Israel Studies Chair ends historic five-year term

Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger has just ended her five-year term as Leon Liberman Chair in Modern Israel Studies. Chair manager Tammy Reznik looks at the chair’s significant contribution to the Centre and university at large.

“We don’t know about God, but Jewish continuity was always paved with words … Genesis, Isaiah and Proverbs are our pyramids, our Chinese Wall, our Gothic cathedrals. They stand undemolished in the flow of time. They are objects of rare beauty, especially in the Hebrew original, independent of time, politics and faith.”

Speaking at her farewell lecture (3 May) on the topic “Jews and Words”, Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger provided a taste of the upcoming book she has co-authored with her father Amos Oz.

Established in 2005 through the gift of the Lee Liberman Charitable Foundation in partnership with Monash University, The Leon Liberman Chair fulfilled its aims to advance a rounded and multidisciplinary teaching and research program exploring the politics, society and culture of the modern State of Israel with the appointment of Oz-Salzberger in May 2007.

The result has been an outstanding array of international conferences, symposia, lectures, workshops and community events and has also provided mentorship for research students in modern Israel studies.

In his vote of thanks at the farewell lecture, Monash’s Pro Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Copolov, captured the essence of Oz-Salzberger’s work:

“Your lecture tonight was encyclopaedic in its coverage – covering as it did the language in major religious texts such as the Torah and, not uncritically, the works of sages such as Maimonides, but also the learning-inspired bonds between parents and their children. It would be hard to imagine any such bond being stronger than the bond – deeply infused with love and respect – that you and your co-author, your father clearly enjoy.

“Words are not only at the centre stage as the subject of your talk tonight; they are also the tools by which public intellectuals such as yourself, spread wisdom and enlightenment. It has been said that Judaism is the faith that is most intoxicated by books and learning. Thank you so much for helping fuel our intoxication tonight in such a satisfying and memorable manner.”

Highlights include the Monash Israel Lecture Series took place over four consecutive weeks in 2009, 2010 and 2011, attracting hundreds of people. The flagship annual Monash Israel Oration featured top Israeli researchers including Itamar Rabinovich, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies, Tel Aviv University; Zionism expert Professor Anita Shapira from the Rabin Centre for Israel Studies, Tel Aviv University; and Amos Oz.

A unique scholarly contribution was the two-part conference series titled “The Israeli Nation State: Political, Constitutional and Cultural Challenges” (August 2010 and April 2011). A publication featuring papers from both conferences as well as essays by other experts will be published in 2013. The journal will tackle Israel as a nation state from legal, historical and sociological perspectives and represents Jewish, Israeli and Arab/Palestinian scholarly research.

Fania Oz-Salzberger gives her final lecture as Leon Liberman Chair in Modern Israel Studies.
Photo: Ben Weinstein
From the acting director

It has been an exciting few months at ACJC while I have been serving as acting director. We have made some outstanding new appointments, including Karen Auerbach as the Kronhill lecturer in East European Jewish history. Her work focuses on the Jews of Poland during and after the Holocaust and she has received a book contract with the University of Indiana Press. Karen has been lecturing at ACJC for the last year and we are delighted she has joined us in a permanent position.

We also have appointed two new researchers in Holocaust Studies who will arrive from the United States in July: Daniella Doron and Noah Shenker (see page 4). All these wonderful scholars of international repute will further establish ACJC as one of the major Jewish Studies programs in the world.

With the aim to reconsider how Jewish identity is understood in the contemporary world, we recently hosted the Old Jews New Jews conference with keynote speakers from the US and Israel who delved into the broad spectrum of how Jews understand, and are understood, around the world. Most of the events were packed with a great range of participants: Monash undergraduate and graduate students, local community members, interstate academics and students who work in Jewish studies (see page 5).

And building on the momentum we are continually gaining in furthering our international academic reputation, I hosted the Loti Smorgon Lecture Series at which Ken Freiden from Syracuse University and Karen Auerbach and Julie Kalman from Monash discussed the interaction between Europeans and Jews during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Monash students continue to flock to ACJC courses as they seek to understand the relationship between Jewish culture and the broader world. Because the scholars at ACJC undertake research and publish books in a range of fields, they also teach in a variety of areas, from philosophy, to literature, to history. Our teaching and scholarship aim to build bridges between Jewish studies and other fields and the students respond wonderfully to exploring how Jewish studies has been a crucial force in the development of the modern world.

Leah Garrett
Loti Smorgon Research Professor
Contemporary Jewish Life and Culture

Online access to community data

Ongoing research by the ACJC’s Professor Andrew Markus is helping Australia’s Jewish communities to plan ahead.

Information about the Jewish community can now be accessed directly online, thanks to a new dedicated web page on the Australian Jewish Population Study (arts.monash.edu/jewish-civilisation/jewish-population-study).

Markus said this is one of the ways that the ACJC is making a significant contribution to Jewish life in Melbourne and Australia, a development made possible by the generous donors who provided funding to supplement the grant he obtained with colleagues from the Australian Research Council.

Markus said the first steps are now being taken to catch up with Jewish communities abroad. There are major overseas internet sites which provide information to their communities for evidenced-based planning, such as the North American Jewish Data Bank (www.jewishdatabank.org) and the London-based Institute for Jewish Policy Research (www.jpr.org.uk). He said he hopes that the current research program will grow into a Jewish population research unit within the ACJC.

Three reports have been released since October 2011: ‘Older Jewish Australians’; ‘Antisemitism’ and ‘Education: A Statistical Analysis’. There is also a report analysing the Jewish communities of New Zealand using Gen08 data (the survey was administered in NZ), prepared by New Zealand colleagues and accessible from the Australian Jewish Population internet site.

Highlights from the Australian reports include:

- the proportion of people aged 65 and above is already significantly higher in the Jewish community than in the wider Australian society; it is projected that the Victorian Jewish population aged 75-84 will increase from 4,130 in 2021 to 7,470 in 2031, a development that will place major pressure on community resources;
- younger members of the Jewish community report more experience of antisemitism than older people, probably because they have a broader range of contacts and experiences than most in the older age groups; the issue of anti-Israeli hostility is an important issue within the universities - and more attention could well be given to support young Jewish adults;
- detailed statistical analysis of the impact of Jewish education on identity supports the findings of the earlier report on Jewish continuity; the impact of Jewish schools on identity, when considered in isolation, is not statistically significant; the strongest predictor of strength of Jewish identity are factors associated with the family home and upbringing.

Markus is now working with Dr Miriam Munz on a report dealing with poverty within the Jewish population.

The 2011 census data will be available in the second half of the year and Markus and his team will be working on reports in co-operation with the planning group at the Jewish Communal Appeal (JCA) in Sydney. This will be the first time that the Melbourne and Sydney communities have worked co-operatively on census analysis, which provides data vital for communal planning.

“We are very fortunate in Australia to have census data on the Jewish population. The American census does not ask people for their religion, hence hundreds of thousands of dollars are spent by Jewish communities to obtain the demographic data that we get almost for free. But in past years we have not been organised in Melbourne to access and analyse the data and then to build on that information with targeted surveys, which we managed to do with the Gen08 survey,” Markus said.
There’s nothing quite like on-the-ground experience, and for two groups of ACJC students who are heading off to Europe and the Middle East on intensive study tours at the end of June, their encounters promise to be unforgettable.

The first Overseas Study Intensive titled ‘Final journey: Remembering the Holocaust’, follows the road to Auschwitz, visiting Berlin, Krakow, Lublin, Zamosc, Vilnius, Bialystok and Warsaw.

This two-week study abroad unit, led by Dr Karen Auerbach and Sue Hampel, and starting in Monash Prato, explores the modern history of European Jews before the destruction. Students will travel to the major centres of interwar Jewish life in Italy, Germany, Poland and Lithuania and encounter the diverse heritage of Jewish life in each country. The unit will explore issues central to this period and the individuals who shaped their times. Students will visit museums, synagogues, cemeteries, destroyed ghettos, and sites of mass murder such as Auschwitz-Birkenau. They will ask what remains of the past, by looking at the ways in which the lost world of European Jews is being memorialised and renewed through tourism and return.

‘War and Peace: Models of Conflict Resolution’ explores peace, conflict and reconciliation and visits Prato, Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ramallah, Hebron and Bethlehem.

This unit, led by Associate Professor Mark Baker and Dan Rabinovici, begins with a workshop on conflict resolution at the Monash Prato campus in Italy. Students will travel for the remaining period to areas that have experienced conflict to observe first hand the complexities of peace-building and reconciliation. The course focuses on the Arab-Israel conflict and investigates current attempts to mediate peace between Jews and Palestinians, the impact of the conflict on the lives of people, poverty, settlements and security issues, terrorism and counter-terrorism, Jerusalem and its holy sites. In some years, the course may also travel to alternate sites of conflict, such as Northern Ireland or the former Yugoslavia.

The ACJC is hosting prominent Israeli journalist, author and historian Tom Segev for a lecture series in August and September titled “The Making of Israel: History, Myth, Memory”.

Segev writes a weekly column in Israel’s daily newspaper Ha’aretz. His most recent book, Simon Wiesenthal: The Life and Legends, has been published in numerous languages and made the New York Times book critics top 10 list in 2010. He is working on a biography of David Ben-Gurion.

Segev will speak on four consecutive Wednesday nights from 22 August to 12 September, 7.30pm, at Monash Caulfield.

His lecture topics are:

- “The twice-promised land: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate”;
- “The first Israelis: how to speak Hebrew in 100 languages”;
- “The seventh million: the Israelis and the Holocaust”;
- “Elvis in Jerusalem: beyond Netanyahu and Obama”.

For more information call 9903 5002.
American couple Noah Shenker and Daniella Doron are joining the Centre in second semester as Holocaust and Genocide scholars. Shenker’s research, in testimony and memory, examines how the model of the Shoah Visual History archives can be used for the broader field of genocide studies. Doron is an historian who works on the impact of the Holocaust on children and focuses on the postwar reconstruction of family life in France.

Noah Shenker is particularly interested in issues relating to the representations of the Holocaust and other genocides in visual culture. In his previous role he designed two new undergraduate courses; one explored debates concerning the challenges of representing the Holocaust in visual culture; the other examined critical debates surrounding the historiography of the Holocaust, including discourses on the aftermath and memorialisation of the Shoah.

He is planning to continue to teach these subjects at Monash as well as museums, memorials and the Holocaust; testimony and trauma; Jewish identity in cinema; the Holocaust and comparative genocide; and Jewish autobiographical film and literature.

Shenker wants his students to engage with the ethical, moral, and methodological questions and obligations associated with studying the Holocaust with an eye towards examining and confronting contemporary social traumas.

“As my work is strongly rooted in the study of visual and aural culture, I challenge students to look and hear beneath the surface of what they consume and create in media culture, compelling them to interrogate the historical, political, and ideological underpinnings of representations of suffering and survival.” Noah Shenker

While at Colgate University her courses were broader in scope, ranging from a two-semester introductory sequence on Jewish history, an interdisciplinary course on Jewish history and autobiographies and a seminar on ‘Jewish Migration and Diaspora’.

Daniella Doron is strongly committed to undergraduate and graduate education as well as to research and believes her role as a scholar carries “a profound responsibility to remain actively engaged in the intellectual development of students.

“Outside of academia, Shenker enjoys hiking, farmers markets, cross-country road trips and the cinema. Doron is an avid cook and baker, enjoys gardening and reading fiction and shares her partner’s love for cinema.

The couple is looking forward to exploring Melbourne’s urban environment and food and coffee culture, becoming integrated into a dynamic Jewish community and joining the community’s and university’s rich intellectual lives.

Daniella Doron and Noah Shenker
Daniella Doron comes to Monash University from Colgate University, where she was the 2010-2012 Schusterman Postdoctoral Fellow in History and Jewish Studies. In 2009, she received her PhD from New York University from the departments of History and Hebrew and Judaic Studies where she wrote a dissertation entitled “Family, Youth and Identity in Postwar France, 1944-1954”. A selection of this work recently appeared in the Journal of Jewish Identities (August 2011). Doron’s teaching and research specialities include Holocaust and Genocide studies, modern Jewish history, modern France and the history of childhood, gender and the family.

Noah Shenker was a postdoctoral fellow at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, where he taught courses on the Holocaust in visual culture. In 2009, he received his PhD in Critical Studies from the University of Southern California’s School of Cinematic Arts. He is completing a book titled Formations of Memory: Documentary Film History and Theory and cultural, trauma and memory studies. Shenker’s research and teaching expertise includes issues of Holocaust and Genocide studies, modern Jewish visual culture, trauma and memory studies, documentary film history and theory and archival and museum studies.

Karen’s new book
Karen Auerbach, Kronhill lecturer in East European Jewish history, has completed her book on Jewish life in Poland after the Holocaust. Ujazdowskie 16: Jewish Families in Warsaw after the Holocaust in press for publication (Indiana University Press) in April, 2013, traces the lives of 10 Jewish families who were neighbours in an apartment building. The study reconstructs the families’ histories over two generations from before the Holocaust to the present day and sets their lives against the backdrop of Jewish communal life and Polish politics.

The ACJC adheres to Monash University’s commitment of harnessing knowledge to improve the world. The Centre’s academic staff continues to engage with colleagues locally and internationally in teaching and research collaborations.

Markus around Australia
Pratt Chair Professor Andrew Markus was a guest presenter at several national conferences and forums during September and October last year. He spoke about trust in Australian public life for the Young Strategic Leaders Forum, which is run by the Kokoda Foundation at the ANU Campus on the south coast of NSW and delivered a paper on the asylum issue at the Migration Institute of Australia conference on the Gold Coast. He presented a keynote lecture on social cohesion at the UN Alliance of Civilisations forum at Melbourne Town Hall and presented findings of the social cohesion survey to a round-table discussion on strategies to combat racism, hosted in Canberra by Dr Helen Szoke, Race Relations Commissioner. He also participated in a panel discussion on racism and social cohesion in contemporary Australia at the FECCA (Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils) conference in Adelaide. The Jewish Population Study report on ‘Older Jewish Australians’, which Andrew co-authored, was the focus of a panel discussion at the Jewish Care (Vic) Inc annual general meeting in November 2011. The dialogue was hosted by the ABCs Peter Mares and was later broadcast on Radio National.

Israel chair news
Early this year, Leon Liberman Chair in Modern Israel Studies, Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger, was in New York for a Posen Foundation Advisory Board meeting to discuss new doctoral programs for the study of Jewish civilisation in the US, Israel and Europe. In late March, she gave a guest lecture at Tel Aviv University titled “Where goes the book?: on ancient and modern tablets and scrolls”.

Yom Hashoah guest
ACJC tutor Sue Hampel was the keynote speaker for this year’s Yom Hashoah commemorations on the Sunshine Coast, in Surfers Paradise and in Brisbane.

Literary essay published
Professor Leah Garrett’s essay titled “Young Lions: Jewish American War Fiction of 1948” has been accepted for publication in the journal Jewish Social Studies.

ACJC student at major meet
ACJC PhD candidate Annabelle Baldwin shared her research about sexual violence against Jewish women concentration camps in a presentation to a London conference early this year. Her was titled ‘German perpetrators of sexual violence against Jewish women in the Nazi camp system’ at the 4th International Multidisciplinary conference on ‘Beyond camps and forced labour: Current international research on survivors of the Nazi Persecution’. Monash University was also represented by ACJC tutor Sue Hampel and Arts faculty researcher Margaret Taft. The conference featured around 120 speakers and 30 panels on topics ranging from ‘The opening of the archives of the International Tracing Service’ to ‘Displacement, evacuation and deportation in the Soviet Union’ and ‘After the war: Jews and Gentiles in immediate post-war Europe.’

All about Poland
ACJC lecturer Dr Karen Auerbach travelled to Poland in mid-November last year for a month of archival and library research in Warsaw, Wroclaw and Krakow and to present a paper titled “Memory, Identity and the Writing of History: A Case Study of Jewish Life in Poland after the Holocaust” at a conference at Warsaw University. In December she continued on to the annual Association for Jewish Studies conference in Washington to present a paper on Jewish publishers of Polish literature in 19th-century Poland and to chair a panel on Czech Jewry. Earlier this year, Auerbach and Dr David Slucki spoke on “Jewish publishers and the Polish book in modernising Poland” at a Monash University lecture titled “Memory, Identity and the Writing of History: A Case Study of Jewish Life in Poland after the Holocaust” at a conference at Warsaw University. In December she continued on to the annual Association for Jewish Studies conference in Washington to present a paper on Jewish publishers of Polish literature in 19th-century Poland and to chair a panel on Czech Jewry. Earlier this year, Auerbach and Dr David Slucki spoke on “Jewish publishers and the Polish book in modernising Poland” at a Monash University literature faculty research seminar.

HU post
The ACJC’s Dr Michael Fagenblat is lecturing as Lady Davis Fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, jointly in the Department of Jewish Thought and the Department of Philosophy. He has been teaching two courses in Hebrew: on Martin Heidegger and modern Jewish thought and on negative theologies. He returns to the Centre in second semester.
The ACJC’s Jacob Kronhill Program in Yiddish Language and Culture attracts students of all ages, from a variety of backgrounds and with varying degrees of Yiddish knowledge. Three graduates talk about their impressions and experiences of the program, the role Yiddish is playing in their lives after graduation and their plans for ongoing involvement with Yiddish in the future.

Reyzl Zylberman

Growing up in a Yiddish-speaking family, it was always important for me to be an active Yiddish speaker. This always meant not just involving myself in Yiddish events, but actively improving my Yiddish. Yiddish, for me, is a form of expression of my secular Jewish identity that is inextricably bound to Jewish culture and, therefore, Jewish languages. In my case, the Jewish language through which I express myself is the language of my family’s past, present and future. In the same respect, Yiddish remains an important language to be studied and spoken by all Jews.

The Yiddish language is home to the best cultural treasures and accounts of Jewish life that could ever be found and I feel privileged to be able to immerse myself in them.

I first began studying Yiddish at Monash University in 2008 as a key addition to my undergraduate major in Jewish Civilisation. When I joined my first Yiddish class at Monash I was already a fluent Yiddish speaker, but wished to improve my grammar and explore more Yiddish literature. I found this and more at the ACJC. The program enabled me to greatly improve my Yiddish and prepare me for my life as a Yiddish teacher.

It was an assignment from my Yiddish class at Monash, for which I researched the Melbourne Yiddish community, that inspired me to undertake an Honours degree in Jewish Civilisation at Monash University, researching the Yiddishist SKIF youth movement in Melbourne.

Reyzl Zylberman

Today, I am completing my Honours degree and am a Yiddish teacher for Years 8, 9 and 12. I am also an active member of the Yiddish community, sitting on various committees that organise Yiddish events.

I feel privileged to share these treasures of Jewish life with a new generation of students, as a secondary Yiddish teacher. This growing generation of Yiddish speakers is busy too, making new Yiddish films, books, magazines, games and music etc. I am honoured to be a part of this generation.

“The Yiddish language is home to the best cultural treasures and accounts of Jewish life that could ever be found and I feel privileged to be able to immerse myself in them.”

Reyzl Zylberman was a co-recipient of the 2010 Peter and Barbara Kolliner Prize in Jewish Civilisation.

For more information about the Jacob Kronhill Program in Yiddish Language and Culture at the ACJC, email arts-acjc@monash.edu or phone 9903 5002.

Clare Fester

I didn’t know any Yiddish at all before I started university. I was drawn to study Yiddish because I was interested in how stateless cultures retain their identities. I am also interested in radical literature.

I was lucky enough to study Yiddish at the ACJC via videoconference when the Yiddish department at Sydney University was closed half way through my Yiddish major. Despite the distance, the class made me feel like part of their Yiddishe kehile (Yiddish community). The ACJC Yiddish program shattered my timidity to speak Yiddish and gave me a healthy appreciation for Yiddish leftist poetry, a field I hope to pursue in the future.

Since completing my Yiddish studies at the ACJC, I have studied at the Yiddish Book Centre in Amherst, Massachusetts in the US, where I conducted original research into the radical Yiddish press. The YBC awarded me a grant through its Cowl Jewish Cultural Liaison Program to run Yiddish cultural programs in my community, through which I have helped organise a Yiddish culture lecture series and Sydney’s first all-Yiddish choir, Dos Pintele Syd. I am currently completing my BA at University of Sydney and hope to join the Melbourne Yiddish community in the future.

Clare Fester won the 2001 ACJC Yiddish Prize.

‘The ACJC Yiddish program shattered my timidity to speak Yiddish and gave me a healthy appreciation for Yiddish leftist poetry, a field I hope to pursue in the future.’

Clare Fester
Ariella Leski

I grew up knowing just enough Yiddish to insult a nudnik and compliment a bubba on her cooking; these are, after all, fundamental issues in a Jewish family. But I had always wanted to know more.

I have always been drawn to Yiddish and the way it links me to my grandparents and their pasts. For the most part though, I decided to learn Yiddish because I didn’t want to miss out on all the secret conversations at the Shabbos table. Now that I do understand what’s being said though, I can confirm that it’s usually not as scandalous as I had thought. “This soup is too salty” and, “Cut me another piece of cake”, feature often. When I finished school, I chose to go to Monash University so that I could finally study Yiddish. I was lucky to have teachers who realised how effective learning a language through literature, film and music can be.

In November 2010, I finished the three-year Yiddish language, culture and literature program. I would recommend it to anyone looking for an entertaining and enjoyable learning experience. I was very surprised to win the ACJC Yiddish Prize in 2010, but the real naches was sharing the news with my grandparents.

My Yiddish knowledge has been very useful at the Jewish Holocaust Centre where I have been a volunteer for a long time. I also assisted the Jewish Museum of Australia to translate Yiddish documents.

In calling him Melbourne’s homegrown Yiddish poet.

Some Birstein poetry has also been translated into Hebrew after Firestone discovered that Israeli scholars were not aware of it.

Voluntary translators from all over the world have contributed to the projects with project leader Firestone ensuring the faithfulness of the translations.

Firestone is also editor of www.yiddishpoetry.org, a linked site to an ongoing project that is compiling an anthology of Polish inter-war Yiddish poetry with the help of Polish, Hebrew and French translators. Here, sound files of readings by native Yiddish speakers can be found.

Myer Bloom is a teacher of journalism at Monash College and a graduate of the ACJC’s Masters in Holocaust Studies program.

I am completing my honours thesis in History and Jewish Civilisations. As my thesis relates to the experiences of Holocaust survivors in Australia, Yiddish has come in handy. I would not have been able to conduct essential research – such as reading Yiddish newspapers – if I hadn’t completed this course. I plan to continue studying Yiddish. There’s so much more to learn.

Ariella Leski won the 2010 ACJC Yiddish Prize.

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Myer Bloom

The ‘Yiddish Language and Culture’ link on the ACJC’s website presents three in-depth Yiddish language, culture and history research projects as well as details of Monash University’s Yiddish language and culture courses.

The ‘Yiddish Melbourne Project’ led by Professor Andrew Markus provides documents, photos, music and testimonies recording the lives of important Yiddish personalities, the institutions they created, the outlook of their descendants and how they have all shaped Jewish Melbourne.

Adjunct Research Associate Dr Andrew Firestone’s ‘Israel Shtern Project’ is an attempt to gather all Shtern’s Yiddish writing on the net, with some English translations. Shtern was one of Warsaw’s most significant pre-war Yiddish poets and essayists.

Born in the small shtetl of Ostrolenka, Shtern remained a lifelong practising orthodox Jew even though in Warsaw he mixed with the mostly secular and left wing leading Yiddish writers. He was literally a starving poet and would not travel or work on Shabbat.

The site includes historical chronicler, Rachel Auerbach’s beautifully-written poignant description of Shtern’s last days in the Warsaw Ghetto and an essay on Shtern by renowned Melbourne Yiddish writer and fellow Ostrolenker, Itzchak Kahn.

Firestone’s ‘Yossel Birstein Project’ outlines the work of the Polish-born fiction writer, storyteller and poet who lived in Melbourne for 14 years before settling in Israel. Birstein wrote most of his poetry in Melbourne and there is some justification in calling him Melbourne’s homegrown Yiddish poet.

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Jewish identity was examined from different viewpoints at the Australian Association for Jewish Studies Conference (AAJS) hosted by the ACJC, 12-13 February. Titled ‘Old New Jews: Jewish identity in the 21st century’, the Dina and Ron Goldschlager Family conference on Contemporary Jewish Life featured an impressive array of international and local speakers. Myer Bloom reports on some of the keynote addresses.

Meaningful Jewishness

Professor Bethamie Horowitz, a sociopsychologist from New York University, provided an overview of how American Jewish identity has changed over the last 100 years in her keynote address on “Revisiting Jewish identity in the 21st century”.

At the turn of the 20th century, Jews were negatively perceived as just one group of the “unwashed masses” migrating to America. By the latter half of the century, although some Jews in quest of upward social mobility dispensed with elements of their Jewishness, most had become “Americanised” without necessarily losing their Jewish identity, she said.

Horowitz presented a series of current statistics indicating that American Jewry is generally well known, accepted (without any of the stigmas of the past), more socially integrated and perceived as having made a significant contribution to American society. The most positive perceptions of Jews were in cities and amongst university graduates, she said.

One significant example of Jewish acceptance is that Jewish representation in Congress rose from one per cent in 1900 to eight percent in 2007.

Rather than measuring “eroded” Jewish activities, as was the practice in past attempts to define Jewish identity, Horowitz argued for investigating how individuals find meaning in their Jewishness within the variety of emotional and cultural expressions of Jewishness in America today.

She suggested the need to examine reactions to conversion, intermarriage, gay relationships, to people who had never married, to people becoming ultra-Orthodox and to not getting a degree (a degree being regarded as an important mainstream American value).

Responding, Professor Andrew Markus said that less research had been undertaken in Australia, but our spectrum of Jewish expression and practice was similar to America’s. However, whereas more than half of American Jews identified as Reform and Conservative, the balance in Australia leaned more towards Orthodox and “traditional” expression.

Significant in this expression is the influence of the survivor generation and most communities’ identification with Zionism and Israel, he said.

Chareidis reacting to modern world

Taking what he termed the Talmudic approach of seeing what Jews are actually saying, doing and thinking, Professor Samuel Heilman, a sociologist at New York University, spoke of the growing influence of Charedism, the practice of ultra-Orthodox Judaism.

Speaking on “Old New Orthodoxies”, Professor Heilman said today, as the higher birth rate of Charedi Jews increases their demographic presence, they are increasingly politically and religiously influential in Israeli politics and in diaspora religious institutions.

Heilman suggested that Charedi Jewry has experienced a triumph of survival, especially in America and Israel, against what Charedim regarded as the corrosive effects of modernity.

He said this confidence and power did not occur in the past because of a demoralisation of the Orthodox world by the Shoah – many orthodox leaders had argued against Jews leaving Europe – and the growth of Zionism and the establishment of Israel. Despite the losses of the Shoah however, Orthodoxy grew in America and Israel. When Ben Gurion granted army exemptions to Charedi Jews there was a perception they would disappear altogether.

Heilman also described the new, more moderate, modern Orthodox practice that has developed in the post-war period. It is more tolerant and pluralist and values university education, professional work and equality for women.

He contrasted this with the view of the Charedim as an insular and politically-conservative group which regards the outside world as toxic, which wants all Jews to be like it and which contributes to the power and authority of the religious right.

Professor Heilman concluded that Charedism is a modern creation in reaction to the modern world and refuted the Charedi claim of representing original Judaism. He was critical of their desire to have greater control in Israel and over Orthodoxy and of their regarding non-religious Jews as not fully Jewish, a perspective he termed 17th century ethnocentrism.

In his response, Associate Professor Mark Baker suggested a new paradigm for examining what is now happening in the Orthodox world. He provided as examples his Melbourne synagogue, Shira Hadasha and others around the world that exemplify a practice he characterised as post-denominational, independent, inclusive and less reliant on rabbinic authority.
Discussion about Zionism has for decades been too infused with political histrionics within the context of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, says Dr Daniel Gordis.

Addressing the topic “A new Zionism for the 21st century”, Gordis, a leading commentator on Israeli society, said Israel’s enemies have contributed more to the debate about Zionism than Israelis. He identified two polarised Jewish positions: a growing leftist attitude wanting to end the conflict with the Palestinians and more insular groups emphasising Israeli-Palestinian differences. Gordis called for an injection of contemporary relevance into Zionism.

Referring to early chapters of Genesis, he refuted critic Tony Judt’s argument that Israel, as a state for a particular people, was an anachronism. He interpreted the stories of the dispersal of Noah’s sons and the Tower of Babel as indicating that the Torah saw human difference as an ideal.

A universal, homogenous society, as suggested by John Lennon’s “Imagine[d]” world of no countries or religions to die for, would be a world with nothing to live for.

This led Gordis to the crux of his argument: Jews need a state because all people need a state. It provides a platform for people to have a presence and to be heard. He cited the examples of the Basques, Tibetans and Georgians who are denied this presence. Despite the negative perceptions of nationalism, Gordis believes Jews, as a nation, have a role to play. Israel has brought this idea to the fore; the significant change is that Jewish people can now be heard.

Gordis said the new Zionism should look to re-asserting the prophetic ideal of living life fully, as part of a distinct culture, history and language. This should counter the eroding effects of globalisation, which are causing the world to lose the sanctity of original sources of language, culture and a distinct lifestyle.

In response, Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger suggested that Israel has not produced a world-class philosopher because Israel was a country busier with practice than theory; it was busy winning wars, building a state and reviving a dead language. However, she identified a positive Zionist dynamic in the flourishing of youth movements, which together with Israelis from all points of the political spectrum, discuss and debate how to revive the social equality paradigm of the past.

Contemporary Jewish life is splintered and divided between an open, modern Judaism, resulting from “post-feminist Limmudisation”, Judaism without walls; and Judaism with bigger walls in the form of the Charedisation of orthodoxy and its tension with Zionism, according to Professor David Shneer.

But the global diaspora of Russian Jews is an important part of the solution to Jewish divisiveness, Shneer, Jewish Studies director and history professor at the University of Colorado, said in his keynote address on “Old-new identities: the remaking of the Jewish world”.

He characterised Russian Jews as politically conservative, anti-pluralist, deeply secular, multilingual, wealthy and suspicious of religious institutions. They are highly educated, identifying professional success as a Jewish trait and are interested in peoplehood and ethnic identity. They want to connect and identify with Jewish culture and this identification is partly shaped by anti-semitism.

Shneer said Russian Jews are mainly of urban background with half originating in Moscow and St Petersburg. As result of their global mobility, they now make up 15-25 percent of the Jewish population in Western countries. They have exercised great demographic, economic and cultural influence in Germany, Canada, New York and Israel. He quoted one example in Israel, where resulting from Russian pressure, tombstones can now be inscribed in Russian, English and French.

More significant examples are the influence in Israel of Alexander Scharansky, Avigdor Liberman and Leonid Nevzlin. The latter is a millionaire philanthropist who wants to remake the Beth Haftufot museum from one presenting diaspora life and its related persecution into a museum of the Jewish people, emphasising contemporary Jewish life, expressions of Jewish identity and the connections between Jews.

In response, Professor Leah Garrett added that the largest shapers of Jewish culture in New York are Israelis, as well as Russians. Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger questioned the effectiveness of Russian Jews as a global bridge between splintered Jewish communities by arguing that Russians tend to alienate both orthodoxy and the left. She said that in Israel and Germany, the younger Russian generations are growing more nationalised and less Russian as they become part of their new homelands.
Public events offer diversity

The Centre’s public events menu has provided a taste of contemporary life, politics, culture and literature from local and overseas guests.

Black-Jewish relations

Professor Bill Chafe spent a few weeks at Monash University last September on a Fulbright senior scholarship secured by Loti Smorgon Research Professor, Leah Garrett. Chafe, a prominent professor of American history whose work focuses on race and gender, is the Alice Mary Baldwin Professor of History at Duke University, USA. Sponsored in conjunction with the American studies program at the University of Sydney, Chafe ran seminars and workshops and taught courses related to courses in this study area. At a well-attended research seminar on black-Jewish relations hosted by the ACJC, he discussed the topic from a historical perspective that considered the role of Jews in the civil rights movement in America. Working with colleagues in Monash’s history department, Garrett helped to organise an inter-university United States studies conference at the ACJC with Chafe giving the keynote speech on “Obama’s America”. Garrett discussed Jewish American war novels.

Shoah screening, discussion

“Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah – a 25-year retrospective” was the title of a four-week intensive seminar series in October and November. It attracted a diverse range of participants to watch the controversial film – which explores the lives of victims, perpetrators and witnesses of the Holocaust and the landscapes of the Nazi death camps – and discuss the conflicting representations of this central event of our time with Associate Professor Mark Baker, Dr Karen Auerbach and Dr David Slucki.

Wagner and the Jews

Prominent Jewish cultural figures, Heinrich Heine, Theodor Herzl and I L Peretz all were profoundly impacted by the operas of Richard Wagner and specifically his Der Tannhäuser. In late November, the Loti Smorgon Professor of Contemporary Jewish Life and Culture and author of A Knight at the Opera, Leah Garrett, discussed how central Jewish thinkers reworked Wagner’s opera to present Jewish cultural concepts. She examined how the changing views of Wagner’s music by major Jewish thinkers outlined the relationship between Jews and the broader world during the advent of the modern era and asked if any art, even that of a prominent antisemite, should be considered taboo.

Exploring Jewish identity

On the eve of the ACJC Contemporary Jewish Life Conference (see pp 8,9), international guest, Professor Bethamie Horowitz from New York University and a socio-psychologist, presented an all-day interactive professional workshop on Jewish identity for community professionals and lay leaders. Hosted by the David Smorgon family, the workshop attracted more than 30 participants who said it provided a better understanding of how Jewish identity impacted and improved their work in the community.

Centre, uni farewell

Fania Oz-Salzberger

Professor Fania Oz-Salzberger’s farewell lecture on 3 May was preceded by a cocktail party at the ACJC, addressed by Sam Lipski AM and Robyne Schwarz who noted her significant contribution to both the Centre and university. Photos: Ben Weinstein Photography

1. From left: Mark Baker, Fania Oz-Salzberger, Robyne Schwarz
2. Edwina Cornish, David Copolov
3. Ricci Swart (left), Helen Light
4. Charles and Leah Justin

Loti Smorgon lecture series

ACJC lecturer Dr Karen Auerbach’s forthcoming book was the subject of her lecture “Integration and its obstacles in post-war Warsaw: the Jewish families of 16 Ujazdowskie Avenue” when she opened the three-part Loti Smorgon Lecture Series titled ‘Cross Currents: Jewish European Encounters’ that took place in May and June. The series looked at the interactions of European Jews with the wider world in the 19th & 20th centuries. The second lecture, by Dr Julie Kalman, about a bourgeois Jewish family in post-revolution France and its tale of religious transition, was titled “From Kippah to Cassock in three generations: the Cerdì-Berr-Ratisbonnes and French Jewry”. The final lecture by Professor Ken Frieden (guest of Limmud Oz) was on “Shipwreck and Survival: Pacific Sea Travels in Yiddish and Hebrew”.

Berlin showcased

In early June historian and researcher Thorsten Wagner (guest of Limmud Oz) gave a lecture titled ‘Berlin: a city in transition’. He is the European director of Fellowships at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics. The lecture explored Berlin and its complex perspectives on the past and present – its ruins and fragments, sites of dramatic historical importance, a web of old and new memorials as well as new architectural masterpieces that are defining and redefining the urban space.

Thorsten Wagner
Stories from the Carlton shtetl

For the children of Yiddish-speaking European migrants who settled in Carlton in the 1920s, ‘30s and early ‘40s, growing up in this Aussie shtetl provided many happy memories that are relived in a book, published by the ACJC. Danny Gocs reports.

When book editor Julie Meadows became involved in the “Write Your Story” program in 1998 to help members of the Melbourne Jewish community publish their life stories, she dreamt of producing an anthology of stories of Eastern European migrants who settled in prewar Carlton.

Two and a half years ago Meadows – who also grew up in Carlton – started work on her book, A Shtetl in Ek Velt, which was launched in December last year.

The book was produced in collaboration with the ACJC and features the stories of 54 people who settled in Carlton between 1925 and 1945, reflecting their diverse religious, political, community and cultural affiliations. Among those who submitted stories are Bernard Rechter, Dulcie Kanatopsky, Harry Pose and Leon Mann. There’s also an entry from acclaimed artist Yosl Bergner, 90, who is now living in Israel and still actively paints in his Tel Aviv studio.

Meadows began the book by contacting people she remembered living in Carlton.

“I contacted them, knowing that they had great stories to tell,” she explained. “In no time, participants were furnishing me with names of childhood friends who wanted to be included. Over the coming months, thanks to our extensive community grapevine, others got in touch with me, offering to write or tell me their stories.”

Meadows said the names of the rabbis, shochets, Yiddish-speaking shopkeepers, doctors and chemists were repeated in many of the entries. “These people and establishments such as the Kadimah and Hascolah were the glue that held the community together.”

Meadows is working on a companion book of the stories of migrants who came on the “second aliyah” – the survivors of the Holocaust who made up the post-war migration to Carlton.

A Shtetl in Ek Velt, a product of the ACJC’s Yiddish Melbourne project, is available from the ACJC for $45. Enquiries: (03) 9903 5002.

This story first appeared in the Australian Jewish News.

Rebuilding the Bund

Writer, broadcaster and former Labor minister Dr Barry Jones AO reminisced about his long-standing ties to the Jewish community and his close friendships with Bundists when he launched ACJC lecturer Dr David Slucki’s book The International Jewish Labor Bund After 1945: Toward a Global History on March 28.

The event, at the ACJC, was co-hosted by the J Waks Cultural Centre Inc.

The Jewish Labor Bund was one of the major political forces in early 20th-century Eastern Europe. But the decades after World War 2 were years of enormous difficulty for Bundists. Like millions of other European Jews, they faced the challenge of resurrecting their lives, so gravely disrupted by the Holocaust. Not only had the organisation lost many members, but its adherents were also scattered across many continents.

The book charts the efforts of the surviving remnants of the movement to salvage something from the wreckage. Covering both the Bundists who remained in communist Eastern Europe and those who emigrated to the United States, France, Australia and Israel, Slucki explores the common challenges they faced – building transnational networks of friends, family, and fellow Holocaust survivors, while rebuilding a once-local movement under a global umbrella. The book is a story of resilience and passion for an idea that only barely survived Auschwitz.

Barry Jones (left), David Slucki
Photo: Ben Weinstein Photography

The International Jewish Labor Bund After 1945: Toward a Global History is available from Sunflower Bookshop.
Each year, the ACJC awards a number of scholarships and prizes to students enrolled in its courses and units. Congratulations to the 2011 prize winners and 2012 scholarship recipients so far. We are grateful to our generous donors for their continuing support.

Prizes 2011

Peter & Barbara Kolliner Undergraduate Prize in Jewish Civilisation
Best major/minor graduate in Jewish civilisation
- Avigail Manshari

Holocaust Studies Prize
Best student in Holocaust unit
- Amelia Hughes

Stewart Baron Prize in Middle Eastern and Israel Studies
Best student in Israel unit
- Miriam Kolacz

Jacob Kronhill Prize in Yiddish Language
Best student in Yiddish language
- Clare Fester

Scholarships 2012

Paul Huppert Memorial Israel Travel Scholarships
For students travelling on Jewish studies abroad course
- Tony Williams, Robyn Vance

Peter & Barbara Kolliner Jewish Study Abroad Scholarship
For students travelling on Jewish studies abroad course
- Samantha Gourley

New chair for ACJC board

Robyne Schwarz is the new chair of the ACJC’s advisory board, succeeding Sam Lipski who recently retired after five years of service.

Robyne was an integral part of the push to undertake the Gen 08 Survey and is actively involved with promoting wider Jewish community planning.

She has served the Jewish and wider Melbourne communities extensively through her association with social work for more than 30 years.

Robyne was president of Jewish Care Victoria from 2004 to 2009 and was the inaugural national chair of the Federation of Jewish Aged and Community Care Organisations.

In the broader community, Robyne was national director and state president of the Australian Association of Social Workers and lectured at Melbourne University in social work. She was also a member of the Psychology and Osteopaths Registration Boards of Victoria.

Robyne is president of the Victorian Health Services Review Council and is the Victorian public member on the Australian Press Council. She is also a member of the Royal Children’s Hospital Clinical Ethics Committee.

The ACJC advisory board also comprises centre director, Associate Professor Mark Baker; Pro Vice-Chancellor, Professor David Copolov; Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research), Professor Edwina Cornish; Vice President, Advancement Ron Fairchild; Dean, Faculty of Arts, Professor Rae Frances; Dr Helen Light; Monica Kempler; Bernard Marin; Professor Graham Oppy; Gary Samowitz; and Professor Ilana Snyder.

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Newsletter compiled and edited by Karen Klein with contributions from ACJC staff.

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The success of the ACJC has been made possible largely through a philanthropic partnership between Monash University and the Jewish community. Gifts and endowments to the ACJC support its growth through named lectureships, scholarships and programs.

For further information about giving to the ACJC, contact:
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