



Auschwitz Jewish Center E-Newsletter

January 20, 2010

Welcome to the first edition of the expanded Auschwitz Jewish Center 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 with Fellows, participants in the American Service Academies Program, and supporters about the developments of the Center. If you have any questions about the newsletter or would be interested in writing an article for a future edition, please contact Shiri B. Sandler at ssandler@mjhny.org.

For the third 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 address above.

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A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Dear All,

I hope you all have had a wonderful holiday season and a happy New Year!

During the fall of 2009, a number of interesting events were held at the AJC. The European Day of Jewish Culture on September 6 saw the Center filled with locals participating in workshops and study tours, with the highlight being a workshop for children on the holiday of Sukkot (The Festival of Booths). On November 29, the 70th anniversary of the destruction of the Great Synagogue in Oświęcim was commemorated with a graffiti art workshop. Under the direction of noted graffiti painter and social activist Dariusz Paczkowski, Oświęcim residents recreated the façade of the synagogue using graphic representations. The artistic result of the event is on display at the newly renovated square in front of the Center.



The Mayor of Oświęcim and German Consul take part in the Great Synagogue Commemoration.

As a result of the renovations, the Center receives increased exposure and visibility in the town. New pictures of the square and more information on our programming and events are available at our website, www.ajcf.org, and on our Facebook page.

In addition to being filled with events, the last months of 2009 were very busy here in Oświęcim as staff worked on our educational programs for high school students. For the third year, our signature Polish education program, *My Former Neighbors*, is in full swing.

Additionally, we continue to work on our new initiative, *Why Do We need Tolerance?*, which is the first comprehensive anti-discrimination program organized in the vicinity of the former camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It combines historical knowledge about the Holocaust with building awareness on contemporary dangers of prejudice. The program consists of four components: workshops for high school students that follow their own visits to the camp sites, weekend seminars for teachers, workshops on Poland's minority groups called *Pioneers of Tolerance*, and an essay contest on the reasons for tolerance. For more information on this new program, visit www.poconatolerancja.pl, where you can see the design of the project.

With best wishes for a happy and healthy 2010,

Tomek Kuncewicz
Director
Auschwitz Jewish Center

So This Is Poland

By Kelsey Bankert (Jaffa and Larry Feldman Fellow 2009)

We sat around a long wooden table covered with dirty plates, scattered silverware, and empty water glasses just out of reach. Tomek was asking us what we learned in Poland. We were answering one by one, and sometimes together, our enthusiasm for our shared experience was bubbling up and out. I knew that what we were really doing was saying goodbye, but our last evening in Poland felt a little like celebration. It was the sigh of relief before a wry



Fellows and AJC staff at rescuer Janina Rosciszewska's home.

smile. Poland had shaken us up. It asked us if we all knew so much about the war after all; it forced us to see we didn't know half as much as we thought we did. This is hard for historians. This is hard for anyone. But what good is knowledge, are questions, if they are asked out of turn? If they are assumptions instead of inquiries? We all came to Poland with ideas. Ideas about the Polish people and their memory of the war. Monolithic meta-narratives were handed to us through many scholarly channels until we questioned if this was all there was. Was Poland a land of collaborators? Was Poland a land without Jews? How to know? Except to go.

And so we went and we found our answers. We found them when a Polish woman told us about hiding Jews in her home during the war, despite the dangers. We found them in the young boy who single-handedly cares for a long abandoned Jewish cemetery. We found answers in the Jewish survivors who had remained in Poland after the war, because this was their home and they loved it. We loved it too. We saw clearly that the intricacies of any culture are difficult to dissect, to hold steady up to the light for clear evaluation. War is tragedy. It changes a people. It changes the landscape. It makes us more vulnerable, and braver, at the same time.

And it was so beautiful. Alongside all else, it was beautiful. There was the quiet bustle to Krakow, the whirlwind energy and ghosts of war in Warsaw, and the long views in the south of the country over mountains and valleys so green it almost hurt. All around us was a world contradictory in nature and effortlessly beautiful because of those contradictions. It was a country of loss, pain, suffocation under oppression. It was a country of perseverance, stubbornness, faithfulness through all trials. On Sundays, the Polish churchyards were filled with families, the sanctuaries overflowing. The bowed heads resemble that of a king who kneels, but only to accept his crown. It is the small concession in exchange for the gift of nobility and fortitude. That is Poland. That is beauty.

Reflections on the American Service Academies Program

By Cadet Theodore Labeledz, United States Air Force Academy (2009)

When people ask me what I learned about the Holocaust during my time in Poland, my frightening inability to respond perpetuates the emotions – namely pain – I felt during my journey. Part of this pain is born from knowing of humanity’s unwillingness to stop genocide after the secrets of the Holocaust were revealed – because the world did not learn its lesson from the near complete annihilation of the European Jewry. I do not yet entirely know what I have learned from the Holocaust – I am not sure I will ever know completely. What I do know and what I will share are my reflections on some of the darkest moments in human history.



ASAP 2009 participants at the AJC Dinner at the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust.
Photo credit: Melanie Einzig

After spending several weeks intensely studying the Holocaust, I quickly learned there was no resolution to this tragedy. Walking through areas like Kazimierz in Krakow showed me that the wounds of the Holocaust have not healed – that they will never heal. The war ended and the camps were liberated, but the pain and suffering did not end. Those who survived were left to piece their lives back together – but the pieces were gone. I try to imagine the millions of Jews in Poland before the war and remember that now there are mere thousands. Europe will never be the same – the world will never be the same – the near extinction of an entire culture will never be healed.

Countless times – early in our journey – I found comfort in thinking that the memory of the lives lost during the Holocaust would serve as an indelible scar on human history and forever influence the humanity of our decisions. Many say that we study this tragedy so that the world will never forget and so the world will never bear witness to such an occurrence ever again. Sadly, the world idly watched as humanity failed repeatedly in forgotten places like Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It pains me, and the question still haunts me, to ask why continue to remember, study, and bear witness to this tragedy if the world has such a short memory. We hope these things will never happen again, but genocide has. Now, I find myself questioning what the purpose is in preserving this memory if the world will only forget. I am now left in search of my own meaning...

My journey may be over, but I am left with more questions now than when the trip first began. I have more knowledge of the events that took place during the Holocaust, but I am still puzzled by the limitlessness of human cruelty. Now I am left struggling to find hope for the world I must live in and one day raise my children in. Will our innovations generate peace and prosperity, or will we use them to destroy one another over our petty differences? As the world quickly grows smaller, clashes of culture, religion, and ideology will become the territorial disputes of the past. The question for us is how we will deal with these conflicts. Will we remember the lessons

the world forgot about the Holocaust, or will mankind continue to accept bloodshed as our only means to coexist?

So, where does the end of this journey leave me? I undoubtedly am now confronted with seemingly unanswerable questions – but I also have a lifetime ahead of me in which to ponder their answers. More importantly, I must decide how this trip will change me. In a few short years, I will be commissioned as a second lieutenant in the United States Air Force. Although my initial responsibilities will likely be meager, this trip and the subsequent reflection have catalyzed my thinking about my future responsibilities. It is very unlikely that I will ever have the power or influence to prevent genocide or mass military atrocities, but the likelihood of me being placed in a position – sometime in my career – where lives hinge on my decisions is very real. I will likely never encounter genocide, but I will certainly have the opportunity to prevent other war crimes that could result in innocent bloodshed. Ultimately, I remain only one voice, but perhaps my experiences during my journey and my ability to bear witness will be enough to make the world a more peaceful place for the generations to come.

Absence

By Meghan Waldow (2009)

Given the opportunity to reflect upon my experience in Poland as an AJC Fellow over the past four months, numerous thoughts come to mind. I could use this opportunity to chronicle the influence that survivor testimony heard throughout our journey has had on me. Or, I could reflect upon the bravery exhibited by Janina Rosciszewska and her family while hiding several Jews in their home throughout the course of the war. Maybe I could write about how moved I was while listening to Jakub Mueller's talk about his crusade to keep Jewish history



The remains of the synagogue in Dzialoszyce.

alive in Nowy Sacz. Perhaps I could attempt to explain the feeling that came over me as I walked through the basement of Block 9 in Auschwitz. Maybe the most complicated to attempt to explain is the wide array of emotions that most of us felt throughout the course of our trip. I don't think any of us were prepared for the emotional rollercoaster that we rode everyday of our historic journey. For me, personally, I simply could not shake this sense of sadness that came over me with every *shtetl*, city, or town that we visited. I could not help but be aware of both the *absence of representation* and the *representation of absence* of Jewish life in Poland.

During our trips to former *shtetls*, as well as while walking through museum exhibits showcasing the loss of Jewish life in Poland, I could not help but feel lost. Sadness is an obvious response to seeing images of Jewish life destroyed during the Nazi period. But I felt empty, hollow, and cheated. Walking through city streets and seeing the remains of former Jewish houses of worship and the sites of once glorious

examples of a thriving Jewish life, I became angry, and distraught. I found myself yearning to understand, to comprehend, just how something like this was able to happen not so long ago. To this day, I don't think that people realize just how prevalent Jewish life was in Poland before the rise of the National Socialists. That said, it is almost impossible to ignore the remnants of the annihilation of a community of people that once made up such a stronghold of society. By recognizing my own anger and sadness upon seeing such sites, I could not help but wonder what the reactions were of Poles who now live among these ruins. What do they know? What questions do the children ask? Are destroyed synagogues in Poland so prevalent that people no longer notice them?

Throughout our journey, we were lucky enough to meet several people who have taken an active interest in the Jewish history of their towns and have made it their duty to both publicize and reconstruct the numerous Jewish stories of their individual communities. Seeing such an interest comforted me enormously throughout an emotionally exhausting journey. It was refreshing and reassuring to see people both young and old make it their mission to recapture such a rich part of their nation's past. These devoted citizens had an immeasurable impact on me. In the midst of such absence and loss, the enthusiasm and passion that these amazing people had for recapturing Jewish life in their towns filled me with hope and optimism. In that way, I cannot emphasize enough the indefatigable support of Tomek Kuncewicz and Maciek Zabierowski throughout our journey. Our fearless leaders taught us so much more than they probably realize and their devotion and loyalty to this important cause are inspiring.

For me, the most incredible and powerful part of the journey came in the skeletons of synagogues that we encountered throughout our *shtetl* tours. The silence of these sites was absolutely deafening for me. The absence of such an important societal group serves as a constant reminder to me. The fact that evidence of their existence still abounds throughout Poland only heightens the intensity and acknowledgement of their dismissal. There are more Jews in Germany today than there are in Poland. What does that mean?

For me, the measure of any great scholastic undertaking is the increase in questions that one unearths. As a humbled member of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows, though I've answered so many of the questions with which I started the program, I now have newer, harder, questions to answer about the past, present, and future of Jewish life in Poland. The experiences that I had as an AJC Fellow will stay with me for the entirety of my life. It is my hope to be able to use my broadened and personalized knowledge on this significant event to reach out to students and become a better teacher. Knowledge is power. And power, as we all know, can change everything.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center and the Museum of Jewish Heritage thank the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture for its support.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program has been supported by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.





www.ajcf.org