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Yad Vashem and the Comprehensive History of the Holocaust

Introducing Christopher R. Browning, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, "The Origins of the Final Solution: The Fateful Months of September–October 1941," Henry and Gretl Wald Lecture, Lincoln, Nebraska, April 8, 2004

Good evening. I am Paul Royster, director of the University of Nebraska Press, who are co-publishers, with Yad Vashem, of Dr. Browning's *The Origins of the Final Solution*, which is the inaugural volume in The Comprehensive History of the Holocaust series.

I feel it is proper tonight to say a few words about our co-publisher and partner in this historical enterprise—that is, Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Authority of the state of Israel. First of all, the name: it derives from a passage in Isaiah, chapter 56:

“These are the words of the Lord: Maintain justice and do the right, for My deliverance is near, and My righteousness will be revealed. . . . One must not

say, ‘I am nothing but a barren tree.’ For those who keep My sabbaths, who choose to do My will and hold to My covenant, shall receive in My own house and within My walls a memorial better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name (in Hebrew, “yad vashem”), a name imperishable for all time. . . . For My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people. This is the word of the Lord, who brings home the outcasts of Israel, I will yet bring home all that remain to be brought in.”

Yad Vashem, was established in 1953 in Jerusalem. It is entrusted with documenting the history of the Jewish people during the Holocaust period, with preserving the memories and stories of the six million victims, and with imparting the legacy of the Holocaust for generations to come through its archives, library, school, museums and recognition of the Righteous Among the Nations.

Yad Vashem is a complex of museums, exhibits, archives, monuments, sculptures, and memorials. It holds the largest and most comprehensive repository of material on the Holocaust in the world, including documents, photographs, films, and videotaped testimonies of survivors, all accessible

and open to the public. Its Hall of Names is a tribute to the victims, recording the biographical data of millions of martyrs, as submitted by surviving families and friends. To date, Yad Vashem has assembled a computerized record of 3.2 million names of Holocaust victims.

Yad Vashem's International School for Holocaust Studies offers courses in nine languages, and sends professional staff around the world for the purpose of Holocaust education. Its International Institute for Holocaust Research coordinates and supports research, organizes conferences and colloquia, and publishes important works on the Holocaust, including memoirs, diaries, and historical studies. Its publications include *The Encyclopedia of Communities*, a 32-volume encyclopedia of the Jewish communities and towns destroyed or damaged during the Nazi regime. Its publications also include the annual *Yad Vashem Studies*, which publishes conference proceedings and scholarly articles on every aspect of the Holocaust. In all, Yad Vashem Publications has published over 200 books, diaries, and document collections in Hebrew and in English.

The Yad Vashem complex also houses an Historical Museum, an Art Museum, the Hall of Remembrance, the Children's Memorial, the Valley of the Communities, the Avenue and Garden of the Righteous Among the Nations, and the Memorial to the Deportees. Yad Vashem observes annual ceremonies on Holocaust Martyrs' and Heroes' Remembrance Day in late April, and on Victory in Europe (VE) day in early May.

Now I know you are wondering, "How did they get mixed up with Nebraska?" Well, in 1999, Nebraska was the US publisher of a volume called *Documents on the Holocaust*, edited by Yitzak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, and Abraham Margalioth, then in its 8th edition, that had originated as a Yad Vashem publication. In February 2000, Estee Du-Nour, then director of publications for Yad Vashem, approached Daniel J.J. Ross, then director of the University of Nebraska Press, about a series of 10 to 15 books, with an editorial board comprised of David Bankier, Yehuda Bauer, Yoav Gelber, Israel Gutman, Dan Michman, Dina Porat, Renée Poznanski, and Avner Shalev, and with titles commissioned from the world's leading scholars on the Holocaust.

Dan responded with great enthusiasm, and within weeks had lined up Alan Steinweis, professor of history and Jewish studies and a member of the press's Faculty advisory board, to be the press's ambassador, agent, and series editor. It was Alan who, while on a visiting appointment at Ben Gurion University of the Negev, went up to Jerusalem in May 2000, and met with the new director of publications Bella Gutterman, and then subsequently in Freiburg, Germany, with Yehuda Bauer and Renée Poznanski. The record indicates that Alan spent a great deal of time impressing the people at Yad Vashem with Nebraska's outstanding reputation for book design, something for which we heartily thank him. Alan also realized we were in competition with some of the largest commercial and university presses, and that the key to carrying off the prize was to offer a home for all the volumes. That's what we did: we brought home all that remained to be brought in. A deal was struck and basic terms agreed in early July; contract negotiations over specific language and clauses lasted through December. Signing and countersigning went on through July 2001. Meanwhile, Alan put together an editorial board for the

Nebraska side, including Doris Bergen, Peter Hayes, Susannah Heschel, and Michael Marrus.

Fortunately, the publishing contract did not call for a huge up-front commitment of funds, but it did commit the Press to publishing 15 or more very scholarly works, some of them promising to be very long and possibly with very narrow appeal and limited audience. It was agreed with Yad Vashem that each side would attempt to raise funds to defray their share of the commissioning, translation, editing, and publicity costs. Jean Cahan and Gerald Shapiro, of the Harris Center for Judaic Studies, and Terry Fairfield, Beth Brase, and Susan Norby of the University of Nebraska Foundation, helped us to approach Susan Cohn and the Ike and Roz Friedman Foundation about possible funding assistance. We were overwhelmed by their receptiveness and generosity. Their subvention of a very significant portion of the costs of publishing this Comprehensive History of the Holocaust series makes it possible to publicize this work more widely, to offer it at more affordable prices, and to devote our other resources to making it the best-looking, best-edited, and most authoritative work possible.

We are honored tonight to be joined by Mrs. Friedman, her daughter Susan Cohn, Rabbi Aryah Azriel, and members of the family. We are grateful for this opportunity to recognize their invaluable support and assistance, and we are resolved to make the best possible use of these resources at this critical time.

Still, I don't think I've answered the question "Why Nebraska, and not some East Coast publisher?" I can suggest that we are a community with a significant population from central Europe, and among whom the experience of dislocation, of rebuilding from the ashes of war and desolation are not unknown. And perhaps our partners in Jerusalem still don't know that we're not an East Coast publisher—American geography being sort of vague in their minds, and Lincoln and Omaha possibly occupying a place on their mental map somewhere just slightly west of Philadelphia.

I spoke at a gathering here just a bit over a year ago, concerning the announcement of the gift of the Friedman Foundation and of the series. I said two things that I recall—first that the Holocaust reminds us that good does not come out of evil, but that it

persists and outlasts and inevitably overcomes in that way . . . as Isaiah has it "for My deliverance is near, and My righteousness will be revealed." The second is that the study of the Holocaust requires of us a maximum commitment to truth—finding it, understanding it, passing it on to the new generations as widely and as energetically as our efforts will allow. This is the real work commissioned by the Yad Vashem—that the truth about the martyrs and heroes of the Holocaust may become an everlasting name and monument inspiring us to join the drive to a more humane future for humanity as a whole; that "he who destroys one life is as if he destroyed an entire world, and he who saves one life is as if he saved an entire universe."

Thank you.