



## AJC FELLOWS E-NEWSLETTER

April 2, 2009

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Welcome to the spring edition of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows E-Newsletter. Thanks to the generous support of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, the E-Newsletter allows us to keep in touch about the developments of the Center and the Fellows. If you have any questions about the newsletter or would be interested in writing an article for a future edition, please do not hesitate to contact Shiri B. Sandler at [ssandler@mjhny.org](mailto:ssandler@mjhny.org).

It's a busy spring at the Center and at MJH, so we hope you take a moment to catch up with everything that's been going on in Oświęcim and New York.

We'd like to welcome the newest cohort of Fellows! Accepted at the end of March, the Fellows come from universities across the U.S. and Canada. We're thrilled to have them and will be introducing them to you in the next newsletter.

For the second year, we are offering the opportunity to fund individual Fellowships. Due to the Congressional cutback on earmarks, the State Department has been unable to offer the grant opportunity that funded the program prior to 2008. For \$15,000, individuals or organizations can provide an unmatched learning opportunity for college graduates and graduate students. If you are interested in funding a future Fellowship or know someone who would be, please contact Shiri at the above address.

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### **IN THIS ISSUE:**

***A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz***

***The Ongoing Need for Dialogue***

***Symbols of Anti-Semitism or Sincerity?***

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**A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz**

Dear All,

With spring approaching, our preparations for the *New Life* exhibit are quickly advancing. The exhibition is scheduled to open May 5. While researching in Israel in December, we met with 19 survivors from Oświęcim and their families. With the help of our Israeli team, we photographed and filmed the survivors and their families. The exhibit will include contemporary and historical photographs, as well as a film in which the survivors, their children, and grandchildren discuss their feelings towards Poland, Israel, and Oświęcim. The focus of the exhibit is life after the Holocaust and post-war life in Israel, which is where the majority of the Oświęcim survivors emigrated. Additionally, the exhibition also deals with the post-war years in Oświęcim, as a few of the survivors featured lived in the town for several years after the war. One woman in the exhibit with a particularly unique story was born in post-war Oświęcim and lived there with her family until 1962.



AJC staff and *New Life* crew with survivor Gita Weisler in Israel

In January, the AJC held its opening of an exhibit by Fay Grajower, an American artist whose works focus on the Polish-Jewish experience and her own Polish-Jewish roots. We were pleased to have her at the opening and to have her run a workshop about her art for local high school students.

In February, we held a book launch, *I was Looking at the Lips... Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto*, with its editor Dr. Piotr Weiser. The diary was written by a woman named Maryla, who was most likely killed at the end of the ghetto uprising. This is all we know about her. Her diary was found at the Majdanek camp; only the last section of the diary was found. It describes the final days of March and April 1943 and it ends as those crowded in the bunkers listen to the noise of fighting quieting around them.

In March we presented a special film series, *Jewish Motifs: 2008 Retrospective*, twice weekly screenings of the best films from Warsaw's 2008 *Jewish Motifs* film festival. This is the second year we've done this project and this year we are showing 24 films from Holland, Israel, Poland, the UK, and the USA.

The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum now publishes the English version of its monthly newsletter *Axis Oswiecim-People-History-Culture* which covers the four Oświęcim institutions: the Auschwitz Museum, the Center for Dialogue and Prayer, the International Youth Meeting Center, and the AJC. To read it, please click [here](#).

Finally if you are on Facebook, I encourage you to become a fan of the AJC to stay in touch, get access to pictures of programs, and receive updates.

Regards,

Tomasz Kuncewicz  
Director  
Auschwitz Jewish Center

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## ***The Ongoing Need for Dialogue***

by Kim Frumin (Fellow 2001)

### ***Mumbai Jewish Center is Stormed and 6 Die*** ***Anti-Semitic Attacks on the Rise in France and Germany*** ***Synagogue in Venezuela Vandalized in Break-in***

As I read the morning headlines and struggle to find a vestige of hope in an increasingly turbulent world, I am repeatedly flooded with memories of the summer I spent as a student scholar at the Auschwitz Jewish Center. That experience remains the most poignant of my life and still nourishes me with faith in humanity. As a student scholar in 2001, I helped disparate communities to support and learn from one another, while educating and preserving the memory of pre-war Jewish life.

At the Auschwitz Jewish Center, I found the opportunity to bridge the past and future, by engaging the present generation of Jews and non-Jews in the study of Jewish life and culture. By facilitating educational tours, implementing a multi-national dialogue session, organizing a Tisha B'av commemoration, and forging friendships with Polish and German students in Oswiecim, I was able to work with the diverse communities served by the Auschwitz Jewish Center. I was immersed in an international community of visitors seeking knowledge, dialogue, prayer, and comfort.

"What was a typical day like?" I have been asked.

There never was a typical day, as at any given moment students from Germany, a group of Israelis, a teen tour from the United States, a traveler from Portugal, or a Holocaust survivor from Oświęcim would arrive.

Most surprising were the deep collegial friendships that we forged with Polish and German students living in the area. Together we had the chance to discuss the complexity of our historical perspectives and reflect upon educating others about Polish-Jewish relations, pre-war Jewish life, and the Holocaust.

The recent events of anti-Semitism are something I naively never imagined that I would witness in my lifetime. I anticipated that the major challenge my generation would face would be in preserving the memory of the Holocaust. However, it has now become painfully apparent that our challenge as human beings, as citizens of a global world, as Jews is ALSO to provide a forum for dialogue, cultural exchange, learning, and peace. I believe that the Auschwitz Jewish Center does all of this and more—everyday.

Although I have not visited the Auschwitz Jewish Center in over seven years, I now use the education, multi-national dialogue, and interpersonal skills honed there in a very different location—on *Sesame Street*. Currently, I serve as the Educational Content Specialist for International *Sesame Street* co-productions in Israel, Northern Ireland, Russia, and Brazil, overseeing the content, research, and outreach. With the endearing antics of original, local Muppets (and some of your old American favorites), the multi-media programs strive to educate young children and their families, caregivers, and teachers about positive resolution of conflict, mutual respect, and appreciation of similarities and differences. Although the cast of characters is entirely different, the message of dialogue, cultural exchange, learning,

and peace (especially in co-productions in Israel and Northern Ireland) feels just the same.

It is a privilege to be associated with the Auschwitz Jewish Center and to be connected with all of you—an extraordinary network of scholars, dreamers, activists, and educators—who affect real change in this world. And whether you are an American, a Pole, a Jew, a Christian, or even a Muppet, the story is the same—it is up to all of us to fervently preserve and educate about the memory of the painful past while working tirelessly to build a more unified and just future.

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## ***Symbols of Anti-Semitism or Sincerity?***

By James Regier (2008 Ainsberg Fellow)

When I first applied to the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program, I knew it would involve visits to Auschwitz, Belzec, Krakow, Lodz, and Warsaw, all of which are necessary for a student of modern German history. I did not know, or expect, that the program would leave me with a strong sense of inspiration for the future. With its intensive emphasis on life, the AJC has made me more familiar with the Jewish community in Poland prior to the Shoah and a reminder that the Shoah, for all its destruction, was not the end. Meanwhile, in the face of anti-Semitism, the desire for dialogue and understanding is strong and growing, while the Jewish presence in many Polish towns and villages seem to truly be missed.



The Fellows and AJC staff Maciek Zabierowski exploring the synagogues of Krakow, summer 2008

When we first arrived in Poland, it was the end of the annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival. Klezmer music filled the streets of the Kazomierz district in the evenings, while during the days, lectures were offered to educate the Polish public about the Jewish heritage of Krakow. I was not sure what to make of it. There did not seem to be many Jews in the audience, the performers were mainly Americans, and the atmosphere seemed more Disney than real.

Similar thoughts came to mind as we visited some of the former *Schtetlach* and toured a synagogue that had been converted to a museum in Szydlow. People from the town had collected whatever relics they could find of the town's former Jewish residents and placed them in the synagogue, whether or not they fit. In pre-war Poland, larger than life statues of David and Moses, for example, would have had no place in a synagogue. In the lobby, meanwhile, literature and postcards were available, along with images of Jewish elders counting money, which one could buy for health and luck. While these present connotations seemed positive, the images themselves were quite similar to the ones that had previously been used in anti-Semitic propaganda.

In both cases, perhaps there is more than meets the eye. While the representation of Jews and Judaism in the Szydlow synagogue museum is problematic, the intent is

probably not malicious. More likely, it is a misguided attempt of the residents of Szydłow to pay tribute to their former neighbors, with whom they were acquainted but not necessarily familiar. In the case of the closing concert of the Krakow Jewish festival, though the audience was largely non-Jewish, they were nevertheless there to explore some aspect of Jewish culture. There were a number of Polish Jews present for the Festival, indicating that perhaps it was not so artificial after all. Both Szydłow and the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival represent good intentions that can be used to teach and learn about the unfamiliar other. These factors, combined with Polish organizations such as the Committee for Dialogue Among Nations and a growing academic interest to explore the history of Jewish life in Poland, indicate that the time for dialogue is ripe.

The process of building greater appreciation of ourselves and others within the human community has been one of the major factors that attracted me to the study of history. Greater understanding of one's neighbors must begin with a knowledge of their past. The AJC's program of intercultural dialogue and education on Jewish life and the Holocaust has helped to broaden and shape my future research endeavors. Indeed, it has even helped to shape my dissertation, which will focus on the intercultural interactions between ethnic Germans, Poles, and Jews in the city and province of Poznan from 1918 until 1945. I would like to thank the directors, organizers, speakers, sponsors, and all whose hard work and dedication have made the experience possible.

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