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One priest's quest to document the horrors of the Holocaust

George M. Anderson | JUNE 22, 2009



The ground was moving for three days,” the Rev. Patrick Desbois told me several times during our conversation at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn. The phrase also appears in his recent book, *Holocaust by Bullets*, which won the 2008 National Jewish Book Award. The ground of which he speaks refers to the earth overlying the mass graves at Jewish extermination sites in Ukraine, where the Nazis killed over 1.5 million Jews during World War II. When Father Desbois interviewed witnesses to that Holocaust, they frequently mentioned the moving earth. “It took me a year to understand what witnesses meant,” he said. At first he thought they were referring to the shifting of the earth as the corpses decomposed. But during one of his many trips to Ukraine, a witness who as a boy had been conscripted to spread earth over a massacre site shed new light: after being shot and pushed into the graves, many Jews were only wounded (partly because of a regulation allowing for only one bullet per victim to save ammunition). After they had been buried, the witness said, he “saw a hand suddenly rise and grasp the spade he was using.” The victims’ subsequent death throes caused the ground over them to move for days.

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