

YAD VASHEM CONFERENCE 2006

March of the Living- Interaction and Dialogue between

Australian Jewish Students and Polish Youth

Introduction

- March of the Living is an international Jewish educational program that brings together Jewish teenagers from all over the world to Poland to commemorate Yom Hashoah, and to Israel to observe Yom Hazikaron and to celebrate Yom Ha'atzmaut.
- The first March of the Living took place in 1988 with 1500 participants from 15 countries.
- Today, over 45,000 teenagers from 45 different countries have participated in the program.
- Australia became involved in 2001, and to date, 480 Australian Jewish teenagers have been on the program.
- March of the Living Australia has gained communal and government recognition as an important student program Australia wide.

Read message from Australian Prime Minister John Howard Booklet pages 1

There are a number of **areas of focus** that underlie the educational goals of MOL Australia. These include the following:

1. Pre-war Eastern European Jewish life

- The Poland sector of the MOL study trip has two parallel themes- a Holocaust theme and a Heritage theme. Obviously the Holocaust theme incorporates visits to concentration camps, sites of ghettos and mass graves.
- This area of importance refers to the Heritage theme- where it is the vibrant and diverse Jewish life that once existed in Poland- for centuries before the Shoah- that is our main focus, both in the preparatory educational sessions leading up to the trip, and in Poland itself. It is the former synagogues, yeshivot, schools, cemeteries and other sites of Jewish importance that we spend most of our time in. Obviously the division between the Heritage theme and the Holocaust theme is not a clear-cut one. After all, our encounter is with synagogues without congregants, cemeteries without mourners and whole apartment blocks devoid of their Jewish inhabitants.

2. Landscape of the past- experiential learning opportunity

- MOL can be viewed as an example of experiential learning par excellence. In the lead-up to the trip, the students have read articles, seen films, heard speakers and engaged in many discussions. All that is left is to see with one's own eyes the remaining physical evidence of what once was, and to walk in the footsteps of the Jews of Poland.
- It is fascinating to listen to the young people describing their trip in terms of going '*back*' to Poland. This begs the question of how can one go '*back*' to a place one has never been to before? There is a sense of 'returning' that many of the participants feel, especially those who have survivor grandparents. They feel that they are 'returning' as representatives of their families and of the Jewish people. Even amongst those participants who have no direct family history relating to Poland, their immersion in the study of this component of Jewish History in the lead up to the trip results in a close identification with the history of the Jews of Poland.

3. Jewish identity

- Although no studies have been undertaken of the impact of MOL on Australian participants, we believe that students cannot help but be drawn in to examining and reflecting upon their Jewish identity. It is an inevitable part of the experience.
- However, whether it leads a participant to living a more committed Jewish life than if they had not participated, cannot be substantiated in the Australian scenario at this stage.
- We also recognise the potential for enormous personal growth that comes from this program. This is especially the case when, upon their return, opportunities are provided for students to share their impressions of the trip with fellow students and others in the Jewish community- at school assemblies, communal commemorations and through oral and writing presentations. From 2003 onwards MOL students participated in Yom Hashoah community commemorations in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth. Other students have returned home from the trip and volunteered at the Holocaust Museum.

4. Survivors

- The role of survivors accompanying students throughout the journey is a central part of the MOL experience.
- Listening to survivors talk in the classroom, or at the Holocaust Centre is one thing, hearing them speak outside their former homes, schools, and synagogues is quite another.
- Taking a survivor from one's own community makes buildings devoid of Jewish life become re-populated with Jews in the mind's eye of the participants.
- It is a means by which to re-create the richness of pre-War Jewish life. Listening to a survivor at the physical localities of their pre-War childhood lives, and at the camps where they suffered unspeakable horrors, is a powerful means for the transfer of memory; for passing on the torch of continuity. To sit within the gates of Birkenau and be told, "When I arrived here, at this very spot....." takes away the anonymity of statistical information and leaves an indelible impression on all who listen.
- The creation of 'witnesses –once –removed' is possible when hearing a first-hand account in the very place where it all happened.
- Each year we try to have survivors who lived through a range of experiences- ghettos, camps, hidden children, partisans.
- Some parents have commented how their children get on better with grandparents upon their return, and also that the youngsters are able to unlock stories from grandparents' pasts that they, the second generation, never could.
- It is very difficult to contemplate what a MOL trip would be like without survivors- and it begs the inevitable future question of what will happen when we no longer have any survivors to take along with us? It will be a very different experience.

5. Klal Yisrael

- Participating in MOL specifically, as opposed to another trip to Poland, affords students the opportunity to be part of something larger than themselves, their particular schools or even their communities.
- Seeing and meeting other Jewish teenagers from all over the world, especially on Yom HaShoah in Poland and Yom Ha'atzmaut in Israel, is a very powerful experience for young people.
- The realization that they are part of *Klal Yisrael*, that they belong with these thousands of other young Jewish people from all over the world, can have a profound impact on our participants.

6. Universal/humanistic message

- Another impact we hope to be able to draw out of the MOL experience is a more universalistic one.
- By seeing first-hand the physical remnants of the machinery of destruction that was created out of hatred, discrimination and prejudice, we hope that our students will be alerted never to be passive bystanders in the face of evil, irrespective of who the perpetrators and victims are.
- As Jews, we can't be silent in the face of atrocities.
- If we leave students to be concerned about the welfare of Jews only, then we've missed out on a crucial educational opportunity.
- We hope we spur our students onto becoming actively involved in social action; to be compassionate and aware of other people's sufferings and to be pro-active eg upon return this year many students have expressed wanting to do something about what is happening in Darfur.....

The emphasis of this paper is on the next two **AREAS OF FOCUS**:

Polish-Jewish Relations and Jewish Life in Poland Today

7. Polish-Jewish relations

Goals and Aims

- The whole area of Polish-Jewish relations is sensitive and complex.
- There are conflicting national memories, diametrically-opposed perceptions- all with a heavy overlay of emotion.
- Our aims in engaging students in the issue of Polish-Jewish relations today are manifold.
- Some of these are centred on the **Poland of today**- irrespective of how one sees and understands the past
- and some are centred on trying to tease out the **shared past** of what happened between Jews and Poles for centuries, and during the War.
- Obviously, the division between the two is also murky and not quite so clearcut.
- In terms of the **Poland of today**- we want students to grapple with the phrase "**Let's visit Poland**".
- What do many Jewish people mean when they say, "We're going to Poland"? The Poland most often being referred to, is the lost world of Jewish Poland that no longer exists in reality, and this implies that that is all there is to do in Poland; nothing more to see/learn/ experience there.
- What is Poland? In the eyes of many...nothing, but a Jewish cemetery.

Often, there's no serious, in-depth thought about

- the Poland of today
- the Polish people now
- what are the issues facing contemporary Polish society
- how does Polish society remember the events of the Second World War
- What do young Poles today know about the Jews that once constituted 10% of the population of their country?
- Jews in Poland today

The truth of the matter is that Poland today, in early 21st century, is a

- **democracy** of 40 million people
- there is a surge of Jewish Studies courses on offer at universities
- there is a tremendous interest in all things Jewish amongst the 'intelligentsia'
- each year there is an increase in the number of towns forming grassroots organizations dedicated to the preservation of Jewish sites in their towns and holding annual memorial services
- high school students in different parts of Poland are engaged in on-going projects of cleaning up and restoring Jewish cemeteries
- The Forum for Dialogue Among Nations Foundation was established in 1998. Its aim is to create a climate of tolerance and promote democratic values. There are cultural heritage preservation projects, education programs with Jewish and Polish students and even international exchange programs.
- many young Polish people are eager to learn about Poland's Jewish past, and to meet their Jewish peers from around the world
- Poles march in solidarity with the Jewish people in March of the Living on Yom HaShoah; and the numbers are increasing every year
- The Polish government has made a commitment to facilitate the establishment of memorials throughout Poland which reflect and honour the Jewish nature of what happened during World War Two
- **Poland is one of Israel's staunchest allies in Europe**
- Regarding the Jewish community of Poland- which we'll discuss later on- it does exist, it is growing both numerically and in terms of communal organizations, it is going from strength to strength

Does this mean Poland today is perfect vis-a vis anti-Semitism?

Of course not. We are not saying that- this is not a whitewash; not apologetics for the Poles.

Poland, and its educators, have a lot of work to do- but having met with representatives from the Polish Education Ministry they know their task is massive. Their teaching material includes the following information:

During the preparations for the March of the Living, young Polish participants should be aware that an over 800 year mutual history unites Poles and Jews. In our country bloomed an exuberant life of the Jewish society, Jews who found a safe haven here. In Poland, they found their second homeland, contributing to its culture, education and economy. However, our common history is not free from its dark pages and events caused by anti-semitism, xenophobia and the nationalistic rhetoric – such as pogroms on the Jewish population and ‘school bench ghettos’.

The article concludes by stating:

Through participation in the March of the Living, we all learn one thing: the respect for the uniqueness of each person and regard for the inalienable rights flowing from human dignity. We also become cognizant of the necessity to work together on maintaining peace and safety for our and future generations so that the painful experiences of the Holocaust would never be repeated again. (This material was published in co-operation with the Ministry of National Education, Warsaw 2004)

- In the acclaimed book, *Shtetl*, Eva Hoffmann writes:

More central, and much more hopeful is the reopening of public discussion about Polish-Jewish history, including its most painful episodes. The discussions, conducted in the press and in other forums, often draw furious heat and ardent feelings, but they are also filled with self-examination, self-criticism and thorough searching of personal and collective conscience.

On our side, as educators of young Jewish people, our aims include:

- Wanting our students to see people- all people- as individuals-not stereotypes. [one cannot make generalizations about a nation of 40 million people; no matter how you see the past, the vast majority of Poles alive today were not of adult age during the War]
Our students perhaps need to face their own inherited pre-conceived stereotypes and prejudices

There are good and bad in all people.

Indeed it is confronting and confusing for our kids, when they're in Poland, to meet these Polish kids who are so welcoming, hospitable, warm, knowledgeable about the Jewish history of Poland, and anxious to build bridges between themselves and Jewish youngsters.

- We believe that moving kids out of their comfort zones, or at least challenging their comfort zones, is an important educational goal. It is a tremendous opportunity for educational, moral and personal growth.

- It is an encounter that serves towards showing young people about the possibility of healing deep wounds. It is about the role that they can play in the improving of difficult relations. It is NOT about forgetting about the past- it's about acknowledging the past-with all its ugliness and complexity, and trying to move forward to a better future.
- It is about asking, where do we go from here? Our students-16 year olds- are two generations after the Shoah- we don't want them to be stuck in a mire of prejudiced generalizations and stereotypes forever.....
- Working with young people is about empowering them for the future- their actions can make a difference; we want to imbue them with optimism that good, positive things can grow out of tragedy, and that they can be a part of ensuring this happens.

In terms of the **Poland of the past**, and what happened between Jews and Poles for many centuries, and then during the War:

- Uncomfortable, confronting, complicated issue; not black and white
- In order to understand the Poland of today- the here and now-one needs to have at least some sense of the past
- The Jewish History of Poland is a very mixed one. Over the centuries there have been times of co-operation and neighbourliness; and times of vicious anti-Semitism. And all shades of relationships in between. It must be noted that Casimir the Great invited the Jews into Poland in 14th century, whatever his motivations were, he did provide a haven for the Jews from the hell of Western Europe at that time. To jump centuries later, after the death of **Marshall Pilsudski** in 1935, there were ferocious anti-Semitic episodes exploding throughout Poland.
- In a nutshell, there are those who feel Poland has always been a country populated by extreme anti-Semites.
- On the other side, there are those who point out that Poland was the country with the largest Jewish population in Europe, where Jewish life thrived precisely because of the country's favourable climate towards Jews.
- An interesting question/statement has grown out of this conflicting perception and understanding is:

IF THINGS IN POLAND WERE SO GOOD FOR THE JEWS, WHY WERE THEY SO BAD?

AND IF THINGS IN POLAND WERE SO BAD FOR THE JEWS, WHY WERE THEY SO GOOD?

How do Poles remember the Second World War? **What is the Polish 'collective national memory'?**

In a nutshell:

- They too were victims
- Germans invaded their country on September 1st 1939!!!
- Luftwaffe bombed the hell out of Poland for 3 weeks- bombs weren't earmarked 'Jew' or 'Gentile'. Many thousands were killed in the opening weeks of the War
- Polish intellectuals religious and political leaders in each town and city disappeared or were taken away and shot
- Starvation, disease, misery, devastation, death
- Germans closed or destroyed schools, universities, museums, libraries
- Nazi policy towards the Poles had two overall aims:
 - a) to prevent the Polish elite from organizing resistance
 - b) to exploit the less educated majority of peasants and workers as unskilled labourers ie they were earmarked to be a nation of slaves serving the Third Reich
- By the end of the War 3 million Polish Gentiles had been killed!

Poles during the War vis-à-vis the Jews:

- There were those who were indifferent to the fate of the Jewish neighbours
- but many did 'dob' in their Jewish neighbours.....
- on the other hand, there are Jews alive because Poles saved them.....
- on the other hand, little help from the Polish underground.....
- On the other hand: the number of Poles that have been awarded the Yad Vashem honour of 'Hasidai Umot Haolam' ('Righteous Among the Nations') is currently nearly 6,000
- given that Poland was the only country where harbouring a Jew was punishable by the death penalty- you, your family, the whole building..... (how many of us would hide someone knowing that if caught we, and our families, would be killed as retaliation?)

This is what Poles emphasize: price to be paid for helping; Yad Vashem figures underestimation.....

This is the crux of the point of contention, discomfort and acrimony between Jews and Poles to this day.

N.B. The tension levelled has been amplified by Jews referring to the camps as “Polish death camps”. This is incorrect. The Nazis did it! They were Nazi death camps set up in occupied Poland.

[Yad Vashem has recently supported a Polish initiative to rename Auschwitz-Birkenau as *the Former Nazi German Concentration Camp Auschwitz-Birkenau.*]

How do you weigh it up?

This issue is one of **contested memory**.

Let’s be more specific:

Poles see themselves as **VICTIMS** (they were!) but where it becomes **contested memory** is that there is a tendency to see themselves as **EQUAL VICTIMS**.

- We then, as Jews, find this problematic:
 - We were earmarked for total destruction- genocide.
 - They were earmarked to be a nation of slaves serving the Third Reich.
- We had it worse- boils down to who suffered more?
- Does a fight for survival bring out the worst in people?

Obviously, this is a very complex issue.

Rabbi Michael Schudrich: “The Poles were neither as good as they would like the world to believe, nor as bad as many Jews claim.”

- What does all this mean for today?
Where do we go from here?

For us, as Jewish educators, we do not want our young people to stay mired in the stereotypes/generalisations of the past- we want to move forward, and are trying to find ways to do so.

Our main emphasis is to dispel the myths that Poles may have had about Jews and that Jews may have had about Poles. We hope that the sessions in Poland will have a ripple effect in Polish society. Hopefully, the Polish kids will go home and tell their parents and their friends what they learned from us and vice versa!

In the words of an American MOL educator, “We do not bring you [young people] to Poland to teach you to hate, but to teach you what evil can really do in the world.”

Preparation

- The very first educational preparatory session is devoted to this topic- this is the only educational session where ALL participants-from the different states- are present. This reflects the degree of importance that we attach to this issue-it's the first topic in the educational preparatory series and it's the only one at which all participants are present.
- Open up the session with... We are off to Poland; we each have our thoughts, our images, what are we looking at, what are we looking for, what is our agenda, our baggage, our assumptions..... - then get the kids to read **Marie Clare article- Booklet page 2** quietly to themselves.....What is the Poland of this article like?
- Vacation spot; becoming fashionable, trendy, cafes, nightlife etc. Has anyone here even contemplated Poland in this way? [Can a person go to Poland and not "mention the War"?)
- Making students aware of own baggage, and preconceived ideas. Heighten self-awareness and self-reflection
- What does it physically look like? What images do you have in your mind of the country we will soon all be visiting? What are our expectations of the geography, terrain?

For example- some people think of Poland in black and white; drab, colourless terrain. The fact of the matter is that it's really a very beautiful country- scenery, rural areas, forests, mountainous regions are quite stunning. Sometimes that can be a shock to the system- perhaps we somehow expect nature to reflect our grief....

As has been outlined earlier:

We talk about the Poland of today- the here and now

We talk about the goals [as we outlined them to you]

We talk about the Polish collective memory of the War

Read article extract (Ron & Krysna Pawlowski) Booklet page 3

We talk about the Poland during the War vis-à-vis the Jews

We talk about the initiatives now taking place between Jews and Poles.

Sesame Street article: Booklet page 4

Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations: Booklet Page 5

Tel Aviv Uni. Article: Booklet Page 6

Discussion groups:

1. Try not to be too politically correct, but as honest as you can be.
2. There's no right/ wrong answer; this is about grappling with a very sensitive issue.
3. Allow yourselves to be uncertain, if that is how you currently feel.
4. Allow yourselves, and each other, to change your minds- in this discussion, in Poland, afterwards.

1. Do you think that it's 'okay' to visit Poland and not make any effort to meet Polish people (Gentiles)? Why/ Why not?

2. Would you, personally, like to meet young Poles? Why/ Why not?

3. What 3 questions would you like to ask a young Polish person?

4. Which of these questions would you be prepared to actually ask, and which would you feel you couldn't or shouldn't ask? Explain.

5. What are some attitudes, that you are aware of, that some Jews have towards Poles?

6. Do you feel that it makes a difference whether such views are held by survivors, or by people of your generation?

Activities in Poland

[Don't necessarily do all of these every year.....]

Visit to Polish high school- largest in Krakow- and meet with Polish Gentile students their own age. [Facilitated through Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations]

- We have been welcomed with "Shalom Aleichem" and dancing.....and the word "Shalom" formed out of lollies-spelt in Hebrew!
- Tree of friendship
- Warm words of welcome
- Soccer match

- Sitting in groups: asking about each other's lives- interests, school, music
- More serious group discussions

Visit Otwock High school and clean up Otwock Jewish Cemetery with Polish high school students, their teachers and the local priest, Father Lemanski.

<p>See Polish news article Booklet page 7</p>
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Video Presentation

DVD 4 and ½ minutes (students at Otwock MOL 2005)

Responses

Meeting with Polish High school students

We stepped from the bus. It was our coldest day yet. We walked across the road. Ten, twenty Polish students standing at the gates to their school singing to us He'veno Shalom Ale'chem- we bring peace upon you! – In Poland! They took our gloved hands and we stood in a circle around a small tree- The Tree of Peace. The students planted this tree with their teacher four years earlier. 'We planted this tree as a reminder that nothing bad will happen again between our people and your people.' These students- they were...remarkable, astounding, indescribable. We danced around that tree- young, old, boys, girls, Jews, poles alike. It was the best feeling in the world. (Dalia Goldschlager MOTL 2002)

Reflections from Kasia (teacher in Otwock)

This project is important for the Polish and Jewish teenagers. They have an opportunity to meet and socialise in order to realise that living people are all the same. For us (the Poles) it's important to learn about the history of our town, where a large number of Jews used to live.

Reflections from Father Wojtech Lemanski (Polish priest from Otwock)

You have come to Poland from Australia, a country so far away. We have come here, to Otwock, a place so close in distance, but in many ways, also far away. You, youth from March of the Living, are discovering the history of your ancestors, while we, the Polish youth, are discovering the history of our fellow citizens, Jews who lived in Otwock before the War. By cleaning and restoring these tombstones with you, we bring back the memory of the people who used to live in our town.

<p>See Responses Booklet page 8</p>
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8. Jewish Life in Poland Today

Goals and Aims

- We want students to gain a first-hand account of Jewish communal life in Poland today. Despite claims to the contrary, there are Jews living in Poland. There is a Jewish community, and it is growing.
- **It is growing....**
 - in terms of the number of people affiliating with the community
 - in terms of Jewish communal organizations
 - in terms of Jewish educational institutions [both for adults and youngsters]
 - in terms of the training and employment of Jewish communal professionals
- We want students to learn about, and be exposed to this Diaspora community.
- We, as teachers of young people, feel that grappling with present-day and future issues- as outgrowths of the past- is an essential component of our responsibility.
- We want them to gain a sense that they are witnesses to an as yet unformed and uncertain new Jewish experience, that is playing itself out in our time.
- We want students to think about, discuss and contemplate issues such as:
 - How do they feel about the resurgence of Jewish life in Poland?
 - What does it mean to live as a Jew on Polish soil?
 - What are the issues Jews in Poland face today?
 - What are our responsibilities towards assisting the Polish Jewish community [same as/ different from, other Diaspora communities]?

Preparation

- One two-hour educational preparatory session is devoted to this topic- Jewish life in Poland today.
- Brief history of Jews in Poland from the post-War period through 1956 political upheavals and through 1967-68 further upheavals until the fall of Communism in 1989

- Emphasis is placed on reasons why Jews stayed in Poland
- Also the view that Polish Jewry was thought to be on the verge of extinction by late 1980's. No viable Jewish future seemed possible to even contemplate
- Trace the dramatic change that began in 1990's until this day: as if a curtain has been lifted after decades of silence and invisibility.
 - Resurgence of Jewish life in all its facets- on the personal, familial and communal levels
 - Ronald S. Lauder Foundation
 - Jewish day school in Warsaw
 - New rabbi in Krakow
 - Jewish university student organizations
 - Jewish communal youth centres
 - More operating synagogues
 - Summer camps
 - Educational initiatives- adult education; teacher training in conjunction with the Sochnut
 - New museums and cultural initiatives

See range of activities offered at Galicia Jewish Museum Booklet page 9

Read AJN article Feb. 25, 2005 Booklet page 10

- Discussion groups- facilitated by madrichim-on the following issues:
 - How do you feel about the resurgence of Jewish life in Poland?
 - Should Jews live in Poland, where millions of our people were murdered?
 - How do you feel about the issue of us donating money to support Jewish communal projects there eg restoration projects; shule library?

Activities in Poland

[Don't necessarily do all of these every year.....]

- Visit to the Lauder-Morasha Jewish Day School in Warsaw [security; Hebrew and Polish posters; address by the principal; go into class; sit with the little kids.....]
- Inviting Jewish-Polish teenagers (from the Cholent group) to our hotel for Shabbat lunch, after shule.
 - chatting informally with our kids
 - addressing the group as a whole

[Their accounts of their personal journeys of discovering that they were Jewish, their searches and thirst for Jewish knowledge and their efforts to lead Jewishly-observant lives didn't leave a dry eye in the room. We were all left with much to contemplate]

- Rabbi Michael Schudrich- Chief Rabbi of Poland speaks to our contingent every year about Jewish life in Poland- the issues; problems; sensitivities; new initiatives. Phenomenon of “Jews coming out of the woodwork”.
- This year- for the first time- two Polish Jewish teenagers went with our group to Israel, for the one week Israel leg of MOL. [Their land costs were covered by MOL International, and MOL Australia, paid their airfares.]

Video Presentation

Extracts from Lauder school, Polish Jewish girls, meeting with Rabbi Schudrich