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## AJC FELLOWS E-NEWSLETTER

July 15, 2009

Welcome to the summer 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).

In this edition, you'll find a lot of information on current activities at the Center, including the [bios](#) of the newest cohort of Fellows, so we hope you'll take a minute to catch up with us.

We'd like to thank the funders and announce the four named Fellowships this year, three of whom are making this opportunity possible for the second year in a row: the Jaffa and Larry Feldman Fellow, the Fred and Nadine Rosen Fellow, The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow, and our newest named Fellowship, the Allan and Marilyn Glick Fellow. Thank you to these generous funders!

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## A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Dear All,

It has been an exciting past few months at the Center. On May 5, we opened our new exhibit, *New Life*, which tells the story of Oświęcim survivors, and their descendants, who found a “new life” in Israel. The opening was preceded by a series of educational workshops for local students that focused on the post-war experience of survivors, both in Poland and in Israel. We were pleased with the turnout at the opening, which included two survivors featured in the exhibit, Adela Huppert and Victor Borger with their families, diplomats, representatives of the local and regional governments, as well as Dr. David Marwell, director of the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York. The exhibit is part of the permanent exhibition on the history of the Jews of Oświęcim and includes a catalogue and a website ([www.new-life-exhibit.com](http://www.new-life-exhibit.com)).



Photo from the *New Life* exhibition:  
Henryk Schönker and his Grandson, Ori.  
Photo by Hamutal Davidi.

In June, we welcomed the fifth group of students from the American Service Academies Program to Poland. This cohort was the largest in program history, with 15 students from 4 academies – Naval, Air Force, West Point, and Coast Guard. The U.S. portion of the program included study tours, lectures, and testimony at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust. In Poland, students toured Krakow, met with a Righteous Gentile, heard lectures at the Jewish Studies Department of Jagiellonian University, visited the sites of the former Auschwitz-Birkenau and Belzec camps, toured Oświęcim and the AJC, and worked in the Oświęcim Jewish cemetery (which you can read more about below in Shiri's article). The group also participated in a *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* workshop with Polish and Dutch students on contemporary issues of xenophobia, racism, and intolerance.

In the last couple months, the area around the Center has been undergoing a complete overhaul. This has included the preservation of the remains of the well, which you may remember from the historic pictures of the square in front of the AJC.

To catch up on our 2008 events, please take a look at our 2008 Activities Report at <http://ajcf.org/reports>.

Finally, we have just welcomed to Krakow this year's AJC Fellows. You can learn more about them in their biographies by clicking [here](#). I hope that this will be as meaningful an experience for them as it was for you.

We were honored to welcome representatives of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Sharon Taube and Ari Geller to the AJC recently. The Taube Foundation has supported this newsletter since its inception and has generously funded the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow for two years.

Have a great summer,

Tomek Kuncewicz  
Director  
Auschwitz Jewish Center

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## Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation Dinner

By Shiri Sandler

On June 1, the Auschwitz Jewish Center held its first fundraising dinner since the merger with MJH. The Dinner honored Fred and Allyne Schwartz, the founders of the Center, and hosted special guest and speaker Tom Brokaw. The Dinner was attended by over 250 people, including 20 alumni and current participants of the American Service Academies Program, AJC Board Members, the Consul General of Poland in New York, and Tomek and Ola Kuncewicz. Staff were happy to welcome members of the AJC family, both new and familiar, to the special evening.



Tomek and Ola with Millie and Abe Zuckerman, survivors and parents of AJC Board Member Wayne Zuckerman. Photo by Melanie Einzig.

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## One Morning in the Oświęcim Cemetery

By Shiri Sandler

*Before the AJC Fellows arrive in New York, I travel with the American Service Academies Program to Washington, D.C.; New York; and Poland. This program for students from the US Naval, Air Force, Military, and Coast Guard Academies focuses on Holocaust history, Jewish heritage, and military ethics.*

On the morning of June 10, which began blue, sunny, and warm, the cadets, mids, and I went to the Oświęcim cemetery to do some cleanup. This group took the view that any cleanup meant something, as it honored the dead and mattered to the community (which community they were thinking of, I'm not sure). They're very interested in Judaism and we've talked a lot about the importance of death rites in Judaism, so they were happy to do something in tribute to the disappeared community.



Photo by Shiri Sandler

When we arrived, the group started clearing paths between the salvaged and replaced tombstones, weeding the memorials of broken grave stones, and generally cleaning up debris, both natural and refuse. After an hour or two, they'd made good headway and the cemetery was beginning to look neater. The paths had been weeded and swept, garbage was in bags, and two of the boys had cleared undergrowth so that the German bomb shelter in the back of the cemetery was accessible. Unfortunately, this also meant that the building next to the cemetery could be seen, which bore recently inscribed Stars of David with "666" written across them. Tomek would, of course, take care of this, in his direct and immediate way.

Once basic clean-up was well underway, the students started replacing gravestones. After placing two tombstones, Roarke, one of the midshipmen, decided that the fallen and rotten tree lying on the edge of the cemetery needed to go. It was next to the other bomb shelter, which is now used to store tools. As he began moving large pieces of what must have been a massive tree, we realized that the tree was covering a large number of fallen gravestones, both intact and broken (see photo). Cadets and mids gathered around quickly and began to move the tree and form an assembly line to pass the pieces of the gravestones towards a place where they'd be stored in a more respectful fashion. Mandi, one of the West Pointers, carefully wiped each off as it was placed on the ground.

The day had begun to turn ugly. It was not the Stars of David or the destroyed cemetery. The clouds had gathered and thunder was rumbling. In Kazimierz, the Jewish section of Krakow, we always tell the groups a story about a wedding that was to take place near the cemetery in the center of the main square there. The bride couldn't get her dowry together in time before Shabbat and so the couple was married after Shabbat had started. God and the local rebbe were angry, and a lightning bolt struck the couple, the earth opened, and the couple was swallowed by the ground. In truth, the wedding was allowed to occur after Shabbat by the rebbe, who determined that human joy and life's events were more important than the laws were. The cadets began to joke that the story was coming true, that as we were trying to undo this abomination, this act of desecrating the cemetery, lightening would come down and strike where the act had happened.

As it happened, the rain didn't fall until we finished and all the grave stones had been laid out, wiped down, and the debris of the tree removed. We even had time to quickly snap a photo before the skies opened and the lightening came down.

Our time here is never simple. The things we see, from the broken tombstones to the marks on buildings to Auschwitz itself, are ugly. The things the students say and the way they act, though, are beautiful. That morning, a future marine who didn't know any Jews until he met the two Jewish cadets on this program and me, unearthed gravestones of Jews who, along with their descendants, are long gone. But the human joy and life, the smiles and the feeling of connection to each other and to the Jewish community that came along with the day's work, live on.

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## Bringing Personal Connections into the Classroom

By Sarah Cramsey (2006 Fellow)

Picture, please, the following. Two dozen curious, Red Bull-stimulated and overburdened nineteen-year-olds sitting around an oblong seminar table, laden with books, notepads and often inexplicable historical quandaries to obtain insight from ... YOU, the equally over-caffeinated and indubitably more nervous graduate student. Nothing during my first two years in Berkeley's history department struck more raw fear into my heart than the forty pairs of un-wrinkled (and sometimes perplexed) eyes staring



2006 Fellows at the Center. Photo by Sarah Cramsey.

back at me, as I sat, uncomfortably, near the blackboard waiting (at times in vain) for the historical insight lodged in my brain to percolate into theirs. Over one semester, we were to cover a chronology of five hundred years (from 1500 to the present) and span the entire European continent. Alongside my own coursework, Hebrew language classes and exam schedule, I had to introduce these Berkeley undergrads to faraway places, unfathomable events and the people/ideas/structures (depending on whom you ask!) that drove the proverbial motor of history. How could I, just a decade older than they were, influence their post-secondary education? What lessons would inspire them to think more deeply, ask more informed questions and, most importantly, become better citizens? As my first semester of teaching proceeded, I found that I would succeed one week and disappoint myself the next. In mid-November, however, everything changed.

Two weeks before Thanksgiving, my students studied Christopher Browning's *Ordinary Men*. During seminar that week, as we dissected Browning's story and tested his methodology, I imparted to my students something that had not yet surfaced in my classroom: personal vignettes about my summer with the AJCF in Poland and how I came to focus on the Holocaust in my own scholarly work. I explained to them how I read Browning's work; how I responded to his documentation as both a historian and as an emotional human being; and how spending time in Oświęcim helped me better understand an event that, in a grand sense, seems inexplicable. Using my experiences in Poland as our springboard, we began a fascinating discussion concerning personal responsibility, historical relativism, and ex post facto judgment. Yes, Browning's excellent monograph provided the facts the students used to construct their arguments, but the shape and vigor of our discussion stemmed from the personal experiences I shared with my colleagues that wonderful but difficult summer four years ago.

Pure historical understanding is rarely attainable, and I doubt that it can be found only in books or in the cocooned isolation of one's own mind. Students need to talk, struggle, and attempt to understand in an open, accepting academic environment. The positive reaction from my students on that day last November convinced me that my talents as a researcher, writer, and educator would best be spent on questions and issues surrounding World War II and the Shoah. These issues are my passion. As I enter my last year of coursework and narrow the parameters of my dissertation research, I will often recollect this exceptional seminar alongside my experience in Poland. And when I re-enter the classroom as an instructor next January, in addition to some of those familiar nerves, I will carry a secret weapon, one that I will not be afraid to use when understanding is elusive or eyelids grow heavy: my personal connection to the history I teach.

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## Reflections A Year Later

By Joanna Chen (2008 Fred and Nadine Rosen Fellow)

Before I went on the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellowship last summer, I already knew that my passion was in studying Holocaust history. But now, I also know that whatever journey I embark on from here will somehow always be inextricably tied to my AJC Fellows 2008 experience.

People are always surprised when I tell them my aspiration is to become a Holocaust historian. Some wonder how I, a second-generation Taiwanese American Christian, became interested in a history so unconnected to my own background. Others wonder how I deal with such intense material on a regular basis.

My childhood was filled with history lessons, imparted in the form of bedtime tales by my father or gathered in fragments from my grandparents' stories, glimpses into their wartime experiences in Taiwan and China under the Japanese occupation.



AJC staff Maciek Zabierowski with 2008 Fellows.  
Photo by Joanna Chen.

Going to the University of California, Berkeley expanded my views, and gave me the chance to take history courses that plunged me deeper into the histories and cultures of those different from my own. As a Taiwanese American, I was drawn to European history precisely because it was different from my own background. Coming from an immigrant family, I was fascinated by the varying degrees to which the Jewish communities assimilated or stayed separate from their surrounding cultures. As a Christian, I was horrified by the centuries of anti-Semitism propagated by the church, disguised as the Word of God. At the core of my identity is my faith, and I hope that my genuine interest in Jewish Studies is something I can use one day to bring more understanding of Jewish history and culture to the Christian communities I know and am part of. It is important to me to try to increase understanding between Jewish and Asian communities, especially Holocaust awareness in East Asia.

When I began to study the Holocaust, I realized that most people's immediate associations are images of concentration camps and death. We are reminded to "always remember" and "never forget," but it is only when we start to see the history and culture of the European Jewish community that lived, instead of the iconic images of destruction and death, that we begin to see a glimpse of the immensity and enormity of what was destroyed. It was with that conviction in mind that I became a Jewish Studies minor and applied for the Auschwitz Jewish Center program the year I graduated from UCB.

When I flew to New York last June for orientation at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, I did not know what to expect. I was excited for such a rare and wonderful opportunity, but a bit apprehensive about dealing with such intense history in a compact schedule with complete strangers.

Our first stop in Poland was Krakow, a beautiful city in which we attended the final open-air concert of the 18th Jewish Culture Festival. In the days after, our group also toured Kazimierz and the city, visited the Galicia Jewish Museum, and met with a Righteous Gentile. In Warsaw, we met with Polish students working for the Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations. Our time in Krakow and Warsaw sparked many questions on personal and public memory of former Jewish communities and the Holocaust; on reasons behind the behavior of both Righteous Gentiles and anti-Semitic neighbors; and on the state of contemporary anti-Semitism in Poland today.

Our last stop was Oświęcim. It was surreal and shocking to actually be at Auschwitz-Birkenau, to walk the same paths of both victims and perpetrators, and to see the

evidence of the cruel, systematic, and widespread destruction that the Nazis wrought upon European Jewry during World War II. It is, was, and continues to be a "normal" town. The birds chirp, the grass grows, and the sun shines as it always has in the city where the Nazis built the most iconic symbol of the Holocaust.

I gained from the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellowship all I had hoped for and more: opportunities to engage in meaningful discussions; friendships with a diverse group of people who share similar interests in preserving Holocaust history; and a deeper understanding of Polish Jewish history. The Fellowship experience is indelibly imprinted upon my life, and for that I am grateful to the Museum and AJC staff and volunteers, my sponsors Fred and Nadine Rosen, our U.S. staff Shiri and Ivy, our beloved Polish staff, Tomek and Maciek, and of course, the rest of the 2008 Fellows. Avie, Joanna, Nina, James, and Waitman, the Fellowship would not have been the same without you.

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## Fellows Updates

**Waitman Beorn** (Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow, 2008) has just returned from dissertation research in Minsk. In April, he joined 2008 Fellow Joanna Sliwa to present at the First International Graduate Students' Conference on Holocaust and Genocide Studies at Clark University.

In June, he joined Tomek, Maciek, and Shiri in Krakow for a few days to work with the students of the AJC's American Service Academies Program in Poland to teach the cadets and midshipmen about Wehrmacht atrocities during the Holocaust.

Waitman also has an article, "Negotiating Murder: A Panzer Signal Company and the Destruction of the Jews of Peregruznoe, 1942," forthcoming in the Journal of Holocaust and Genocide Studies, Vol. 23, Nr. 2, Summer 2009.

**Michelle Gawerc** (2001) is currently in the process of writing her dissertation, "Peace-building Through People-to-People Initiatives: The Israel Palestine Case," a 10 year longitudinal study of peace-building initiatives during times of relative peace and times of acute violence. More specifically, she is looking at how non-governmental peace-building initiatives adapt to radically changing environments.

Michelle is about to complete a Graduate Research Fellowship at the Program on Negotiation at the Harvard Law School, and will be a Teaching Fellow at Boston College this upcoming academic year.

On a more personal note, Michelle is happy to share that she has recently become engaged to her partner, Shachak Pe'eri!

**Irene Ann Resenly** (2007) is leaving the Museum of Jewish Heritage after two years as the Assistant Museum Educator for Internships to work as a full-time English as a Second Language teacher in Radom, Poland. She is looking forward to weekend trips to Krakow and Oświęcim and speaking to Tomek and Maciek in Polish!

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the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture for its support.***

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