered because they were Jewish were not made. Nationalist Ukrainian commemoration has had to fit in as best it could with the monuments to the glory of the Red Army. This did not afford much room for the remembrance of Jews who had made up close on one third of the urban population, forming the region's small business class whilst the Poles filled in civil service posts and the Ukrainians tilled the land.

There is no better evidence of a complex past than in the many names the historian attempts to give the towns he visits: all the names they bore in turn, in Polish, in Yiddish, in Russian, in Ukrainian, sometimes even in Romanian. Eastern Galicia, at the margins between Catholic and Orthodox realms, appears remote but it had a thriving cultural life, or rather parallel cultural lives that rarely intertwined. It boasts many artists, thinkers, writers, from Joseph Roth to Shmuel Yosef Agnon. Bruno Schulz, the great Polish Jewish writer was born in Drohobych /Drohobycz/ Drogobych/Drohobets/Drohovitch – and there murdered by a German in 1942. Galicia is also the cradle of Ukrainian Nationalism, today given a new breath of life within the Social Nationalist Party of Ukraine. Its symbol is an unfinished Swastika and it has offices in most towns visited by Omer Bartov.

This party is not alone in claiming the 40s' Ukrainian Nationalist mantle, and specifically that of the OUN of troubled fame. Its best remembered leader is Stepan Bandera. The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists, the OUN split in the spring of 1941 and Bandera remained in control only of OUN-B, that is the most radical branch. Though Bandera spent the war in German prisons and concentration camps, his troops fought on both the German and the Soviet sides; they took in many men who had worn the German and SS uniforms and taken part in Jewish massacres. In

Drohobych, Bandera's statue stands in a park set in the ruins of the Ghetto. In Kolomya the market takes place on the site of the destroyed synagogue.

Memory's twists and turns could almost raise a smile, so deep is the irony in the evidence of the fate of the Jews that crops up at every turn. In Kosiv the small museum is devoted to "Hutsul customs" and the "Hutsul peoples fight for freedom" (Hutsuls are an ethnic minority from that part of the Carpathians). It is nothing but a nationalist exhibition accounting for the history of the OUN. The men on the pictures are mostly clad in German uniform. They are even shown during an "*Aktion*", murdering Jews. On leaving the museum, the historian heard from the old woman who sold him his entrance ticket that the place that houses the museum was the Rabbi's house. Most of the 2400 Jews in the town were murdered during "*Aktionen*" like those shown on the photograph.

Some evidence of past Jewish presence is mundane, like the marks on the right side of front doors where the *mezuzahs*, the small scrolls mandatory in all Jewish households were placed. Sometimes an almost completely erased inscription can just be detected on a shop. But the visitor must be unwaveringly single-minded. There are no books helping to find Jewish vestiges (such as the few existing for Poland). In Lviv, the Jewish museum brochure is a rarity and Bartov treasures his like a precious relic: it seems it has become unobtainable. He used available Holocaust documentation to locate Jewish sites and retrace events that took place during the war. He also relied heavily on the *Memokhbuch*, the "recollection books" that, according to a Jewish tradition going back to the Crusades, were compiled by the rare survivors or by residents who had left before the war: they provide lists of names and transcribe eyewitness accounts of the massacres. Many of these books are currently available on the internet.

Another irony noted by Bartov, is what literally gets "lost in translation" from one language to the other on the rare existing commemorative plates. In Horodenka, a memorial stands in the Jewish cemetery; it was built by a Jew who still lives there, with the help of survivors (and none whatsoever from the local authorities). The text on the slab is in Hebrew and in Ukrainian. The Hebrew text reads: "In memory of the martyrs from the Horodenka district, victims of the Shoah murdered by the Nazi and their collaborators during round-ups, in labour or extermination camps, and in other

ways during the Second World War 1941-1945". And the Ukrainian text states: "Commemoration of the Horodenka Jews who perished during the second round up of 12 April 1942. In everlasting memory of those innocent martyrs, victims of Nazism." The Ukrainian collaborators have vanished between inscriptions – as an extra precaution taken by the memorial builders, keen to reduce the risks of destruction or profanation.

Omer Bartov observes:

Here the Galician past is still bare, indifference still glaring, prejudices and denials and fierce loyalties still almost entirely bereft of the comforting West European glaze of sophistication. The Ghosts of the past still roam freely in the hills and valleys, clutter the unpaved streets, and congregate in synagogues, transformed into garbage dumps and in cemeteries grazed by goats... It is a region suspended in time, just for a little while longer, before it too will be swept with the tide of modernization and globalization, commemoration and apology. Sooner or later, the people of Western Ukraine's Galicia too will become aware of what they had lost and forgotten, but by then they will have destroyed these last traces of the past in their rush to catch with the present...

Omer Bartov has studded his narrative with black and white photographs taken by him. These 35 mm formats are part and parcel of a text which they go far beyond illustrating. In this, Bartov follows in the tracks of W.G. Sebald, the writer of memory, of elusive traces, of the painful recall of the Holocaust. Daniel Mendelsohn also inserted photographs, family papers or snapshots taken on his journey to track down six murdered relations, in his blockbuster *The Lost*⁷. Mendelsohn focused on his great-uncle's family, who lived in Bolechów (one time also Bolekhov and Bolikhov, today Bolekhiv), also visited by Omer Bartov. He did not hang around: there is, in this small town, no reference to the life of the 3000 Jews who lived there before the war, and who were murdered there or transported to the extermination camp at Belzec. The Soviets had turned the great synagogue into a warehouse. The building is today the "Tanners' Club" with no further indication. The Jewish cemetery is utterly abandoned.

⁷ See *La Vie des idées* the [compte rendu du livre](#) by Daniel Mendelsohn.

On re-reading Mendelsohn on his quest for his relations' death, one fact is striking: right at the end of the book, Mendelsohn discovers the truth, part of the truth that is, after a chance question asked of some town folks. They knew of the fate of the Jews and were even able to take him unerringly to the cellar where the great-uncle and one of his daughters had taken refuge before being denounced to the Germans, along with the schoolmistress who had given them shelter. This is a resounding confirmation of Father Desbois' intuition: the memory of the murder of the Ukrainian Jews is still there, just for a little longer. Ukraine's old folks are its keepers and it must be recorded before it is too late.

David Pablo Boder, the survivors' psychologist

It is worth rounding off the perusal of these two books with a return on David Pablo Boder's much earlier work, recently translated into French. Boder's singular book came out in English in the United States in 1949. David Boder was a psychologist who, born in Liepāja (Libau), Latvia, in 1886, arrived in the USA via Mexico and started his career as an academic teaching experimental psychology. In the forties, he was teaching at the Illinois Institute of Technology. As soon as World War II had ended, he went about planning a trip to Europe with a view to conduct in-depth interviews with displaced persons and gather data on the basis of which to study the traumas caused by war and internment in concentration camps. He wanted to question survivors whom, he conjectured, carried a unique experience that must be captured and preserved. This (today standard) process was groundbreaking in 1945 and was only taken up very slowly thereafter, starting in the 70s. Boder raised funds through a range of research and Jewish American organisations and arrived in Paris in 1946. The very day after his arrival, he was starting his interviews of Holocaust survivors met on ORT premises. The ORT (which still exists) is a Jewish organisation for education and training. Faced with the large number of languages spoken by the survivors and the dearth of translators and transcribers for all these languages, he decided to record the testimonies with a wire recorder, almost pioneering a technique that was to have a great future. In this manner, he conducted 120 interviews in France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. He did not interview only Jewish survivors although they are strongly represented in his sample. Each time, he invited the survivor to tell his whole story, family origins, awareness of looming danger, means of survival. As

Alan Rosen highlights in his fine foreword, Boder was interested in songs, asking the interviewee to sing traditional songs they knew, thus perpetuating the tradition of Jewish culture ethnology initiated in Vilnius before World War I.

Back in the states, he personally re-transcribed the interviews, directly into English and created a corpus of 31.000 pages. He picked the interviews of eight Jewish survivors (among whom a woman, Fania Freich, lived in France after the war) and published them in 1949 under the title “*I did not interview the Dead*”. This work, way ahead of its time, did achieve a degree of recognition and was regularly quoted, for instance by sociologist Erwin Goffman, in his early works. Boder is today considered a forerunner to the enormous projects undertaken from the end of the 70s to record testimonies, first at Yale University then by the Shoah Foundation set up and funded by Stephen Spielberg in the 90s. The original recordings have been backed up on contemporary media. The testimonies can be accessed on the [Illinois Institute of Technology](#). It is worth noting that the oral archive department of the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington has undertaken to track down the 120 persons interviewed by Boder (15 have been found so far) and to record them again 60 years on. No doubt, the confrontation of testimonies from the same people across 60 years will represent an exceptional source for the study of the Holocaust.

Translated by Françoise Pinteaux-Jones.

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