PAMIĘTAMY D’ID17

Auschwitz Jewish Center: 2008 Activities Report
The Auschwitz Jewish Center (AJC) is the only Jewish presence in Oświęcim – the Polish name for Auschwitz – a town that is now 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.
2008 was a year of many interesting projects. The most important of these was Pamiętamy-Zochrim (Polish and Hebrew for ‘We Remember’), which commemorated the 67th anniversary of the deportation of Oświęcim’s Jews to three neighboring ghettos. On an April evening, residents of Oświęcim filled the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue to pay tribute to their former Jewish neighbors deported by the Nazis. Footage from this memorable ceremony was included in a documentary, Oshpitsin: To Save from Oblivion, made by teachers Halina and Wieslaw Swiderski and their students from the Konarski High School in Oświęcim. The film was screened at the AJC in November.

The past year saw also the 60th anniversary of the establishment of the State of Israel, which was celebrated at the AJC as Days of Israel. Film screenings, slide shows, exhibitions, and academic lectures drew many interested in Israel.

In addition, the preparations for a new exhibition called New Life were started. At the end of 2008, AJC staff travelled to Israel to conduct research and prepare photographic materials for the exhibit.

The Auschwitz Jewish Center continued its main educational programs in 2008, including My Former Neighbors for Polish public school students and the American Service Academies Program and AJC Fellows: Bridge to History for American students.

Among the many special guests who visited the AJC in 2008 were Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi, Chief of the General Staff in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF); American actress Tovah Feldshuh; Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams and UK’s Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks; and a delegation of members of the European Parliament and the Israeli Knesset.

We are most grateful to our wonderful volunteers Anna Chłopek, Franziska Koch, Joanna Kosowska,
Magdalena Korzec-Maro, Severin van Gastel, and Thomas Wieninger, who contributed greatly to the AJC in 2008 and will be missed. Their duties have been taken over by Melanie Engler from Germany and Johanna Taufner from Austria, who are spending a year with the AJC through the framework of the European Voluntary Service (EVS).

Details on these programs and much more are presented in our 2008 Activities Report. Enjoy!

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Jewish Museum and Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue

A delegation of European and Israeli members of parliament visited the AJC as part of Holocaust Memorial Day and the commemoration of the 63rd anniversary of the liberation of KL Auschwitz-Birkenau. Members of the European Parliament and national parliaments came together with the European Friends of Israel Association and members of the Knesset to see the Jews of Oświęcim exhibit, visit the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue, and learn about the activities of the Education Center.

On April 16th, the AJC organized a special event called Pamiętamy-Zochrim to commemorate the 67th anniversary of the deportation of Oświęcim’s Jews to three neighboring ghettos. For the first time in the history of Oświęcim, its residents gathered at the AJC to remember the spring 1941 Nazi deportation of Jews from their town to neighboring ghettos of Będzin, Sosnowiec, and Chrzanów. In the two years following the deportation, the ghettos were liquidated and most of the Jews living there were sent to their deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The event took place in the women’s section of Oświęcim’s only surviving synagogue, Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot. Over 300 people filled the synagogue to watch a documentary about survivors from Oświęcim living in Israel today and to listen to moving testimonies of two prewar Jewish residents of the town, Henryk Schönker and Chaim Wolnerman, read by students from the local high school.
The event concluded with a candle-lighting ceremony in which the candles spelled the words *Pamiętamy* and *Zochrim* (*We remember* in Polish and Hebrew) in front of the synagogue.

Every year, the AJC’s highest visitation is the day the March of the Living groups visit. This time we were honored to host special guest Gabi Ashkenazi, Chief of the General Staff in Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Lt. General Ashkenazi was accompanied by the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, and Israel’s Ambassador to Poland, David Peleg. The delegation toured the Jews of Oświęcim exhibit and the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue.

In the spring, the Auschwitz Jewish Center celebrated Israel’s 60th anniversary. During the many events of our *Days of Israel* celebration, two photographic exhibitions were on view, *The Nature and Landscapes of Israel* by world-renowned Israeli photographer Shai Ginott and Road to Non-Oblivion which featured photographs from March of the Living 2007 by Oświęcim’s Tomasz Mól.

This summer, Tovah Feldshuh, an award-winning American actress, singer, and playwright, visited the AJC during her stay in Poland. Ms. Feldshuh’s trip was part of the preparation for her new role in a play called *Irena’s Vow,* which tells the story of a Polish Catholic woman who saved 12 Jews during the Holocaust. During her visit, Tovah Feldshuh saw the exhibit Jews of Oświęcim and toured the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot synagogue. She devoted special attention to the photographic exhibition *Polish Heroes: Those Who Rescued Jews* featuring 21 Poles who rescued Jews from the Holocaust.

In November, the AJC hosted the exhibit *Letters to Sala: A Young Woman’s Life in Nazi Labor Camps.* *Letters to Sala...* is a compelling collection of more than 350 rare Holocaust-era letters and photographs from the archives of the New York Public Library, were all saved at great personal risk by Sala Garncarz Kirschner during her imprisonment in numerous labor camps from 1940 until her liberation in 1945. The exhibition is a moving account of the experience of a young Jewish girl from the Zagłębie region during WWII.
Among the most prominent events of the fall was the visit of religious leaders from the UK. Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams and Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks visited the Auschwitz Jewish Center as a part of a joint pilgrimage to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. Archbishop Williams and Rabbi Sacks were accompanied by approximately 180 school students and teachers, as well as the leaders of the British Baha’i, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Sikh and Zoroastrian faiths.

The visit was part of the Holocaust Educational Trust’s Lessons from Auschwitz Project. The group visited the AJC exhibits Jews of Oświęcim and Polish Heroes: Those Who Rescued Jews, as well as the Chevra Lomdei Mishnayot Synagogue.

In November and December, AJC Director Tomasz Kuncewicz and Historian Artur Szyndler travelled to Israel to conduct research for the upcoming New Life exhibit, planned to open in spring 2009. New Life will illustrate the continuation of Jewish life after the Holocaust in the context those who found a “new life” in Israel.

Post-war Jewish life is frequently left out of Holocaust education, though it is important to give voice to not only the strength of Jewish culture, but also the hope and optimism that are conveyed by stories of survival. Both of these themes are key to the mission of the AJC.

Through images and testimony, New Life will tell the powerful story of the triumph of life in the face of overwhelming devastation. The exhibition will present 19 contemporary photographs of Jews born in Oświęcim who are now living in Israel with their children. The photographs will be accompanied by text panels in Polish and English with personal stories of survival, the subjects’ return to Oświęcim after the Holocaust, and life in Israel. A documentary of former Jewish residents of Oświęcim and their descendants expressing their feelings about Poland, Oświęcim, and Israel will also be shown.

While researching in Israel, AJC staff was accompanied by Israeli photographers and filmmakers Hamutal Davidi, Zoltan Soli Fordi, Vladimir Margulis, Omer Polak, and Guy Yitzhaki.

The project has been supported by generous grants from the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research as well as the Embassy of Israel in Warsaw, US Consulate General in Krakow, German Consulate General in Krakow, the town of Oświęcim and Nicromet Polska.
In 2008, 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 Oświęcim descendants in Israel included those from Hamutal Davidi (Rottenberg and Kluger families), Sara and Jacob Harari (Silbiger family), David Bareket (Weiss family), and Ruthi Harniv (Bernstein and Wasserteil families). The AJC also received artifacts from Oświęcim born Israelis, including Elinoar Paleiov (Druks, Liebermann and Königsberger families), Elina Shaked (Kupperman and Grünbaum), Lola Bodner, and Tova Berlinski. We also received family photographs and documents from Simon J. Bronner (Bronner and Bornstein families) and Rabbi David E. Herman (Dattner family) from the USA. The new collection includes roughly 200 photographs from pre- and post-war Oświęcim and Israel. In addition, six unique photographs of Hasidim in the market square of Oświęcim were acquired with the help of the Historical and Ethnographical Collection in Oświęcim. These photographs are part of the collection of the Krakow History Museum.

Please help the Auschwitz Jewish Center preserve the history of the local Jewish community. We are seeking donations of personal 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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At the Auschwitz Jewish Center, we believe that education helps students learn lessons from the tragic events of the past. That is why we are strongly committed to creating opportunities for youth and adults to discover the Jewish past of Oświęcim and Poland, as well as the modern Jewish world.

The past year saw the continuation of AJC’s educational program *My Former Neighbors*, which was attended by 2,615 high school students. 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 Ośpitsin?*, 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.

The *My Former Neighbors* program held a special workshop day for French Studies students from Krakow’s Jagiellonian University and Pedagogical University. We were honored to be joined by special guest and dedicated supporter of the program, Consul General of the Republic of France, Mr. Pascal Vagogne.

A special version of the program was also prepared for high school students from Sweden who visited Oświęcim under the auspices of the Swedish Committee against Anti-Semitism.

The *My Former Neighbors* program is made possible through a generous grant from the Batory Foundation.

In academic year 2008-2009, we introduced two new workshops: *Polish Heroes*, on the Poles who rescued Jews during the Holocaust (based on the *Polish Heroes* photographic exhibit at the AJC) and *Holocaust-Zaglada-Shoah*, an introduction to the history of the Holocaust, which serves as a supplement to school curricula and is based on historical documents and photographs.
The Jewish Motifs week-long film festival was the first My Former Neighbors cultural event for the general public in 2008. The event was organized in cooperation with Jewish Motifs Association; seventeen diverse Polish and foreign movies on Jewish themes were shown. Special guests included film directors Ewa Szprynger and Michał Bukojemski. A book program was held on the biography of Henryk Sławik, Polish Wallenberg: The story of Henryk Sławik, with author Grzegorz Łubczyk.

Sławik was a prominent Pole who rescued Jews during the Holocaust. During the event, the documentary Henryk Sławik: the Polish Wallenberg by Łubczyk and Marek Maldis was also shown.

In March, a commemoration was held of the tragic events of Poland in 1968. The special program, The 40th Anniversary: March 1968, included two days of film screenings and a discussion with Joanna Wiszniewicz, author of Życie przecięte. Opowieści pokolenia marca (Lives Cut In Half. Stories of the March ’68 Generation).

Human rights were the subject of the second film festival of 2008, Watch Docs, which was organized in cooperation with the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights and the Social Institute for Film. The four documentaries shown at the event inspired the audience to discuss human rights issues in Poland and around the world. The festival films were also shown at the Oświęcim College and the International Youth Meeting House.

In May, the AJC celebrated the 60th anniversary of the State of Israel with a series of events called Days of Israel. Special guests included Gazeta Wyborcza journalist Paweł Smoleński, who gave a fascinating presentation on modern Israel called Israel is Not Flying Anymore, and Dr. Edyta Gawron from the Jewish Studies Department of Jagiellonian University, who spoke on How Israel Came to Be: 60 Years of the Jewish State. Also film lovers had a unique chance to see movies from the Jewish archive of Steven Spielberg. Additionally, Tomasz Mól and Jarosław Praszkiewicz, photographers from Oświęcim, presented a slideshow of photographs from the 2005 through 2008 March of the Living programs.
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 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 the events preceding it. The participating cadets and midshipmen visited historical sites related to the Holocaust, including the area of the Warsaw ghetto, the historical districts of Warsaw and Krakow, the Museum of the Warsaw 1944 Uprising, Krakow’s former Jewish quarter Kazimierz, and the site of the Belzec extermination camp. The American military students were also given the opportunity to tour Warsaw with students from Polish military academies. For the first time in ASAP’s history, a cadet from the U.S Coast Guard Academy took part in the program.

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 those who are enrolled in a graduate program. In 2008, after a brief orientation in New York City, the Fellows traveled throughout Poland for three weeks, visiting Krakow, Warsaw and Oświęcim. An intensive program at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum and a study trip throughout southeast Poland (formerly known as Galicia) visiting the formerly Jewish towns of Nowy Sącz, Bobowa, Leżajsk, and Łańcut were also included in their agenda.

At the end of the summer, the AJC hosted art historian Dr. Natasza Styrna. In her lecture Jewish Artists in Krakow, Dr. Styrna told the fascinating story of the 19th and 20th century circle of Jewish painters and artists in Krakow. Residents of Oświęcim paid special attention to the story of Leon Schönker, a painter from Krakow with family roots in their hometown.

Students from Konarski High School in Oświęcim made a documentary on the Jews of Oświęcim called Oshpitsin: To Save from Oblivion. The students, together with their teachers Halina and Wiesław Świderski, used archival resources of the AJC, including testimonies of the town’s Polish and Jewish residents, to tell the fascinating story of the local Jewish community. The film viewing was followed by a discussion with its authors: students and their teachers.
Partnerships

In 2008, the Auschwitz Jewish Center became a partner of the Przestrzeń Miasta (City Space) project. Przestrzeń Miasta is a website that collects photographic documentation of racist graffiti throughout Poland and coordinates its removal. Please help us fight hate graffiti by contributing to this effort. Go to www.przestrzenmiasta.pl (English version available).

Conferences & Seminars Attended by the AJC Staff

Annual European Jewish Museums Conference (Amsterdam) – Contemporary Trends in the Research on the History and Culture of Polish Jewry: Israeli and Polish Perspectives (Maale Hahamisha, Israel) – Auschwitz and the Holocaust: Dilemmas and Challenges in Polish Education (State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau in Oświęcim) – Graduate Seminar for Holocaust Educators at the International School of Holocaust Studies of the Yad Vashem Institute (Jerusalem, Israel), and European Heritage and Collective Memory (Jagiellonian University Krakow).

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The Auschwitz Jewish Center is an affiliate of the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust

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Please support the Auschwitz Jewish Center.
For more information please contact the AJC in New York at [www.ajcf.org](http://www.ajcf.org) or (646) 437-4276.
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