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## AJC FELLOWS E-NEWSLETTER

September 4, 2008

Welcome to the fall 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](mailto:ssandler@mjhny.org).

The 2008 Fellows Program finished on July 23, 2008, funded in part by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany and the six named Fellowships: the Ainsberg Fellow, Butnick Fellow, Fred and Nadine Rosen Fellow, Helen and Morris Revitz Fellow, the Jaffa and Larry Feldman Fellow, and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow. If you are interested in funding a future Fellowship or know someone who would be, please contact Shiri at the above. For more information on this year's program, please read the articles below.

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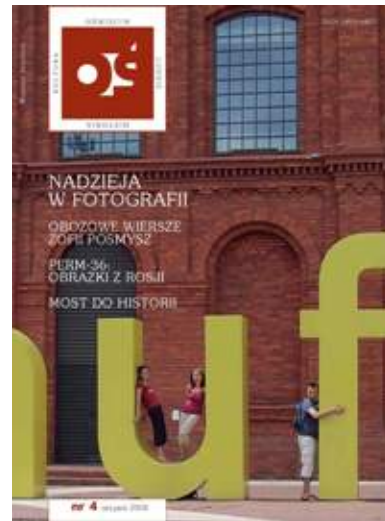
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## A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Dzień dobry!

I am writing to you on a sunny, summer day in Oświęcim. I am very pleased to let you know that we were awarded a grant from the Task Force for Holocaust Education and Research for our new exhibit, *New Life*, which will feature survivors from Oświęcim and their progeny now living in Israel. It will present their lives after the Shoah and discuss their relationships to Oświęcim and Poland, as well as to Israel. In addition, it will examine the difficult experience of returning home after the Holocaust, using Oświęcim as a microcosm of a Polish-Jewish experience in a small town during this time.

As in the past, the summer at the Center has been devoted to two extraordinary educational programs, but we have also had a number of special events at the Center.



Cover of 2008 issue of Os magazine

This past May was the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the State of Israel. Together with the Israeli Embassy and the town of Oświęcim, we presented a number of events in celebration: the screening of films on the first years of Israel; a lecture by Prof. Edyta Gawron of Krakow's Jewish Studies Department; and a talk by Paweł Smoleński – a writer and noted journalist of *Gazeta Wyborcza* - who discussed the current situation in Israel and his new book, *Izrael już nie frunie (Israel Doesn't Fly Anymore)*. To introduce local primary school students to the Hebrew alphabet, we created a series of workshops that used Hebrew versions of familiar cartoons, which was the highlight of the events.

This summer students arrived to attend our two immersion programs: the **American Service Academies Program** for US cadets and midshipmen (read more about it in Shiri's article) and the **Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program - Bridge to History**. The programs went very smoothly with exceptional involvement of their participants. I was particularly impressed with the level of maturity and both intellectual and emotional sophistication expressed during the review sessions. As always, we strongly emphasized the need to confront our own preconceptions and prejudices in order to become more empathetic towards others. It seems that Auschwitz and the events of the Holocaust are the ideal vehicle for exploring such issues and becoming vigilant to the instances of various forms of xenophobia today. For those of you who read Polish, there are two articles on the programs in *Oś* magazine:

[http://www.auschwitz.org.pl/new/pdf/os\\_lipiec\\_2008.pdf](http://www.auschwitz.org.pl/new/pdf/os_lipiec_2008.pdf)

[http://www.auschwitz.org.pl/new/pdf/os\\_sierpien\\_2008.pdf](http://www.auschwitz.org.pl/new/pdf/os_sierpien_2008.pdf)

With best regards for the rest of the summer,

Tomasz Kuncewicz  
Director  
Auschwitz Jewish Center

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## The American Service Academies Program

By Shiri Sandler, Manager of the Auschwitz Jewish Center

The American Service Academies Program is the *other* immersion program at the Center in the summers. For students from the West Point Military Academy, U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Air Force Academy, and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy's Honors Program this is an intensive, three-week experience dedicated to the study of the Holocaust and the events leading up to it. The goal of the course is to teach future military officers about the historical and ethical lessons of the Holocaust. After studying the Holocaust in Washington, DC and at the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York, participants spend two weeks in Poland.



2008 ASAP participants in the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue and at Birkenau

While in Poland, the group travels to Warsaw, Krakow, Oświęcim, a few of the formerly Jewish small towns that you went to as a Fellow/Scholar, and to Auschwitz and Belzec. The syllabus is intense and rigorous, filled with survivor testimony, lectures, museum visits, and workshops. As you all hopefully know from your own time at the AJC, we also try to make sure the participants have some restorative fun and bond with their cohort, as this work is simply too hard to do alone.

The cadets and midshipmen shined this year, showing a willingness to reflect and absorb all the information they could. Many students talked to AJC staff about what had motivated them to join their profession and the program. One midshipman from the Naval Academy told me that had enrolled at the Academy because he felt that America's military might should be used to protect. He thought that the military's actions should be able to honor the memory of those it failed to protect in the past. The cadet from the Coast Guard Academy said that he applied to ASAP because it would be his job to send illegal immigrants he found in America's waters back to their home countries and he wanted to be a humanitarian, not just a guardian of borders.

As the weeks progressed, and especially once we arrived in Oświęcim, participants began to speak to me about the impact the experience was having on them. One Air Force cadet who was going into missiles and silo defense said that as we walked through Birkenau, all he could think about was how he would one day be asked to push a button that would kill innocent people and destroy homes. He said he was learning the difference between a just and a criminal war, and that he had begun to realize that following a criminal order was a choice, not a requirement.

As Tomek says, Auschwitz and Oświęcim provide an unequalled opportunity for students' learning and realization. While sitting in the classroom at the International Youth Meeting Center, the cadets and midshipmen had what many of them called their first honest conversation about gender and race relations at the Academies.

They said they always hear what they're supposed to think about gender and race, but they do not often get a chance to talk about how it affects them and what they actually think.

The program for the cadets and midshipmen is not about military passivity, but rather about the realization of choice, of tolerance and discussion, and the passing on of memory. Just as teachers and scholars need to see Auschwitz for their own work and that of their students, so, too, do those who will be responsible for the actions of our troops in war. What if every officer could pass along to every soldier the lessons of the Holocaust? Then, perhaps, the American military's actions would "honor the memory of the lives it could have saved in the past." We can only hope that will be the case.

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## Traveling to the Land of My Ancestors

By Nina Taub (2008)

Before traveling to Poland this summer as part of the Auschwitz Jewish Center fellowship, I did not know what to expect. I had watched numerous black and white Holocaust films that portrayed Poland as a dark and dreary place where the sky was always grey. Yet Poland was the place where my grandfathers had grown up and my ancestors had found shelter for generations. Why would they have stayed if the sky was only grey?



2008 Fellows with Polish students from the AJC *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* workshop

As I prepared for the trip, I was struck by how little I knew of my family's Polish history. Growing up, I listened intently to my grandfather's stories about *shtetl* life. Yet these stories, devoid of historical context, could have happened anywhere. Because the Holocaust created a huge chasm between my family's present and our past, I knew nothing about Polish history or culture, or my family's place in it.

Our first stop in Poland was the beautiful city of Krakow. We arrived in Krakow during the 18<sup>th</sup> annual Jewish culture festival. Krakow was abuzz with Klezmer music, Jewish films, and lectures on Jewish history and Jewish Polish relations. The Jewish quarter of Kazimierz overflowed with Jewish themed restaurants, souvenirs, and synagogues. I attended services at the Remuh synagogue, built in the 1500's, and the only functioning synagogue in Krakow today. The synagogue was packed with Jewish tourists from around the world as well as with a handful of local residents. While it was nice to see that one of the synagogues was still being used, it was equally odd to exit on a Saturday morning to a throng of tourists snapping pictures of the building and its worshipers. What struck me was the odd juxtaposition of Jewish life in Poland today. While maintaining communal Jewish life is a struggle, Jewish culture is flourishing.

Throughout Poland we met with people who were interested in exploring Jewish history and culture. Many Poles are looking into their backgrounds and discovering some Jewish roots. I found myself grateful for their interest, since the Jewish community in Poland is too small to bear the responsibility for caring for all the synagogue buildings and cemeteries that still exist. In Nowy Sacz, we met with an incredible 89-year-old resident, Jakub Mueller, who returns to his hometown every summer to care for the Jewish cemetery. His indefatigable drive to care for and restore the Jewish cemetery in his hometown is remarkable. While he spoke of his children's lack of interest in continuing his work, I am hopeful that the Poles of Nowy Sacz will continue his restoration efforts after he is gone.

In Auschwitz, there are heart-wrenching displays of confiscated Jewish belongings that tell of the daily life the Nazis stripped from the Jews upon their arrival at Auschwitz. There are displays of prayer shawls, shaving kits, and children's toys. One case displays an enormous amount of pots and pans, many well worn with blue or red rims to denote their use for dairy or meat in a kosher kitchen. One of the historians shared that her mother, while not Jewish, cooks in similar pots today and is careful today not to use a red pot to cook dairy food or a blue pot to cook meat. She explained that when she asked her mother why she is so careful to separate meat and dairy, her mother could not provide a reason. She surmised that someone in her mother's family had probably worked closely with Jews and had picked up this habit before World War II. To me this was a poignant example of how much Jewish and Polish neighbors shared, and how linked their customs and culture were for 500 years.

Upon returning to New York, I shared my experiences with my grandmother, a German Jew whose parents were born in Poland. From her I learned that she had attended a wedding in Krakow as a young child. She spoke of how exciting it was to see Jewish life overflowing in the streets of Kazimierz; Krakow's Jewish life was much more vibrant than the muted religious traditions she experienced in Germany. Despite the fact that she visited as a young child, the experience created a lasting memory. It was wonderful to connect her memory to a place I had visited, even though it is non-Jewish Poles who are the custodians of Jewish culture in Poland today.

While in Poland, I was struck by how post-Holocaust history differs so much from other genocides. While many victims of the Rwandan, Cambodian, or Bosnian genocides live next to neighbors who may have helped perpetrate genocide against their families, because of the complicated history, many Jews left and never returned. American Jews have created a distance between modern American life and European Jewish history. This distance makes many Jews feel that there is nothing left in Poland and no reason to visit. However, there is a shared cultural bond that has not been severed over the last sixty years despite the physical and emotional distances between American Jews and Polish Christians.

What I found in Poland was an unexpected sense of peace and belonging. I was surprised by how many traces of pre-war Jewish life remain, from mezuzah indentations on doorposts to carefully restored synagogues in small rural towns. I am truly grateful to the Polish towns and people who have taken it upon themselves to preserve what is left of a rich Jewish history and culture. Somewhere during the trip, I decided that despite always feeling truly American, I am also Polish. My family's history is inextricably linked with the history of Poland.

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## Renewing Links with the Past

By Joanna Sliwa (2008)

My perspective on the 2008 Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program comes from a minimum of two angles. First of all, I have only finished the Program recently, and I am still in the process of putting my thoughts together. Second, the Program took place in my native country. The quest for learning about and understanding my heritage has shaped my views about the experience. Some of my interests throughout the Fellowship included exploring the issues of Polish-Jewish identity, as well as the complicated, but fascinating



2008 Fellows with AJC and MJH staff overlooking the Rynek in Krakow.

aspect of memorializing the past and the present for the future. Learning about the seemingly distinct, but really common Polish and Jewish past contributed to creating my bridge to history. What will remind me of my, in the words of Shimon Redlich, "pilgrimage to the past," are not necessarily material objects, but my individual experiences, interactions with people, and memory.

The AJC Fellowship was a kind of return to my roots, a journey marked by contrasts and symbolism. For example, it was only much later that I realized that our usual meeting place in Krakow – the statue of the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz, could convey both positive and conflicting views on Polish-Jewish relations. Mickiewicz did not regard the terms Pole and Jew as mutually exclusive, rather he was a proponent of cooperation, drawing attention to the fact that Jews, although they had a distinct religion, belonged to the Polish nation. In Warsaw, on the other hand, I stood by another statue of Adam Mickiewicz, the site of the student protests of March 1968, and the symbol of the inception of the virulent anti-Zionist campaign orchestrated by the communist regime against the Jews of Poland. For me, the statues of Mickiewicz became emblematic of the complicated situation of the Jews in Poland throughout history, as well as representative of striving for mutual acceptance and understanding on the part of both Poles and Jews.

The three-week program in Poland also exposed me to the various shades of Polish-Jewish identity, which varied depending on the experiences of the person or his or her family before, during, and after the Holocaust. The most striking were the contrasts: between individuals who insist on being regarded as the last Jews; and people who strive to revive Jewish life in all its forms. When I went to the synagogues for services I was happy to see the resurgence of Jewish life among the younger generation. I was glad to see young Polish Hassidim, as well as a young Jewish Pole from Israel aspiring to be the assistant rabbi in Poland. I always become furious when people say that Jewish life does not exist in Poland. There are people, both Jews and non-Jews, whose mission is to preserve Jewish sites, show the richness of Jewish heritage and how it continues to flourish in Poland.

Some of the many highlights of my fellowship experience included a tour of Jewish sites in Pszczyna led by a Polish teenager of Jewish origin, whose passion for studying and remembering Jewish life in his town is amazing. I was moved by the acts of the Auschwitz Jewish Center's staff for whom it was normal to remove hateful stickers on sign posts, and who did not hesitate to take out a spray bottle to cover swastikas graffitied on a building right by a major road. I left with the faith that there are people who care, who are not afraid to notice inappropriate acts, and who take action. I am impressed and inspired by the work of all the individuals with whom we met, and the institutions that we visited.

Again it was only much later that I realized another symbolic analogy. It was mostly rainy in Poland, and the sun came out once the Fellowship ended. On Tisha'v Av (the fast day that commemorates the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem) that was observed just over two weeks after the end of the fellowship, a dirge was recited, in which the author, a rabbi or sage, writes metaphorically of the heavens, of the Jews crying as the Temple was destroyed and they go into exile. At the end of the laments, the Jews regain their faith, and the sun comes out. For me, after three emotionally intensive weeks spent in Poland seeing the destruction of Poland's Jews, the sun came out; there appears hope for our future.

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## Fellows Updates

**Rachel Rothstein** and **Chany Greenstein (2006)** returned to Oświęcim and reunited with AJC staff (see photo). They then traveled to Vilnius where they attended a month-long intensive Yiddish language and culture program at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute. While there, they explored the rich Jewish history of Vilnius and Kaunas. They also visited Ponar and the Ninth Fort where the Jewish communities of these two cities were murdered during the Holocaust, as well as the secret Jewish partisan base located in a forest outside of Vilnius.



2006 Fellows Rachel Rothstein and Chany Greenstein visit with Tomasz Kuncewicz and Maciek Zabierowski this summer

**Carol Simon (2007)** has just returned from the Yad Vashem International Holocaust Educators' Conference in Israel, where she led a discussion group of educators from Jordan, Australia, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Germany, England, Croatia and Poland and ran into Professor Jolanta Ambrosewicz-Jacobs. Carol is busy researching an upcoming paper on the survival rates of Sephardic, Ashkenazic, and Romaniote Jewry in Greece during the Shoah and with the Holocaust Council of MetroWest's *Schindler in New Jersey* project. 2007 Fellows may recall how prior to the trip a dear friend of Carol's and one of the Holocaust Council's survivor board members suddenly died. A scholarship fund has been created in her memory to bring teachers to the Museum of Jewish Heritage and share the story of Cecile (a hidden child in Belgium) and her husband (a survivor in the Shanghai Ghetto). Carol

also continues to speak with community, synagogue and civic organizations about the Holocaust in Poland.

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