

Lauder: I`ll renew life in Eastern Europe (Tłumaczenie Poniżej)

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW - WYJĄTKOWY WYWIAD

ODNOWA ŻYCIA WE WSCHODNIEJ EUROPIE.

BY TOBY AXELROD VIENNA (Wywiad ukazał się 26 października w londyńskiej gazecie "Jewish Chronicle")

□THE MOST important thing to Ronald Lauder is Jewish children. And he has reached some 34,000 of them.

This week in Vienna, the American Jewish billionaire and philanthropist marked 20 years of providing Jewish education in central and Eastern Europe, through his Ronald S Lauder Foundation, "Our aim is to build Jewish life in Eastern Europe," he told the/C.

And education is key. The former diplomat began focusing on Jewish schooling while serving as US ambassador to Austria in the mid-1980s, and went on to launch schools in Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland, Belarus, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine.

Back in Vienna this week, Mr Lauder presided over the inauguration of the Lauder Business School, serving 200 students from across Europe and the US. Helping to fix a mezuzah at the newly opened floor of the Lauder Chabad Campus school, he was serenaded by hundreds of children. Meeting the students is vital. "The one thing they have in common is their passion for learning" he said. "When a decision is made by parents or children to go to a Jewish school in Eastern Europe, that decision takes a certain amount of strength.

"First of all, it's hard work. Second, to go to a Jewish school in Eastern Europe, you have to be very strong [in your Jewish identity). And thirdly, in a strange sense, it is a commitment to learn about Judaism. And it is also a commitment to me — they are betting on my name, my reputation. So I feel a very strong responsibility."

The 63-year-old is well aware of the power of the Lauder brand.

"My name gave people more and more confidence. It's not like buying a car, which, if it doesn't work, you can get another one.

They are committing the most valuable asset they have: their children."

Mr Lauder, who is president of both the World Jewish Congress and the Jewish National Fund, also met Austrian Chancellor Alfred Gusenbauer and President Heinz Fischer, urging them to take a tougher stand on Iran.

Although he considers Iran's bellicose posturing a serious threat, Mr Lauder still considers antisemitism to be a bigger problem for Jews in the world today — particularly anti-Israel sentiment, "which I feel is nothing more than covered-up antisemitism. Many people will say, 'I am just anti-Israeli'. I say, 'What's the difference?'

"But the most important problem is, I feel, the assimilation of Jewish people."

He recalled visiting the late Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, who told him that "the Holocaust today is taking place in California".

Though Mr Lauder objects to such comparisons, "both have the same end result: fewer Jews in the world."

"The greatest thing that we can do in Eastern Europe is to make people proud of their Judaism and to make it a positive, fun experience."

So Lauder programmes include summer camps and educational events that offer both secular and Jewish content.

The New York-based father-of-two said he used to be challenged over how he could defend the idea of rebuilding Jewish life on the ashes of the Holocaust.

"Strangely enough, today I am never asked. Why? Because people are starting to see Jewish life coming about, and they realise what we are doing."

Now, he said, "they are asking what they can do to help".

An unusual aspect of the Lauder programmes is that they bring together Jews from Chabad to Reform.

"We say to every school: 'Let the community decide what type of school they want to have,'" Mr Lauder explained. "Do I have a feeling of trying to influence them? No. But I do not believe in extremism. I do not believe in a school being too Orthodox or too secular.

"The only time I get involved is if I feel that they are talking too much."

