



---

## **AJC FELLOWS E-NEWSLETTER**

**October 1, 2009**

Welcome to the fall edition of the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows E-Newsletter and Shana Tovah to those of you celebrating! 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 contact Shiri B. Sandler at [ssandler@mjhny.org](mailto:ssandler@mjhny.org).

We've started recruitment for the 2010 AJC Fellows Program. If you know anyone who would be an appropriate applicant for the program, please do not hesitate to pass the application along to them. Applications are due on January 18, 2010.

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.

---

### **IN THIS ISSUE:**

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

#### **Tracing Jewish Heritage in Poland: An AJC Fellow's Epic Journey and Discovery**

**By Jessica Silva**

#### **Reflections on the AJC, History, and Memory**

**By Hinda Mandell**

#### **Hopeful Signs in Poland**

**By Dr. Paul Radensky**

#### **Fellows Updates**

---

---

## A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Dear All,

With the summer coming to an end, this seems like the ideal opportunity for an end of season run down. For the past eight years, the AJC Fellows Program (of which many of you are alums), kicks off the second part of our major summer programming, after the Academies Service Program, which I discussed in the last edition of the newsletter. This program brings mainly North American graduate students to Poland for an in-depth onsite study of the Polish-Jewish experience, the Holocaust, and the current state of the Polish-Jewish community, as well as the preservation of Jewish heritage in



Fellows with Polish Auschwitz survivor Zofia Lys and AJC staff Maciek Zabierowski.

Poland. It is always important to us to present this complex subject, which is often emotionally loaded, in a way that enables the participants to feel competent in educating others without bias. This year, we worked with six women, all very engaged participants for whom the program seems to have been a very rewarding and eye-opening encounter with contemporary Poland and its complicated history. I am sure you will be able to get more insight into their experience from the essays included in this edition of the newsletter and those to come.

I am thrilled to report that the AJC has been awarded a significant grant toward our *Why do We Need Tolerance?* project. Currently, we have a workshop of the same name as the final session of the educational program *My Former Neighbors*. In 2010, the AJC educational programs will expand immensely to include weekend seminars for teachers from the Slask and Malopolska regions, a series of comprehensive workshops called *Pioneers of Tolerance* for a select group of students from Oświęcim, and an expanded version of the *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* workshop for students visiting the former camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau; it combines historical facts with contemporary issues of tolerance. For this project we have partnered with the Roma Association in Poland, whose headquarters are in Oświęcim. The program will last for twelve months and will include a website with participant blogs, resources on the subject of prejudice, and essays from an essay competition that will be part of the project.

2010 will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AJC and we are planning events to celebrate our birthday. I hope for many of you this will be an opportunity to return to Poland and participate in our celebrations. Please keep an eye out for further information. We would love to welcome you back to Oświęcim.

Best regards,

Tomek Kuncewicz  
Director  
Auschwitz Jewish Center

---

---

## Tracing Jewish Heritage in Poland: An AJC Fellow's Epic Journey and Discovery

By Jessica Silva

Before my experience as an Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellow, my knowledge of Jewish heritage in Poland was admittedly limited. While my academic focus was how survivors of genocide depict their experiences, specifically focusing on a Rwandan survivor, I had spent months interviewing Holocaust survivors living in Montreal as part of the large-scale oral history project called *CURA: Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations*. My work included interviewing numerous Polish Jews



The Jewish Cemetery in Bobowa, Poland, one of the *shtetls* the Fellows visit.

who often recalled fond childhood memories of pre-war life in Poland. Listening to stories about everyday life in Krakow, Lodz, and other Polish towns, I became more interested in learning about Jewish heritage in Poland. My professor encouraged me to apply for the Fellowship, seeing it as a unique opportunity to uncover Jewish heritage in Poland and to learn about current preservation efforts.

A few months after learning of my acceptance into the program, I was in Krakow getting acquainted with the all-female Fellows and our dedicated Polish program staff Maciek Zabierowski and Tomek Kuncewicz over pierogies and borscht. I was intrigued to learn that both Maciek and Tomek are not Jewish, but are committed to educating and preserving Jewish history in their country. This became a predominant theme throughout the program, meeting with passionate individuals who are actively working to preserve and protect sites of Jewish heritage and memory in Poland.

We went on several study trips of various *shtetls* in the outskirts of Krakow and Warsaw, including Pinczow, Szydlow, Kielce, Chmielnik, where only traces of the Jewish presence are visible today. It was a powerful and moving experience to visit these once thriving Jewish communities, which existed for centuries but which now have little traces of their Jewish inhabitants. Having studied the Holocaust and visited numerous concentration camps in recent years, I found these trips to be among the most difficult experiences yet. It was disheartening to come across little or no trace of Jewish heritage in former *shtetls* such as in Chmielnik, where only the skeleton of the town's synagogue remains. However, meeting with local people who are committed to preserving the Jewish past of their towns was the antidote to the emptiness of the *shtetls*.

Our meeting with the young Polish couple Karolina and Pietro in Bedzin was the most memorable part of the trip for me. They founded *Hurtownia Manufaktury*, a grassroots initiative to preserve Jewish heritage in Bedzin. They are in the process of restoring a former private *Beit Midrash*, or prayer house, in a rundown and nondescript apartment building. Katarina explained that the owner apparently knew about the hidden murals that cover the walls of the apartment, but never acted to

conserve them. It was rented as a two-bedroom apartment until recently, and, thankfully, is now being protected. The wall murals are being restored by the Cukerman's Gate Foundation. The *Beit Midrash* will hopefully be open for visitors soon as part of Bedzin's rich Jewish heritage. As we traveled, we continued to meet with numerous remarkable individuals who value the Jewish history of their communities, and who are helping preserve and educate others about it. The Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oświęcim is further proof of this resurgence in Poland, having opened its doors to honor the former residents of the town and to educate about the lessons of the Holocaust.

The AJC Fellows Program felt like a whirlwind tour at times, visiting small towns and major cities in southeast Poland from Krakow to Warsaw. My interest in tracing Jewish history and memory did not end with the conclusion of the program, though. I stayed on after the trip to backpack through several countries in Eastern Europe, including the Czech Republic and Hungary. I eagerly visited synagogues and sought out any trace of a Jewish past where once vibrant Jewish communities existed. My experience as an AJC Fellow reinforced the importance of uncovering buried histories in hopes of producing a more complete historical narrative of a town. It was an extraordinary and influential experience, made possible by generous donors and dedicated program staff. I feel very fortunate to have participated and am thankful for having traveled with an amazing and inspiring group of girls. Lastly, I would like to thank Maciek and Tomek for their patience and support of the Fellows and for all of their hard work at the Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oświęcim.

---

## Reflections on the AJC, History, and Memory

By Hinda Mandell (Fred and Nadine Rosen Fellow, 2009)

*Hinda Mandell is a doctoral student in Mass Communications at the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University.*

I have been thinking a lot about the memory-making process in recent weeks. No, I'm not necessarily feeling particularly nostalgic. Rather, I've been preoccupied with the more literal and philosophical side of memory: How does our mind select some memories for its vault while rejecting others? What role do important memories play in our identity? And what happens when a memory conflicts with reality?



Let me take a step back. This past summer, I had the distinct opportunity to travel to Poland as an Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellow.

Hinda Mandell with Mr. and Mrs. Jozef Pajak, who live across the street from the house where Hinda's grandfather, Martin Waysdorf, grew up in Lagow, Poland.

You may expect me to say that the trip was eye-opening, engrossing, and emotionally moving. You are right, but it was also much more than that. This trip represented the seminal experience that happens when academic interests, family history, and issues relating to personal identity collide. The four weeks of learning from my "fellow Fellows" and the Museum staff in New York and Poland were,

frankly, remarkable. Fast forward to the present, this fall semester, where I am taking a graduate seminar on culture, religion, and memory at Syracuse University. While the readings encompass many religious views, the study of memory largely came about in relation to the Holocaust, so many of our readings touch on this as a Jewish cataclysm..

On the first day of class, the professor handed out a poem by the Indian-Muslim poet known as Agha Shahid Ali. And when I read the poem "Farewell," and especially the repetitive line "My memory is again in the way of your history," I thought, without hesitation, of Auschwitz. The poet may have been writing about Kashmir, but what I heard was the contestation over which people have the "right" to Auschwitz, the memories of what happened there and its symbol of ultimate suffering.

While at the Auschwitz Jewish Center in Oświęcim, we learned about the 100,000 Polish political prisoners who were sent to the most notorious concentration camp. Is it possible for the same place (Auschwitz) to represent the same thing (suffering) to different groups of people? Do Jews have the right to "own" the memory of Auschwitz because 90 percent of those who entered its gates were of the Jewish faith? It seems clear to me that you cannot deny a people the right to remember the atrocities committed against them (one only needs to turn to the Armenians as an example), because the act of remembrance contributes to the creation of a collective, group identity. But is that identity diminished or threatened because other people – other groups – turn to the same symbol for meaning? Can Jews and Poles and Roma (and any other group who suffered through Auschwitz) be equal possessors to the memory of Auschwitz?

Like any powerful experience, I'm afraid that my time in Poland has resulted in more questions than answers. (This, however, is indicative that it was a rich and fruitful intellectual experience!) But in an attempt to tease out the notion of memory, identity and ownership, I'd like to turn to a personal anecdote that highlights how we personalize controversial history. My father's uncle fought as an American soldier in World War II. While fighting on the front, he found – and took – a copy of *Mein Kampf* from the rucksack of a German soldier. This book is now in the possession of my family. The question over what to do with this book – which I see as more of a family artifact than a historical one—has begun to ripen. I cannot and will not speak for my father, but to me this book holds value because it is evidence of my family's history. To others, this book is first and foremost a historical document teeming with hatred that resulted in the death, victimization, and suffering of millions upon millions. So what is this book? Is it a historical document, a personal artifact, or a source of the most vile form of propaganda? The easy answer is that it can be one, all, or none of these things. The answer becomes more complicated when, in exploring the issue, it is clear that I may feel strongly in one direction, while other family members may completely oppose my view down to the very core of their identity. There is no right answer, of course, but the process here does speak to the far reaching complications that emerge when exploring the convergence of memory, identity, and history. If I did not travel to Poland this past summer as a Fellow, I would not have been able to see the nuanced shades of grey that are so apparent to me when thinking about my family's *Mein Kampf*. Instead, I would have viewed Hitler's treatise only for its horrible content. In actuality, I now see the book as evidence of a journey that my great uncle made as an American soldier in World War II. This terrible book now becomes proof that a member of my family fought against the very things that *Mein Kampf* preaches. As a Fellow, we learned – through the guidance of Museum staff – different ways to examine artifacts. And we learned that they may have meaning that does not appear initially.

It is clear that this is a barbed subject that could become heated quite quickly. Tempers can flare and feelings can get hurt. It is for this reason that I am so very thankful to have had the opportunity to broach this subject in the respectful manner that was the trademark of the Fellows experience. I feel that I had the benefit of learning that history is not so easily explained, because it is complicated by matters of identity that are as complex as they are appealing. I very much look forward to exploring the subject of memory in my class this fall. And I know that my analysis will be more nuanced because of the journey that I took with my Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows and staff. And for that, I am most grateful.

---

## A Visit to Poland with the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows

By Dr. Paul Radensky

This past June, I had the good fortune to accompany the six graduate students who are 2009 Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows for a week of their trip to Poland. For most of the week, we were located in Krakow. I was surprised to discover that Krakow was a beautiful city. We spent one day touring the Polish historical sites with Maciek Zabierowski, AJC staff, and another day visiting the synagogues, the old Jewish cemetery, Plaszow, and the Schindler factory. Later in the



Tempel synagogue in Krakow.

week, we took a trip to Kielce, where we met with Bogdan Bialek, who is working with the Polish population in Kielce with the goal that the residents will acknowledge the participation of their fellow Poles and ancestors in the 1946 Kielce pogrom. Afterwards, we travelled to a number of small towns which still have historic synagogues within them: Szydlow, Chmielnik, and Dzialoszyce. We then visited the small town of Lagow, the ancestral home of one of the fellows who was on the program. On my own, I visited Auschwitz I and Birkenau. From Birkenau, I went to the Auschwitz Jewish Center, where I met with Tomek Kunczewicz, the director, who showed me around the Center, including the beautifully restored Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue. After Auschwitz and Birkenau, being in a functioning synagogue was healing.

I was deeply impressed by Poland's beauty, but the thing that struck me the most, in Krakow and beyond, was the near total absence of Jews. Ironically, the week I was there coincided with the Festival of Jewish Culture, which takes place in Kazimierz and probably attracts a few hundred Jews from abroad. Even so, outside of the venues of the Festival, there were practically no Jews to be seen. It is striking when we consider that Krakow was a quarter Jewish before the war, and in the small towns that I visited, the Jews were usually the majority of the population before the Holocaust. The absence of the Jews, especially in the presence of large abandoned or former synagogues, drives home the reality of the near complete destruction of Jewish life in Poland.

I say near complete, because I also saw some positive signs of life. We were in Krakow on Shabbat and we were fortunate to have a Friday night dinner with Rabbi Boaz Pash and members of the Krakow Jewish community. There were not huge numbers of people at the dinner, but there were some, and there were young people as well, which is a good omen. I saw another positive sign the next night when I attended a Melave Malka concert in the Tempel Synagogue in Kazimierz. The event was part of the programming for the Festival of Jewish Culture, and included performances of different kinds of Jewish music. The place was packed. Traditionally the Festival draws thousands of people, but only a few hundred are Jews. And true to form, many of the Jews who came for the Festival were there, but the overwhelming percentage of the audience was Polish. The rise of interest in things Jewish by the Poles hopefully means a greater acceptance of and respect for Judaism. This is, in general, a good thing, but in the case of Poland, it may mean that more people with a Jewish past will be willing to step up to claim a Jewish present and a Jewish future. I would be remiss if I did not mention another hopeful sign for Krakow's Jewish community: the establishment of the Krakow JCC. Like other JCCs, the Krakow JCC provides programs for seniors and is creating a nursery school program for the growing number of children in the community.

I left Poland grateful for having had the opportunity to visit. Seeing places where Jewish life had been and is largely no longer present was sobering. Nevertheless, the story of Jewish life in Poland is still not a closed book. The reawakening of Jewish life in Krakow (and other Polish cities for that matter), the interest in Jewish culture by Poles, and the increasing Jewish presence (as in the Auschwitz Jewish Center) are causes for cautious optimism.

---

## Fellows Updates

**Waitman Beorn (Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow 2008)** presented a conference Paper, "A Calculus of Complicity: The Wehrmacht, the Anti-Partisan War, and the Final Solution in White Russia, 1941-42," at the conference *Seventy Years On: New Perspectives on the Second World War* in Calgary from August 31-September 2, 2009.

**Shannon Nagy (2007)** is a Ph.D. student in German History at the University of Texas-Austin. She has just completed her comprehensive exams and has left Austin to do dissertation research in Germany on a Fulbright Scholarship. Shannon spent the previous summer learning Yiddish at the National Yiddish Book Center and is thrilled to now focus on her dissertation on material culture in East Germany.

**Joanna Sliwa (Jaffa and Larry Feldman Fellow 2008)** In April 2009, Joanna reunited with AJC Fellows Waitman Beorn and Irene Resenly '07, as well as AJC Intern Jessica Antoline, at the First International Graduate Students' Conference in Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University. In summer 2009, Joanna received a scholarship from YIVO and NYU to study at the Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature and Culture, where she had the pleasure of meeting AJC Fellow Rachel Rothstein '06.

***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.***

