



AJC FELLOWS E-NEWSLETTER

December 3, 2008

Welcome to the 5th edition of the quarterly 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 like to contribute an article for a future edition, please contact Shiri B. Sandler at ssandler@mjhny.org.

Applications for the 2009 Fellows Program are now available [here](#). If you know anyone who would be an appropriate applicant to the program, please do not hesitate to pass the application along to them. Applications are due on February 2, 2009.

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.

Happy New Year and best wishes from all of us at AJC and MJH!

IN THIS ISSUE:

A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Memorial or Memento? Holocaust Sites and Public History

The Authentic Component of Holocaust Education

Fellows Updates

A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Hello all!

It is a very busy time at the AJC, but I am excited to take some time to keep you up to date. At this beginning of the new school year, the AJC is filled with Polish students participating in the educational program *My Former Neighbors*. We have enhanced last year's program with the addition of two new workshops, *Holocaust-Shoah-Zagłada* and *Polish Heroes* (on Polish rescuers). We have also created an art competition for students who have finished the *My Former Neighbors* workshops, which asks them to create art on the themes of the workshops.

This summer, we were pleased to welcome actress Tovah Feldshuh to the Center. Ms. Feldshuh was in Poland preparing for her play *Irena's Vow*, which deals with the story of Irena Gut, a Polish Catholic, who saved Jews during the Shoah.



The Chief Rabbi of the U.K., Sir Jonathan Sacks, with other religious leaders at the AJC

Our fall featured two interesting programs for the public. The first was a presentation by Dr. Natasza Styrna on Jewish painters of Krakow, with the emphasis on the work of Leon Schoenker, who was closely tied to Oświęcim and who was one of the most prominent inhabitants of the town. Dr. Styrna curated the first exhibit on Krakow Jewish painters which was presented at the Krakow Jewish Museum. The other event was the screening of a new film on Jewish Oświęcim made by students and teachers from the local high school, entitled *Oshpitsin: To Save from Oblivion*. An independent project that utilized AJC testimonies and archival material of both Jewish and Christian townspeople, the film successfully depicts the Jewish history of Oświęcim. We will be preparing a version with English subtitles, and we will make that available online.

At the beginning of October, the AJC welcomed two new volunteers from the European Voluntary Service: Melanie Engler from Germany and Johanna Taufner from Austria. Melanie and Johanna have been involved in educating German-speaking student groups who visit the Center.

In November, the AJC was visited by The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams and the Chief Rabbi of the U.K. Sir Jonathan Sacks. They were accompanied by roughly 180 school students and teachers, as well as the leaders of the British Baha'i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Sikh, and Zoroastrian faiths.

At the end of November, I went to Amsterdam to make a presentation about the AJC at the conference of European Jewish Museums. Following that, staff member Artur Szyndler and I traveled together to Israel to work on the New Life exhibit and participate in the seminar at Yad Vashem for educators.

All the best for 2009!

Tomasz Kuncewicz
Director
Auschwitz Jewish Center

Memorial or Memento? Holocaust Sites and Public History

By Waitman Beorn (Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow 2008)

As historians, we often are tempted to expect that everyone visiting museums or historical sites should be as moved and fascinated as we are, especially when those places are directly related to our interests. In many ways, the resulting feeling of disappointment and frustration we may feel when we accept reality is amplified at Holocaust sites, which undeniably seem to demand reverence, commemoration, and contemplation. Yet, what *can* we expect from the public as they experience Holocaust sites? Or, better, what *should* we expect?



Photo by Waitman Beorn

As a visitor to Poland with the Fellows program this summer, I, too, struggled with this difficult issue. The varied uses of these sites rapidly became apparent. In Kasimierz, the formerly Jewish area of Krakow, tourists flock to eat at “authentic” but not kosher “Jewish-style” restaurants. The area is even complete with fake storefronts with Jewish-sounding names. While visiting the former concentration camp of Plaszow, I saw a father teaching his son to ride a bike on the site where Amon Goeth burned the exhumed bodies of his victims. During our visits to former synagogues, we saw some restored, some abandoned, and some re-used with little or no mention of their significance.

Auschwitz, too, presented a variety of experiences. The Fellows were rapidly pushed through Block 11 by a French tour guide with school children in tow. Tourists from Krakow “saw” the site in 2 hours before re-boarding their tour buses for the salt mines. A group of Israeli policemen in uniform posed for photos by the “Arbeit macht frei” gate. Parents with children in strollers walked through the gas chambers. I ate lunch at a café located beside the former admission building where prisoners were processed. Though not all visitors came with the same level of historical interest, one could not help but be impressed by the sheer numbers of visitors. Indeed, without the visitors themselves, discussions of content and presentation are moot.

This, then, seems to be one of the fundamental debates surrounding the public presentation of Holocaust sites: how far can we distill and summarize the complex and important histories of the Holocaust before important distinctions are lost, painful facts glossed over, and difficult questions avoided? Most outside of the academic community are not interested in the subtleties of interpretation and often lack the background to appreciate them. Moreover, very few visitors to historic sites are interested in reading long, tedious historical narratives which would give a visitor a more complex and detailed history of a site.

Even as a historian, I believe that the first goal for Holocaust sites is to get visitors in the door, not to create Holocaust experts. It seems to me that the primary lessons of the Holocaust, the ones most relevant to us today do not require footnotes and archival sources. If nothing else, visitors to Holocaust sites should understand that Auschwitz was, essentially, built on intolerance...and was built gradually. But, the fact that not all visitors read or investigate all the historical presentations does not

absolve the historian from providing as complex and factual a discussion as possible, for those who do wish to look deeper.

One cannot, however, separate the site from the history. I believe Holocaust history can be *experienced*; it simply cannot be recreated. One can read that a thousand human beings were kept in a barracks at Birkenau, but one cannot *feel* that fact without experiencing it in the relevant space. The sheer size of Birkenau highlights (and one might say symbolizes) the massive, inhuman scale of the Holocaust. Yet, the depiction of personal stories in Kanada impresses upon visitors that the Holocaust is really a collection of millions of individual journeys. I feel that, in many ways, Birkenau represents a very effective combination of presentation styles. Enough historical context is provided to allow visitors to understand what they are seeing, yet the historical presentation does not overload or detract from the physical space in which it is displayed.

This fall I visited the Neuengamme concentration camp outside of Hamburg. It was a cold, gray day and there were only a handful of visitors. The contrast to the bustle of visitors to Auschwitz was striking. As I reflect upon my visit to Poland, more and more, I am simply grateful that there ARE visitors. It is the job of the historian to offer explanation, not to propagandize or require some essential "minimum" experience from those who visit these sites. I am optimistic enough to believe that all visitors take away something from a visit to Auschwitz. A synagogue standing in ruins in the middle of the small Polish town of Dzialoszyce is still standing there, bearing witness, and, in some way, still a part of that community. In the end, it seems that the worst thing tourists can do in these Holocaust sites is...to stop coming.

Waitman Beorn is a Ph.D. candidate in Modern German History at the University of North Carolina. He is currently doing doctoral research in Stuttgart, Germany.

The Authentic Component of Holocaust Education

By Irene Resenly (Fellow 2007)

As I look back and reflect on the time I have spent in the field of Holocaust Education, I see that my graduate work, my employment at the Museum, and my time as a Fellow have influenced the niche I want to create in the field.

I recently graduated from New York University with a master's degree in Holocaust Education. Instead of completing a more traditional master's program in History or Museum Studies, I chose to attend Gallatin's School of Individualized Study, which allowed me to gain a background in the interdisciplinary aspects of Holocaust Education from some of the field's most prominent scholars. In the summer between my first and second years at Gallatin, I became a Fellow. My time as a Fellow had a strong impact on how I viewed educating students about the Holocaust.



2007 Fellows in the "Radegast" memorial to the Lodz ghetto

The combination of academic and emotional learning that I experienced as a Fellow struck at the very heart of what I wanted to achieve when working with students. When the Fellows visited the Orthodox synagogue in Warsaw, once home to a flourishing congregation, I was shocked to find that they could not make a minyan. After learning about Oscar Schindler, we walked through a bustling park that was once home to Plaszow, the concentration camp run by a well-known ruthless Nazi. On several occasions, we even walked through the infamous gate of Auschwitz to hear lectures from the museum staff or have an emotionally jarring tour of the site. The feeling of connection that grew within me from these experiences was what I hoped to give the students, but how do educators reproduce what one experiences at an authentic site with students in a classroom in New York or New Jersey?

In the months after I returned from Poland, I became the Assistant Museum Educator for Internships at the Museum. In this position, I have had the privilege of assisting with three groups of Lipper Interns—college-aged interns—and one class of High School Apprentices. With every group, my colleagues and I have faced the challenge of how to make this material accessible and meaningful to each and every student so that they, in turn, can teach others to do the same. Regardless of age, familial background, or prior familiarity with the content matter, every intern can find some aspect of the Holocaust he or she relates to through the Museum's primary sources: artifacts. While some might be moved to tears by Yocheved Farber, a young girl from Vilna whose toy loom shows how her life was brutally cut short in a children's roundup, others might be inspired to stand up for justice after learning about partisans in Poland. Through artifacts, interns connect with the human component of the Holocaust and, in turn, are able to tap into the humanity of those to whom they are teaching.

When I was writing my own Holocaust curriculum for my thesis, I wanted to bring the feeling of connecting to those artifacts, standing in the synagogue in Warsaw, walking through those gates, to the students of my curriculum. I realized that what worked for our interns and visiting students of many ages, seeing artifacts, would work for the twelfth graders for whom my curriculum was meant. I couldn't take my students to Poland, but in a way, through the Museum's artifacts and other primary sources, I could bring them as close to Poland as their classrooms would let them go.

My goal is that as an educator I will be able to empower young students to take responsibility for their own Holocaust learning. Students needed the tools to understand the voices of the history in order to be moved emotionally by them. Just as going to Poland as a Fellow brought me closer to understanding the realities of the Holocaust in a way reading could not, using primary sources with students allows them to address the historical and moral complexities of the Holocaust and enables them to empathize more with the history and its victims.

Irene Ann Resenly is a 2007 Fellow and the Assistant Museum Educator for Internships at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

Fellows Updates

Waitman Beorn (Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow 2008) was the researcher for the Museum of Jewish Heritage's exhibition *The Shooting of Jews in Ukraine: Holocaust By Bullets*. Since Waitman is in Germany and won't see the exhibition, he asks all the New York 2008-ers to go see it for him!

Liz Kilstein (Fellow 2007) moved back to New York City in August to begin a Root

Tilden Kern D'Agostino Fellowship in Women's & Family Advocacy at NYU Law School.

Avie Robinson (Butnick Family Fellow 2008) became engaged to Daniel Bertaccini in October!

Joanna Sliwa (Fred and Nadine Rosen Fellow 2008) has moved to Worcester, Massachusetts to start the Ph.D. program in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University and is immersed in the program. She misses her cohort and AJC staff and asks all 2008-ers to send her pictures from the summer, as her computer was stolen and hers are all gone!

Barry Stiefel (Fellow 2002) graduated with his Ph.D. in History in May from Tulane University and is now Visiting Assistant Professor at the College of Charleston in South Carolina, where he is teaching classes on historic preservation and synagogue architectural history. His dissertation was on "The History and Preservation of the Synagogues of the Atlantic World, 1636-1822."

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