

Historian delivers lecture to Mobile's Christian/Jewish Dialogue

By Perilla A. Wilson

MOBILE—An outrageous statement by David Irving, famous Holocaust denier, in which he stated that “more people died on the back seat of Edward Kennedy’s car in Chappaquiddick than ever died in a gas chamber at Auschwitz” was brought up in the opening statement in London’s Royal Courts of Justice where historian Robert Jan van Pelt served as the expert witness for Penguin Books and Deborah Lipstadt in 2000. Irving had brought a libel suit against them claiming that Lipstadt in her book, “Denying the Holocaust”, had falsely labeled him as a Holocaust denier. Van Pelt spoke to the Christian-Jewish Dialogue at the West Regional Branch of the Mobile Public Library about his experience as an architectural historian and “The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial”, the title of his 570 page book published in 2002.

Introduced by his friend, Dr. Donald Berry, registrar at the University of Mobile, van Pelt mesmerized his audience as he took them through the evidence he presented at the trial in a country where the burden of proof is on the defendant. The trial, held be-



VAN PELT TALK—Robert Jan van Pelt, Professor of Architecture at the University of Waterloo in Canada spoke to the Christian-Jewish Dialogue at the Mobile Public Library. He is seen here signing a copy of his most recent book, “The Case for Auschwitz,” for Ricky Voit of the Mobile Jewish Welfare Fund, left. His visit was arranged by co-chairs of the Dialogue, Paul and Mary Philben, standing, center. On the right is Nancy Anlage, special events coordinator for the Mobile Public Library.

intentional. He said that the first kind involves those who intend to give evidence, some sympathetic, some not so. There are three sources that include: the victims, among them survivors (eyewitnesses) and those who left written records of their experiences; the bystanders (Poles, French, Dutch, Italians, etc.) and lastly; the perpetrators, the nazis.

The non-intentional evidence is that which is interpreted, not created. It is evidence that is reconstructed through observation, that cannot talk back about

U.S. imposed different conditions; that the lack of a Prussian blue pigment in the walls at Auschwitz were due to a difference in composition of cyanide and carbon dioxide; etc. The defense required that their expert witness, van Pelt, also have a working knowledge of chemistry.

In all, he spent five days on the stand in cross-examination. He had “to assemble a convergence of all calculations like the designer of the operation.” He found that giving testimony to prove the Holocaust events pos-

fore a judge but no jury, hinged on Lipstadt’s defenders being able to prove that there was historical evidence for the gas chambers and killings at Auschwitz. Van Pelt outlined the two kinds of evidence, intentional and non-

the way in which it is interpreted. Some of this is considered demographic. One of the questions here was what happened to 6 million victims and documents about them. It is known that the Germans destroyed the architectural archives for the death camps as liberation appeared likely in 1944 and ’45. However, they forgot to destroy the evidence of the architectural documents at Auschwitz. This collection helped reconstruct how the camp was organized through drawings and blueprints and these, along with the architectural ruins, were pivotal.

Van Pelt, now a Professor in the School of Architecture, University of Waterloo, Canada, was able to refute an earlier denier’s claim that a comparison of tests in an American gas chamber was not compatible with conditions at Auschwitz; that the speed with which the victims were killed was vastly different because of amounts of cyanide used in U.S. vs. Auschwitz; that safety precautions for eye-witnesses in

sible, in front of survivors, was the most difficult because it made him feel like “a technician of death.” He said that as he “found holocaust denial obscene, this was unbearable,” when faced with testimony under the circumstances. However, he persevered. Lipstadt used five experts and no eye-witnesses. The judge awarded Lipstadt and Penguin Books two and a half million pounds for expenses to be paid by Irving. They have yet to see a penny and Irving continues in the United States today to be, as Lipstadt claims, the most dangerous of all deniers, the only historian to do so.

The next scheduled speaker for the Dialogue is Father Larry Frizzell, director of Judeo-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University, according to Paul and Mary Filben, co-ordinators of the Mobile Area Christian-Jewish Dialogue. His topic will be, “The Passion: From Gospels to Gibson” on Tuesday January 6, 2004 at 7:00 p.m. at St. Ignatius Church’s Marian Hall.