Bay Area artist hopes to turn horror into hope at Auschwitz

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For most visitors to Auschwitz, a one-day stay is enough. The emotional impact of touring the infamous death camp is great, and there is little else in the area to see.

That is not the case with Helene Fischman, however. The Emeryville-based artist — whose work was on the 2002 cover of Resource, the Bay Area's Guide to Jewish Life — will spend eight weeks this summer as a scholar at the Auschwitz Jewish Center.

The center houses a museum as well as a place of prayer and reflection only 1.8 miles away from the death camp. Fischman and three other scholars will spend their time living in the town of Oswiecim, developing educational and arts programs, and conducting research on behalf of the center.

Most of the residents of Oswiecim have little or no contact with Jews. And in fact, "many of them live in the shadows of Auschwitz and only see Jews as victims of Nazi terror, not as those who had a vibrant culture before the war," said Lisa Kahn, director of outreach and programming of the New York based-Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation.

The scholars who spend time at the center work to develop educational programs to change that. This is the fourth year of the program, and some possible projects include interviewing elderly residents about their impressions of Jewish life there before the war, and creating educational curricula for students in North America.

Fischman, 36, originally from Rhode Island, received an undergraduate degree in painting from Boston University's School of Visual Arts, and a master's degree in education from Cal State Hayward.

A former Jewish educator, Fischman has been developing art curricula for more than a decade.

In 2002, she was the recipient of the Fromer Award, given by the Center for Jewish Living and Learning of the Jewish Community Federation of the Greater East Bay.

Her curriculum was designed to teach adults about modern Jewish artists and techniques in a variety of media. Through it, she hoped, students would develop artistic skills that would give them tools to express prayer through symbols and images. The curriculum made its debut that fall at the Limmud Conference, a five-day Jewish educational conference at the University of Nottingham in England.

Last summer, Fischman received a grant to create an art project in Terezin — the village next to the concentration camp of the same name, outside of Prague — where she temporarily turned an old Nazi barrack into a contemporary art studio.

"Terezin was the only Nazi camp where art was allowed, so my feelings about art as a key to cultural survival compelled me to go there and make art in honor and memory of the former prisoners," she said.

Artist Helene Fischman works in her Emeryville studio.

She learned about the scholar program at the Auschwitz Jewish Center on the Internet.

Though she doesn't know exactly what she will be doing in Poland, she is looking forward to combining her arts background with Jewish education.

"Art offers a sense of hope, a refuge for the heart, a sanctuary for the soul," she said.

"The arts can provide a rich framework for students to learn about and express the accompanying amalgam of feelings and emotions associated with the unfathomable events at Auschwitz."

She also plans to use the experience to create art of her own. "I believe that the outcome of applying creative arts in the environment of Auschwitz will facilitate transformation of my students and my own feelings of horror into a connected community spirit of hope and beauty."

The S.F.-based Jewish Family and Children's Services will be supplementing Fischman's scholarship, in part with a grant from the Roszi and Jeno Zisovich Jewish Studies Award to Teach the Holocaust. ▪