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COMMEMORATING THE MASS GRAVES OF THE HOLOCAUST - A CALL TO ACTION

Today is the 65th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the largest of the Nazi extermination camps. The day has rightly been designated by Germany and many other nations as a day of Holocaust commemoration.

Auschwitz and the large network of death camps set up by the Nazi regime to support an abhorrent premise of racial superiority symbolizes the degradation of the human spirit, the depths of inhumanity that lurks in human beings.

However, the state-run industrialization of murder at designated extermination camps was only part of the process of killing Europe's six million Jews, as well as Romas and Sintis, Poles, and other targets of the perverse Nazi racial ideology.

One and a half million of Holocaust victims were killed on open fields by murderers who looked into the eyes of each man, woman and child they shot. The corpses were deposited into pits that the victims were often forced to excavate themselves. The killers were largely SS units, however units of the Wehrmacht and German police units were also part of the killing operation. One of the most infamous examples of such massacres took place at Babi Jar in Ukraine. Historian Christoph Browning's book "Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland" about a Hamburg police battalion that participated in the mass killings remains a penetrating chronicle of how quickly figures of authority and group dynamics can lead "ordinary" people to cast off core moral and ethical values.

These forgotten victims of the Holocaust, whose sites of death have been largely neglected since the day they were shot, must be remembered as well on Holocaust Commemoration Day.

The fact that we are able to honor the memories of these victims is due in large part to the remarkable work of a Catholic French priest. For the past seven years, Father Patrick Desbois and his Christian-Jewish organization Yahad in Unum has made repeated trips to the Ukraine, Belarus and Russia to talk to surviving witnesses of the mass killings. Father Desbois has restored a small measure of dignity and humanity to the victims by documenting the terror they suffered in the last hours and minutes before their death.

However, Father Desbois' documentation does not alter the situation that thousands of sites throughout Eastern Europe where victims were shot have remained largely untouched since the day the killers left behind the corpses. In most cases, the dead were not buried, the graves were not sealed, and the sites remain unmarked.

In Berlin last week, Father Desbois, a man driven by a deep sense of humanity and compassion, said that a war is not over until the dead are buried. At a press conference in Berlin, he questioned the moral legitimacy of Europeans to intervene in international affairs until the issue of thousands of neglected and open grave sites is solved.

Time is quickly running out to address the situation, as there are fewer witnesses with each passing day to identify the sites. An international initiative has formed to express support for Father Desbois work and to call for action on the issue of open Holocaust gravesites. Together with Patrick Desbois, President of Yahad in Unum, General Secretary Stephan Kramer from the Central Council of Jews in Germany, President Reinhard Fuehrer from the German War Graves Commission, International Jewish Affairs Director Andrew Baker from the American Jewish Committee, Deidre Berger from the AJC Ramer Institute for German-Jewish Relations; Director Paul Shapiro from the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and Executive Director Phil Carmel from Lo Tiskach (an organization formed with support of the Claims Conference to map Jewish cemeteries and gravesites in Europe) have asked the German government to set up a task force and launch pilot projects to begin work on sealing and memorializing the gravesites.

At the recent Berlin press conference, the urgency of the issue was stressed as well by Christian Kennedy, the U.S. Special Envoy on Holocaust Affairs; Kathrin Meyer, the executive secretary of the International Holocaust Task Force; Jiri Cistecky, the head of the Prague-based Shoah Legacy Foundation, Rabbi Pinhas Goldschmidt, acting head of the Conference of European Rabbis, and Rabbi Yaacov Bleich, Chief Rabbi of the Ukraine. The initiative is also in contact with Ukrainian government representatives.

The dimensions of the project are considerable and some will ask why after so many decades it is necessary.

First and foremost, as Patrick Desbois has pointed out, the Holocaust is not over until the dead are buried. German soldiers wherever possible have rightfully found their graves; now it is time for the victims to receive a proper burial. As Phil Carmel from Lo Tiskach pointed out at the Berlin press conference, every marker put up at a mass gravesite is visible proof of the Holocaust and a valuable instrument to combat Holocaust denial.

Focusing on the issue of the mass gravesites is essential to complete our understanding of the legacy of the Holocaust, which is incomplete without addressing the issue of the Nazi government-sanctioned shooting squads that helped liquidate much of European Jewry. Only then can we confront more fully the antisemitism that drove a government to persecute, dehumanize and murder a minority fully integrated in Europe for thousands of years.

Launching an initiative to seal and memorialize these graves is not just an obligation but an opportunity, particularly for younger generations in Europe for whom the Holocaust is distant history. Through exposure and exchange, young people in various European countries can confront directly the depravity of a system that resulted ultimately in mass murder. Burying the dead and protecting the mass graves is a chance for younger generations to reflect on the legacy of the Holocaust and the lessons for their generation.

With time running out, we must act now. This is a consensus that is shared by German government officials and parliamentarians in initial discussions. An initiative to create final resting places, based on the invaluable documentation of Father Desbois, needs the cooperation of governments and international Jewish and non-Jewish organizations in order to mobilize resources in the most rapid, efficient and professional manner.

Let us seal, memorialize and protect the mass gravesites wherever possible, out of respect for the dead and respect for the fundamental principles of the inviolability of human dignity and human rights on which modern democracy is based.