

# IN THEIR OWN WORDS

## SURVIVAL AND THE EINSATZGRUPPEN

The Neuberger's **In Their Own Words** website offers the unique opportunity to hear testimony delivered by witnesses to the effects of the Einsatzgruppen, Jewish resistance and survival.

The Einsatzgruppen (often translated as mobile killing squads), and their role in carrying out the Holocaust is the focus of this lesson. Although we may be more familiar with the role of the network of concentration camps established by the Nazis, the Einsatzgruppen were ruthlessly efficient in carrying out their mission – the mass murder of Jews through primarily through mass shootings as well as the use of gas vans. They operated in the Baltic states (Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia), Russia, Ukraine and the Balkans. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) estimates that at least 1.5 million and possibly more than 2 million Holocaust victims died in mass shootings or gas vans in Soviet territory as a result of ruthless actions of the Einsatzgruppen. Many of the victims were buried in unmarked grave sites often in fields and have been documented through the work of Father Patrick Desbois, a French Roman Catholic priest.

### **By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:**

- Identify and discuss how and where the Einsatzgruppen functioned as well as their role in carrying out the Nazi genocide of Europe's Jews.
- Assess the decision-making process of individuals and the factors that guide these decisions
- Identify and discuss the historical context of the role of the Einsatzgruppen as one step in the Holocaust
- Analyze and critique primary source documents such as photographs as well as contemporary media sources.
- Evaluate historical sources for perspective, limitations and historical context.

This lesson focuses on the impact of the Einsatzgruppen through the experiences of Holocaust survivor Peter Silverman. An additional perspective is provided through the use of primary source material; an archival photograph. It contains 3 activities which can be alone or together depending on the curricular needs.

# ACTIVITY I

## Learning about the Einsatzgruppen and Survival through First Person Testimony

### APPROACH:

Watch the Peter Silverman testimony excerpt which can be found online at <http://intheir-ownwords.net/peter-silverman> It is just under 5 minutes duration, and you may want to watch it more than once so that you can hear all the details of Peter's story.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Jody, Peter Silverman's hometown was a small Polish town situated near three countries- Lithuania, Latvia, and the former Soviet Union (today Russia). The area was subjected to occupation by Soviet forces from 1939 - 1941 as per the Molotov- Ribbentrop Pact signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Later in 1941, Nazi Germany was at war with the Soviet Union and German troops occupied the area. In effect, the people of this region experienced first occupation by the Communist forces of the Soviet Union, and later by Nazi Germany. Life under both regimes was brutal, but for Jews living under Nazi control meant certain death. Additionally, penalties for hiding Jews or helping them were severe, and often resulted in death. The Germans also offered rewards to anyone who revealed where Jews were hiding making survival extremely difficult.

### Questions:

- 1 What does people mean by his town and region was cut off from what was happening? What are some of the ways in which Peter and the other people in his hometown of Jody, learnt what was happening during the war?
- 2 Why do you think some people changed their minds about hiding or sheltering Jews during the Holocaust?
- 3 Peter describes the process that was carried out by the Einsatzgruppen and their collaborators in killing the Jews.

# ACTIVITY II

## Analyze a Primary Source Document-Historic Photograph

### APPROACH:

Look carefully at the Primary Source photograph (Appendix II) of the Einsatzgruppen scene. Look for details as to its composition, what is in the forefront, the background, at the sides of the image, and what stands out to you.

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### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Photograph: Ivangorod, Ukraine. A German policeman aims his rifle at a woman and her child, 1942.

#### Where was this photo taken?

Ivangorod, in the Ukraine.

#### What does this photo tell us?

The mass murder of Jews in the occupied areas of the former Soviet Union began with the German invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941. The Wehrmacht combat units were accompanied by four SS death squads (Einsatzgruppen A,B,C,D), whose mission was the immediate liquidation of all Jews (men, women and children). Day after day, together with local collaborators, the Einsatzgruppen carried out this mission – without restraint or compromise.

#### Who took the photo?

German army photographers documented the killings. One such individual, Reinhard Wiener, recorded a personal testimony in the early 1980s describing his work as a photographer documenting the killing of Jews and civilians in the Ukraine.

#### When was this photo taken?

1942

#### What was happening in other areas while this photo was being taken?

Think for a moment about the chronology of the Holocaust and the Second World War. It was a time of tremendous killing across Europe as the Einsatzgruppen swept across the Baltic states, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe.

#### How did the photo survive?

Many photographs survived because of the official role of the photographer. If you do not expect to lose a war, you have nothing to fear by photography.

#### Does it change or alter what you think of the people involved in the crimes of National Socialism? Of officers, their wives and family members, of everyday citizens?

Entire families were often wiped out in a single day – grandparents, adults and children. They were murdered in forests, Jewish cemeteries, anti-tank trenches, on the banks of rivers and in the rivers themselves, and in pits dug along the way (mostly by the victims themselves). The horror was revealed in its entirety when the postwar Extraordinary Soviet Commission began to investigate Nazi crimes and discovered that entire communities of Jews had been completely destroyed. Their fate was related, in many cases, by local neighbors (some of them collaborators), as well as the very few Jews who had survived the murder operations and lived to tell their tale.

## Questions:

**Summarize what is this photograph reveals to us considering the points below. You don't need to include all of these points but you should choose at least 3 to inform your response.**

- What is happening in the photograph?
- Where was the photograph taken?
- When was it taken? (season, year etc)
- From what vantage point is the photograph taken?
- Who do you think was taking the image?
- Why do you think this photograph was taken?
- How do you think this photograph survived?  
Why do you think it survived?
- How can we go about finding out more about this photograph?

# ACTIVITY III

## The Work of Father Patrick Desbois

### APPROACH:

Read the article about Father Desbois (Appendix I) that appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press in 2013. Father Desbois was in Winnipeg to speak to high school students about his work and his motivation. After reading the article answer the questions below.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT:

Father Patrick Desbois has spent many years researching the Holocaust, fighting anti-semitism, and building relations between Catholics and Jews. Father Desbois is a Roman Catholic priest and the President of Yahad – In Unum, a global humanitarian organization he founded in 2004 dedicated to identifying and commemorating the sites of Jewish and Roma mass executions in Eastern Europe during the Second World War. He has interviewed and recorded the testimonies of Holocaust witnesses as part of his work documenting the killing fields and unmarked graves that resulted from the actions of the Einsatzgruppen during the Holocaust.

### Questions:

- 1 Why is it important to Father Desbois to study the Holocaust and discover where victims of the Einsatzgruppen are buried?
- 2 What does Father Desbois believe is the role of the individual in society when we encounter or see human rights abuses?
- 3 Compare what Peter Silverman says about the role of local people during the killing actions to that of Father Desbois. What are some of the different ways in which people responded? Why?
- 4 What point of view does the journalist take in her article?
- 5 In what ways were the local population affected by the Holocaust?

### The following resources will provide you additional information about the Einsatzgruppen:

<https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/einsatzgruppen>  
The website of the USHMM provides a detailed overview of the Lodz Ghetto including primary source materials

<https://www.yahadinunum.org/patrick-desbois/>  
The website of Yahad in Unum (lit. together in one) the organization founded by Father Desbois.

# APPENDIX I

## Winnipeg Free Press Article on Father Desbois

### Documenting the Holocaust

#### Catholic priest dedicates life to hearing witnesses' stories

Father Patrick Desbois is coming to Winnipeg to speak to high school students and receive an honorary degree from the U of W. A tool to prevent genocide might be right in your pocket, suggests a Roman Catholic priest who has devoted the last decade to uncovering stories of Holocaust victims.

“Take out your telephone and send a picture to CNN” or another news organization, says Rev. Patrick Desbois, explaining how anyone with a cellphone camera can document human-rights abuses or other atrocities. “We see that in the world (now); one person sends an image, and it changes things.” Since 2002, the French priest has been changing how the world understands the Holocaust by documenting the deaths of more than 1.5 million Jews at the hands of the Einsatzgruppen, the Nazi mobile killing units that operated in German-occupied Europe between 1941 and 1944. Desbois visits Winnipeg next week to speak to high school students and accept an honorary degree from the University of Winnipeg. He is scheduled to participate in a discussion on indifference with Sen. Roméo Dallaire at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, May 2, at Shaarey Zedek Synagogue, 561 Wellington Cres. The free public event is jointly sponsored by the university, the synagogue and the Freeman Family Foundation Holocaust Education Centre. Intrigued initially by his grandfather’s reluctance to speak of his Second World War experiences in the Rawa-Ruska concentration camp on the border between Poland and Ukraine, Desbois decided to visit it himself. He discovered thousands of prisoners -- mostly Jewish -- had been killed and buried in mass graves during the war. Local citizens had witnessed the events and sometimes were forced to participate in the burials. Spurred on by these stories, Desbois set out to interview more witnesses and recorded the interviews, interspersed with his own story, in his 2008 book, *The Holocaust by Bullets*. Desbois now divides his time between working in Jewish-Catholic relations in his native France and interviewing witnesses through the research organization Yahad-In Unum, which he helped found in 2004. Teams from Yahad-In Unum visit communities throughout Eastern Europe for up to 17 days at a time, interviewing witnesses to events that occurred decades in the past. “Most of the time, they were forced to do things; they had no choice,” Desbois says of how citizens of the former Soviet Union were requisitioned to dig graves, remove gold teeth or otherwise assist the Germans in the atrocities dating back to 1941, when the Germans invaded the U.S.S.R. Along with hearing the stories and identifying graves, Desbois uncovered much guilt in those who were reluctant witnesses to the killings. Many of them had never before shared their stories. “These people were not free because of the German Reich, and they were not free after” the war, he says, adding they remained silent about the killings for decades. To date, Desbois and his team have conducted 3,300 interviews, collecting memories from witnesses about the locations of the killings and asking for details about the colour of army uniforms and the weather conditions in order to corroborate accounts and document the lives and deaths of Jews. “We’re fighting hard to find the last mass graves,” he explains in a telephone interview en route to Romania on another interview mission. “We give the dead back to their families, and now families are asking us to find their loved ones.” Desbois’ work helps the Jewish community and beyond understand the broader history of the Holocaust, says Belle Jarniewski, chairwoman of the Winnipeg-based Holocaust education centre. “It’s very moving to me that a Catholic priest would dedicate his life to restoring the memory and the humanity of these victims of the Shoah,” explains Jarniewski, daughter of two survivors of the Holocaust, or Shoah, as it is referred to in Hebrew. “He has gone in there, and being a Catholic priest, people were willing to talk to him. He has been able to restore humanity to these people who were murdered.” Restoring that humanity has deeply affected the 57-year-old Desbois, who

considers this work his life's mission. Now when he prays, he calls up the names of murdered Jewish children, some whom he has discovered were buried alive alongside their dead parents. "It changes your faith. You present yourself to God with all the names of people who were children when they died," he says of the impact of hearing hundreds of gruesome stories. "I am not alone when I pray to God." However disturbing the stories, Desbois believes this type of research and study is vital to prevent history from repeating itself. "If you study the Holocaust, you will be strong to fight a new genocide," he says. "The first step to fight the disease is to know the disease."

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### To learn more:

FOR more information about Rev. Patrick Desbois and his work, check out the website of Yahad-In Unum ([www.yahadinunum.org/](http://www.yahadinunum.org/)), the organization that carries out research into mass murders of Jews and Roma people in Eastern Europe between 1941 and 1944. The organization's name means "together" in Hebrew and Latin.

# APPENDIX II

## Archival Photograph of an Einsatzgruppen Killing Site

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