Auschwitz Jewish Center: 2009 Activities Report
The Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC) is the only Jewish presence in Oświęcim – the town the Germans called Auschwitz – which is primarily associated with the site of the darkest tragedy of the 20th century. In September 2000, the Auschwitz Jewish Center opened its doors to honor the former residents of the town and to teach future generations about the destruction caused by the Holocaust.
Since August 2006, the Center has been affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York. The Center’s facilities include the Jewish Museum, Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue, and Education Center.

2009 was a year of many interesting projects. The most important of these was May the opening of the unique exhibition, *New Life*. The past year also saw the 70th Anniversary of the destruction of the Great Synagogue in Oświęcim, which was celebrated by a commemorative art project by Dariusz Paczkowski. In addition, preparations for a new year-long educational project called *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* began in December 2009. The Center continued to implement its main educational programs, including *My Former Neighbors* for Polish public school students, the *American Service Academies Program* (June), and *AJC Fellows: Bridge to History* for North American students (June-July).

We are most grateful to our wonderful volunteers Melanie Engler, Johanna Taufner, Hannes Berger, Jörg Reitmaier, Ewa Cichostępska, Agnieszka Pasella, Anna Kryska, Ewa Kornelia Nowak, Gabriela Pasternak, and Elżbieta Filipiak, who contributed greatly to the AJC in 2009 and will be missed. Their duties have been taken over by Daniel Bäumer, Julia Preidel, Nicole Freihoff, and Thomas Decrock, who are spending a year with the AJC through the European Voluntary Service (EVS).

In addition, the home of the AJC, Jan Skarbek Square, was renovated in 2009, giving the AJC a new face for Oświęcim.

Details on these programs, changes, and much more are presented in our 2009 Activities Report. Enjoy!
In April, the AJC hosted youth groups from Australia, North America, and Greece during the March of the Living.

On May 5, New Life opened. This moving story of Oświęcim Jews who left their hometown after the tragedy of the Holocaust documents the renewed lives they have created for themselves and their families in Israel.

New Life is also the story of those who are a symbolic bridge between Poland and Israel. A documentary film featuring Jewish former residents of Oświęcim, along with their children and grandchildren, highlights their feelings about their hometown, Poland, and Israel and is featured in the exhibit.

At the exhibition opening, we welcomed a number of former residents of Oświęcim and their families, including Wiktor Borger, Adela Huppert, and Shalom Lahat. In addition to local officials and diplomats, many residents of Oświęcim also attended the opening.

The AJC was pleased to welcome former residents of Oświęcim who visited to see the exhibition. We are pleased and touched that former residents, including Sabina Rosenbach and Jerzy Feiner and his family, have found New Life a reason to return to their hometown.

We thank our Israeli colleagues for their collaboration on the historical research, photography,
and filming that went into the making of *New Life*: Hamutal Davidi, Zoltan Soli Fordi, Vladimir Margulis, Omer Polak and Guy Yitzhaki.

In July, the former camp KL Auschwitz-Birkenau was visited by an international and interreligious group that included professor Jonathan Webber (University of Birmingham); Dharm Master Hsin Tao, representing the Buddhist community of Taiwan; and Bhai Sahib Mohinder Singh, representing the Sikh community of Great Britain. The delegation visited the AJC and toured the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue and the *New Life* exhibition, and received an introduction to the Center’s educational programming.

On September 6, the AJC organized an open door day during the 10th annual European Day of Jewish Culture (EDJC), which is organized by the European Association for the Preservation and Promotion of Jewish Culture and Heritage (AEPJ). EDJC was celebrated in 25 countries. About 100 people participated in different activities including guided tours through the *New Life* and *Jews of Oświęcim* exhibitions and the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue. Among the offerings were multimedia presentations about Jewish festivals, a discussion on Sabbath traditions with Chantal Maas, and children’s workshops.
Two special events wrapped up the 2009 year. November saw the 70th Anniversary of the destruction of the Great Synagogue in Oświęcim, which was commemorated with an art project made by Dariusz Paczkowski (3fala.art.pl) and inhabitants of Oświęcim, entitled Remember for the Future. During the event, which took place on the former site of the Great Synagogue on Berek Joselewicz Street, a graffiti painting was created.

In December, the AJC hosted the Barakah Theatre of Kraków’s award winning one-woman play Closet, directed by Ana Nowicka from Oświęcim and starring Monika Kufel. This is the powerful story of one young Jewish girl’s wartime experiences hiding in a closet through the war.

New in Our Collection

In 2009, the AJC acquired a number of valuable artifacts, including documents and photographs, which will serve as historical sources about the Jews of Oświęcim and their families. Artifacts donated by former residents of Oświęcim and their descendants in Israel included those from Jerzy, Dov and Samuel Feiner (Appel and Feiner family); Yossi Turk (Silbiger family); Amir Panski (Panski family); Elina Shaked (Kupperman and Grünbaum family); Jan Liliental (Liliental and Blumenfrucht families); Chaim Huppert (Huppert and Bronner families); Wiktor Borger (Borger family); Avi Feiler (Feiler family); and Hadasah Domb (Bauerfreund and Natowicz families). In addition, two unique documents from 1855, signed by Oświęcim Rabbi Efraim Israel Blücher, Ph.D. (1813-1882) were acquired with the help of the Aleksander Kłosiński Museum in Kęty.
Other valuable documents were donated by Albin Janiczek from Oświęcim and are related to the merchants and businessmen from Oświęcim such as Eisig Kleinberger, Jacob Josef Wachsberg and Dawid Schänker. These documents were found at Górnickiego Street during the renovation works of Mr. Janiczek’s apartment. We are also deeply grateful for the donation of a mezuzah scroll by Oświęcim resident Stanisława Iwińska.

We thank all of our donors for sharing their artifacts, documents, and family histories with the AJC.

Please help the Auschwitz Jewish Center preserve the history of the local Jewish community. We are seeking donations of artifacts, including personal testimonies, photographs, formal and personal letters, diaries, press articles, and any other materials reflecting the history of Oświęcim’s Jews before, during, and after WWII. Anyone willing to donate or lend such materials to the AJC is kindly requested to contact:

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We strongly believe that education allows students to not only learn about tragic historic events but also to draw conclusions relevant to their lives today. Our approach is based on the assumption that it is crucial to combine historical knowledge with sensitivity about, and awareness of, the contemporary dangers of prejudice and discrimination. It is important that the lessons of Auschwitz are applied to our lives today. Therefore, the AJC focuses on educational and anti-discrimination projects that teach not only about the Jewish history of Oświęcim, Poland, but also about the modern Jewish world and the dangers of anti-Semitism and xenophobia today.

With this goal in mind, in December 2009 the AJC unveiled a new educational program called Why do We Need Tolerance? This workshop series with students and teachers from Śląsk and Małopolska Regions and will run through November 2010. The program has been endorsed by the Polish Ministry of Education.

The past year saw the continuation of AJC’s educational program for local students, My Former Neighbors, which began in 2007. This innovative educational initiative for high school students consists of four parts, each offering a different subject and/or method of learning. The first part, Elder Brothers in Faith, focuses on Jewish traditions, culture, religion, and history to create an informed image of Judaism and Jewish life. The second section of MFN, What was Oshpitsin?, addresses pre-war Jewish life in Oświęcim, using it as a microcosm of Jewish life throughout Poland. The first two parts of the program are designed to educate about what was lost in the tragedy of the Holocaust. The third part of the program, Walking Their Paths, is a walking tour of Oświęcim, where the students are taken to see the former Jewish sites of the town and the tangible traces of destruction during the Holocaust. The last session, Why Do We Need Tolerance? is an interactive tolerance workshop aiming at raising sensitivity and awareness of prejudice in everyday life. The program teaches about both Judaism and Jewish history in an innovative and interactive way and increases awareness about the contemporary dangers of anti-Semitism and other forms of xenophobia.

A new component of this program was added this year, the My Former Neighbors art competition. The AJC received several dozen entries. Wiktoria Urbaniczuk (13 years old) from Oświęcim was awarded first prize for her painting, Jewish Dance. In addition, three students received Honorable Mentions and ten paintings from this competition are on exhibit at the AJC. My Former Neighbors is made possible through a generous grant from the Batory Foundation under the framework of For Tolerance Programs.
In 2009, the AJC also offered several new educational workshops. In March, Elizabeth Edelstein, Director of Education at the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York, led a workshop for students, guides, and teachers, entitled Every Object Tells a Story. It uses teaching from artifacts, including personal objects, documents, and photos, to help students synthesize information and understand a complex and personal history.

Also in March, students from the US, Czech Republic, and Oświęcim participated in the Why do We Need Tolerance? workshop. Before the New Life exhibit opening, a workshop was held for Oświęcim students, discussing the personal stories of Oświęcim Jews in a Polish-Israeli context. Our final new program of the year was a workshop held during November’s Remember for the Future Project, led by Dariusz Paczkowski. The artistic results of the workshop were used in the creation of the graffiti façade of the Oświęcim Great Synagogue.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center, together with the Museum of Jewish Heritage, proudly continued its two flagship programs for American students, the American Service Academies Program (ASAP) and the Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows: Bridge to History. Through the American Service Academies Program, future military leaders from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, the U.S. Naval Academy, the U.S. Air Force Academy, and the Honors’ Program at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy took part in an intensive, two-week course dedicated to the study of the Holocaust and related military ethics. In addition to working with scholars and hearing survivor testimony in Washington, DC, New York, and Krakow, participants visited Holocaust and Jewish heritage sites, including Kazimierz, the former Jewish quarter of Krakow; shtetls throughout south eastern Poland; and the sites of the Belzec and Auschwitz extermination camps.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center Fellows: Bridge to History Program is a three week advanced study travel program for students who have recently received their undergraduate degrees and or are enrolled in graduate programs.
After a brief orientation in New York City, the Fellows traveled throughout Poland for three weeks, visiting Krakow, Warsaw, Lodz, and Oświęcim. As part of the program, Fellows took part in intensive workshops at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and in a study trip throughout southeast Poland (formerly known as Galicia) that included visits to the formerly Jewish towns of Nowy Sącz, Bobowa, Będzin, Leżajsk, and Łańcut.

In addition, the AJC was visited by a group of Israeli educators from Yad Vashem in July as well as participants of Raphael Lemkin Seminar organized by The Auschwitz Institute for Peace and Reconciliation in November.

**Culture Events**

In conjunction with *My Former Neighbors*, a number of cultural events for the general public were organized at the AJC:

In January, artist Fay Grajower, an American painter and descendant of three generations of Kraków Jews, presented her exhibit *Where the Past Meets the Future* at the AJC. Inspired by archival photos as well as stories from prewar Galicia, the exhibit was accompanied by a workshop on selected aspects of Jewish art and traditions with local students from the Konarski High School in Oświęcim.

In the next month, the AJC was visited by Clila and Hadasah Bau, who presented the works of their father, well-known poet and graphic designer, Józef Bau (1920-2002).

In March, the AJC, in co-operation with the Jewish Motifs Association, organized the *Jewish Motifs: Retrospective 2008* film festival. Showcased were selections of Polish and foreign films on Jewish themes from the 2008 festival. Special guests included film directors Kasia Lisiak (*Sztuka w dialogu?*) and Kuba Karyś (*Miasteczko Kroke*).

Also in March, the AJC presented an unusual memoir from the Holocaust, *I was Looking at the Lips... Diary from the Warsaw Ghetto*. The book discussion featured the editor, Piotr Weiser, PhD (Jagiellonian University, Kraków and Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw) and Katarzyna Nowak (Pro Memoria Journal).

In October, the AJC presented the famous documentary *Po-lin: Slivers of Memory* by Jolanta Dylewska. This film presents as excerpt of archival prewar films, as well as memoirs of Poles who remember the period before the Holocaust and describe it vividly.
Partnership

In 2009, the education program *Why Do We Need Tolerance?* was produced in partnership with the Roma Association of Poland.

Conferences & Seminars Attended by the AJC Staff

Annual European Jewish Museums Conference (Athens)
Limmud 2009 (Warwick University)
The International Visitor Leadership Program, organized by the U.S. State Department (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington; Museum of Jewish Heritage - A Living Memorial to the Holocaust, New York)
Whoever Saves One Life, Saves the World Entire. Scholarly Conference Devoted to Henryk Sławik on the 65th Anniversary of his Death (Jagiellonian University)
Jewish Members of City Councils in the Second Republic of Poland (Rzeszów University)
Genocides and War Crimes. Scholarly Conference (Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Zawodowa w Oświęcimiu).

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www.mjhnyc.org

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Henryk Schönker and his grandson Ori Bar-Gil, photo by Hamutal Davidi.

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