



Auschwitz Jewish Center E-Newsletter

April 26, 2010

Welcome to the Spring 2010 edition of the AJC 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.

We would also like to welcome Sutton Place Synagogue of New York City as the inaugural member of the AJC's new Synagogue Partnership Program! The Synagogue Partnership Program is an opportunity for congregations to bear witness to the Holocaust and maintain the memory of Jewish life in Oświęcim by partnering with the Auschwitz Jewish Center. We thank Sutton Place for their support and look forward to a meaningful and educational relationship with the Sutton Place congregation.

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A Message from Director, Tomasz Kuncewicz

Dear All,

Since the beginning of 2010, our first comprehensive anti-discrimination programming – *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* has been in full swing. To date, the AJC has held 35 workshops for high school students; begun the *Pioneers of Tolerance* project, which has 25 participants from local high schools; and held three weekend seminars for high school teachers, which were attended by 50 teachers from the Małopolska and Śląsk regions. We have also held a special anti-discrimination workshop series for all of the guides at the Auschwitz State Museum. The project concept links historical knowledge about Auschwitz and the Holocaust with contemporary dangers of anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia; since its inception, it has attracted an increasing number of students and teachers.



Polish students taking part in *Pioneers of Tolerance*.

I am also happy to announce that the AJC was awarded a grant from the Dutch Jewish Humanitarian Fund which will allow us to create an online learning tool on Jewish Oświęcim, a guidebook on the Jewish history of the town, and lesson plans on this topic for use in classrooms.

In February and March, the Center hosted the third year of the *Jewish Motifs: Retrospective* with the best films selected from the Warsaw's 2009 *Jewish Motifs Film Festival*. This year our program included 38 movies, including films from Israel, Poland, USA, Ukraine, Sweden, France, UK, Denmark, and Holland. Each screening was attended by between 50 and 100 people.

2010 also marks the 10th anniversary of the AJC and several major cultural events are planned to celebrate this occasion, among them the first Oświęcim Peace Festival in June. The AJC is cooperating in the organization of the festival in June, which will include a concert of the Israeli band *Hatikvah 6*, as well as a film screening in the market square and two Israeli exhibits at the cultural center or the AJC. In September, the month when the Center opened, 10th anniversary events will include works of performance art by Polish and Israeli artists and a concert. Please stay tuned for more information.

We are also getting ready for the upcoming summer programs and look forward to welcoming the 2010 Fellows and cadets. This year's Fellows cohort comes from the largest applicant pool in program history!

More information on the Center's activities is available in the [2009 activities report](#). I hope you will take a moment to view it.

Best regards,

Tomek Kuncewicz
Director
Auschwitz Jewish Center

Bringing *Traces* Home

By Shiri Sandler, Manager of International Programs

I've been speaking with my colleagues about *Traces of Memory: A Contemporary Look at the Jewish Past in Poland*, the Galicia Jewish Museum's beautiful exhibit that is currently on display at the Museum of Jewish Heritage. It has been quite surprising for me to speak with people who are seeing it for the first time, because even though I've seen it six times, I've realized that seeing *Traces* in New York has made me a first time viewer, too.



When *Traces* opened here at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York, I was excited to show it to my colleagues, as I feel connected to the exhibition and the history it depicts. My coworkers told me they find the exhibition stark and were astounded by the juxtaposition of beauty and destruction. They also found it hopeful, though, as they learned just how much Jewish life survived in Poland and how much is being done to both preserve and revitalize it. And as they told me how informative it was, I was surprised, because I realized it was all these things to me, too.

The synagogue in Rymanow. Photo by Chris Schwarz.

When I view *Traces* at Galicia, I watch my students' responses and listen to their questions, and make sure to see the pictures I love the most: the photo of the river Bug, which separated Soviet occupied Poland from the General Government; and the picture of the synagogue in Rymanow, which Rebekah Slodounik talks about in her article below. These photos are familiar, not only because I've seen them before, but also because I've seen places like those they depict, though never as beautifully as Chris Schwarz saw them. But walking through *Traces* and watching the video at the end, filled with footage of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow and pre-war films of Krakow's Jewish life, I didn't think of what it is like to stand in front of the mark left by a long-gone *mezuzah* or to see the Tempel Synagogue for myself. Instead, I saw the photos for what they told of the history and what I could learn from them alone.

Walking through *Traces* in a gallery I'd walked through hundreds of times when it held stories of resistance or artifacts from American GIs, I felt like I was seeing the ruined synagogues, the gorgeous refurbished prayer house, and the footage of pre-war Krakow for the first time. Taking the photos out of their home, where they're in context and they connect to everything a visitor sees around her in Kazimierz, made them different and even more powerful. In New York, their beauty is enhanced, the information they hold magnified; the photos are the only way to learn these particular histories. Seeing them in New York made me look to the photographs to

learn about Polish-Jewish life and not rely on all the other histories and sights I knew I'd see in my travels with students.

I love the beauty of the places I see on my trips with students, but their lessons are not new to me anymore. My connections to them are ones I've felt before or are raised by my students. And while I get to watch my students learn and live through their brand new realizations of Poland's rich history, I had to come to New York, come home, to really see Poland anew for myself.

Black Saturday

By Tomasz Kuncewicz, Director, Auschwitz Jewish Center

The feeling in Poland right now, the level of trauma and unity of these days, can only be compared to the sadness expressed after the death of the Polish-born pope John Paul II five years ago. The tragedy that has happened in the past week is often being described as the worst blow to the nation after WW II.

It is very strange to read any political analysis from before April 10, as those reports have lost all relevance. The political landscape of Poland has changed dramatically and such a situation proves again how much history is shaped by

coincidence. The presidential elections scheduled for the fall will now, according to the Constitution, take place within 2 months. The two candidates, the late President Kaczynski and the nominee of the Left, Jerzy Szmajdzinski, were both killed in the plane crash of April 10. Immediately following the funerals, the parties will need to nominate new presidential candidates. The duties of the late president were taken over, in accordance with the Constitution, by the speaker of the Parliament, Bronislaw Komorowski.

This tragedy has had a highly emotional impact on the Polish nation not only because of its magnitude, the loss of 96 people including the President and the First Lady, deputy speakers of the both houses of Parliament, leading MPs from the four major parties, heads of various state institutions including the Institute of National Memory, top military officials, clergy, and historians and families of the Katyn massacre victims, but also because of the symbolism attached to the site of the deadly accident - a few kilometers away from Katyn. As you know, the delegation was to attend the commemoration marking the 70th anniversary of the massacre at Katyn, where over 20,000 Polish officers were shot by the Soviets in 1940, among them Polish Jews, as part of Stalin's effort to eliminate Polish elites after the Soviet invasion of Eastern Poland in 1939.

President Kaczynski was a divisive figure in Poland. He was criticized by the more liberal and leftist segments of Polish society for his conservative stance on many social issues. However, he was highly supportive of Jewish concerns in Poland and he played a crucial role in opening the Polish right to Jewish sensitivities. He was also regarded as one of the strongest supporters of Israel among European politicians.



The First Lady, Maria Kaczyńska, in the Core Exhibition, during her visit to the Museum in 2005. Photo by Melanie Einzig.

Paradoxically, it seems that this unprecedented tragedy has had two positive outcomes for the future: awareness of the Katyn massacre around the world, and in Russia itself, has risen; and the efforts to reconcile Poles and Russians seem to be more cemented than ever, especially in light of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's participation in the commemorations in Katyn on April 7, the screening of the Wajda film *Katyn* in Russia, and the exemplary cooperation of the Russian officials in relation to the crash.

Poland Revisited

By Amy Simon (Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture Fellow, 2009)

It is hard to believe that it has already been eight months since our incredible trip to Poland last summer. It's impossible to say "my" trip, because I shared it so intimately with the five other girls with whom I traveled. Thinking back about the trip, the first emotion I have is a longing to return, tinged with a sadness because I don't know when I will. However, I also feel a sense of comfort because though I am no longer in Poland, many of my memories from there still affect me day by day. This happens in large part because my dissertation research constantly situates me again in Poland.



The Fellows and Tomek on the border between Poland and Slovakia.

For the past two years, I have been reading diary after diary in search of Jewish representations of Holocaust perpetrators. These diaries were all written in Yiddish in Warsaw and Lodz during the Nazi occupation of Poland. Thus, every day I return in my mind to the places I visited for the first time last summer. When I return, the past and present often run together. In trying to understand the Jews of the 1940s, I rely on many of the experiences I had during my AJC Fellowship.

I remember the geography of Poland when I think about how far some Jews traveled during the 1940s, during deportation from Austria to the Lodz Ghetto, for example. I think about the countryside and how some of the diarists I have read were only able to write about their experiences in hiding as they moved from house to house, often relying on the goodness of non-Jewish Poles to keep them safe. I remember the grandeur of the home of the factory-owner Poznanski in Lodz as well as the run-down and boarded up former prayer-house we saw there. I think about the class difference between the rich and poor Jews, contemplating how the stereotype of the wealthy Jew which led to so much anti-Semitism was both confirmed and denied by the Jewish experiences in this one city. I consider the photos posted around Warsaw depicting pre-war architecture and think about the complete destruction of the city and ghetto, along with its residents, among them one of the most important diarists for my work, Emanuel Ringelblum.

I remember the anti-Semitic graffiti in Krakow, which speaks to the continued undercurrent of hatred toward Jews in Poland. So many of the authors I read described this in regard to their experiences with Polish "friends" who turned against them when the Nazis came. I also remember the Jewish Culture Festival in that same city, where I attended a Yiddish singing workshop and saw hundreds of young Poles

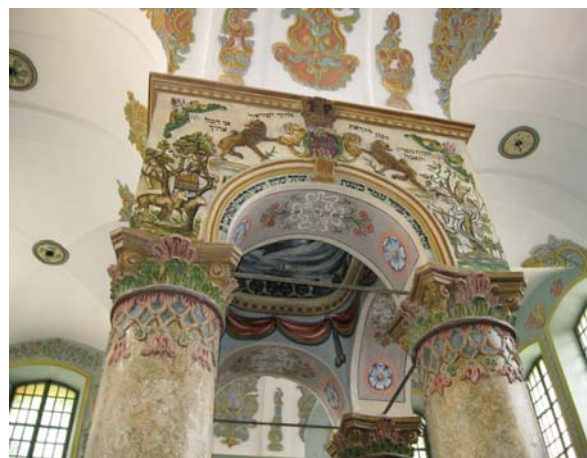
learning about a Jewish culture and language that used to intermingle so closely with their own that the two were sometimes hard to differentiate. I think about the color photographs posted in the memorial museum in Lodz near the railroad track from which Jews were deported. These pictures brought to life what had previously been, for me, a black and white, and therefore distant, event. Seeing the color photos as well as Warsaw and Lodz in person made the people and places in the diaries I have been reading feel that much more real. Furthermore, reproductions of many of the color photos on display in Lodz have been an amazing teaching tool, helping my students to connect the past to their sense of reality.

My experiences of last summer influence my work most, though, when I think about the Jewish representations of Poles in the diaries I have been reading. Sometimes these Poles are described as fellow victims, undergoing the same persecutions as Jews. Sometimes they are generous bystanders, coming to offer a slice of bread as the ghetto walls are built. Sometimes they are active participants against the Nazis, helping to smuggle goods and people in and out of the ghetto, and sometimes they are perpetrators, turning over Jewish friends to Nazi authorities for as little as a portion of sugar. Understanding how complicated the memory of Jews in Poland is today helps me to comprehend how difficult the relations between Jews and Christians must have been in 1940s Poland. If even the memory of an essentially lost people can today cause a spate of Holocaust memorials, such nostalgia, such learning, as well as such hate as we witnessed, it speaks deeply to the intimate yet thorny relationship that must have existed in pre-war Poland. The understanding of the complex state of Jewish and Holocaust memory that I acquired last summer as an AJC Fellow has been a profound help to me in reading and understanding the diaries I am using for my Ph.D. dissertation. For the variety of people we met, the multitude of places we visited, and the numerous reminders of former Jewish life in Poland we witnessed which together led to my deeper knowledge, I thank the AJC. I wish this year's Fellows as much learning and understanding as I think we all experienced last summer and envy with all of my heart the experience on which they are about to embark.

Picturing Poland

By Rebekah Slodounik (Allan and Marilyn Glick Fellow, 2009)

When I returned from Poland and tried to communicate to friends and family how life changing the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows Program was, I had difficulty condensing the program in a pat five-minute narrative. Which aspects of the program should I concentrate on, which anecdotes about the other Fellows should I include, and what should the tone of my description be? Should I include the light-hearted moments, as well as the dark, thought-provoking ones? How could I possibly condense this whole experience into such a short description? Even today, eight months later, I am still recognizing how my experience as an Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellow has affected



The *bimah* of the restored synagogue in Łańcut.

recognition how my experience as an Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellow has affected

and continues to affect my personal and academic life. And gradually, as I have had time to reflect, I realize that it does not have to boil down to a succinct five-minute narrative. What I experienced and learned over the course of this program cannot all be told in a short account. When I attempted to explain, I realized I was literally looking at the answer for several months: two pictures that hang on my bedroom wall.

One is a matted and framed photograph of the inside of an abandoned synagogue in Rymanow, its interior overgrown with lush greenery and tall plants. Sunlight streams in from the open roof, gently illuminating the inside. I bought this print from the Galicia Jewish Museum in Krakow. The abandoned synagogue in the picture recalls the abandoned synagogue from Dzialoszyce that we visited on our shtetl tour. But it is also a reminder of the synagogues we visited that are being preserved or used (for example, as a library or an art exhibition space), such as the synagogues in Krakow and the Jewish communities like in Bielsko-Biala. Though these interiors are in various degrees of restoration, the synagogues function as a clearly recognizable historical and cultural marker of Jewish history in Poland. And this picture reminds me of one of the main purposes of the program: to commemorate the Holocaust and to see the past, present, and future of Poland. The medium of the photograph reflects this goal as well: a photograph, taken today, documenting the past, and ensuring that the image will remain for the future.

The second picture—from the PolArt: House of Folk Art in Warsaw—is a paper cutout of two blue- and orange-colored roosters underneath a red flower, with green foliage surrounding them. The paper cutout hangs in a silver frame directly below the first picture. Like the paper cutout, Poland is vibrant, lively, and stunningly beautiful. I saw the colors in the paper cutting—red, blue, orange, yellow, green, purple—during my interactions with the people we met. I saw the green in the countryside outside Krakow, when we visited with Dr. Rozciszewska and her brother, who as young adolescents helped hide Jews in their home. The warmth of the red and blue I saw in the hug of Zofia Lys, a Polish survivor of Auschwitz, who, after she had finished telling her story, gave each one of us a warm, loving embrace. During the klezmer concert in a synagogue in Krakow during the Jewish Culture Festival, the concert lights were orange, yellow, and purple. But most of all, I saw a combination of all of these colors—the colors of hope and dedication—in the people we met with who work every day to preserve and commemorate the past for today and for the future. I saw the vibrancy of these colors reflected in Jakub Mueller from Nowy Sacz, who walks with singular determination through the city, determined to preserve the memory of his Jewish community.

These two pictures are representative of my experience as an Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellow. I still find myself looking at them every single day. The picture of the abandoned synagogue illustrates Poland's past, whereas the cut-out demonstrates the extent to which contemporary Poland has made this past's commemoration part of the present. Placing these pictures next to each other highlights the juxtaposition. Now, when I talk about visiting Poland, I continue to use these two pictures as an entry point for explaining the intertwining of past and present.

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