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## Pictures of Life

“Witness to a Jewish Century” archives private photographs and memories on the Internet

By Jutta Sommerbauer

Edward Serotta likes best to tell the story of old photos. But he can also relate quite a bit about new ones. One of the most recent pictures features Joschka Fischer and his Bulgarian counterpart Solomon Passi. Together they look at old photos of Jewish families. That was taken last week as the two politicians opened the exhibition “I remember ... photographs of Jewish families in Bulgaria” in Sofia. The photographs and their accompanying stories were collected by Serotta’s institute, *Central Europa Center for Research and Documentation*, or *Centropa*, in Bulgaria. Because of scheduling problems, the exhibition was set up temporarily for only an evening in a hotel, discloses Serotta, who is the director of the center. “And look here!” he says, pointing to a second photo that shows a few chairs. Only the elderly interview partners of the “Witness to a Jewish Century” project were able to get a seat in the improvised setting of the evening, he explains. The other guests had to stand.

Whether old or new, Edward Serotta is fascinated with photos. There are stories in them; you only have to find someone to tell them. It was probably this idea that led to the establishment of *Centropa* in 1999. Today, collaborators of the institute are working all over Central and Eastern Europe to collect photos and conduct life-story interviews with elderly Jews. The goal is to collect memories from the entire century; the Shoah is not the primary focus of the project.

In the meantime *Centropa* is working in fifteen countries. This ambitious memory project has already resulted in the collection of more than 700 interviews. The interview process is extensive and can take several weeks. In the end, a twenty- to forty-page biography emerges from the conversations. All interviews and photos are retrievable via *Centropa’s* online databank.

More than a hundred people work for the research center, Serotta explains during a tour through the Vienna office, which is situated in a light-filled old apartment. But they don’t all work here however, he adds with a smile. The research is carried out in the respective Eastern European countries by skilled staff, who get in touch with the witnesses and digitalize the photographs on the spot. “The people don’t want to let their photos out of their hands for fifteen minutes,” Serotta says.

Following previous professional stays in Berlin and Budapest, Vienna was the “logical place” for the contemporary history project, explains the American-born photographer. The geographical proximity to Eastern Europe and the good contacts to the local authorities were decisive. But private foundations in the USA are still among the most important sponsors of *Centropa*. Actually, he never intended to document Jewish life in Vienna as well. “With time, however, it became embarrassing,” Serotta relates. “Old people approached me and said: I’ve heard about your project. Why don’t you interview me?” More than a hundred interviews have since been collected in Austria.

There is particularly a need to catch up in the east of Europe. After the Fall of the Berlin Wall many Jewish communities were in a disastrous situation. Bulgaria is just one example. “There wasn’t really a Jewish community there. Communism destroyed the civil society and the

structures of Jewish community life so that it was almost beyond repair,” Serotta states. Given the starting position, the reconstruction of the past years has been tremendous. *Centropa* is a key part of the effort to recall traditions. However, the pressure is on, particularly in the countries of the Sephardim, where the specific Sephardic culture of oral tradition is in danger of being forgotten. “It’s two minutes to twelve,” Serotta says.

The ambitious project aims to collect 20,000 photographs and 1,500 interviews by the end of 2007. Beyond that, numerous projects are already in the works. The plan is to use the material to create books, teaching materials, documentaries and interactive DVDs. Centropa also intends to set up a website where users can upload their pictures themselves.

One of the very old photos in the Sofia exhibition –a studio portrait – shows two stout men posing next to each other in the clothes of Macedonian revolutionaries. They hold rifles in their hands. They look into the camera, one serious, the other mischievous: Israel Menachem and a friend, photographed in the Bulgarian city of Pleven, around 1900. But the two men are not armed fighters who just went to a photo studio to have their picture taken. In fact Purim was being celebrated, as we learn from the accompanying text by the daughter-in-law, Ester Josifova. Indeed, every single one of the photos of the Sofia exhibition has a similarly compelling story to tell.

Incidentally, the exhibit is open to the public at the Red House cultural center in Sofia from 8 June. And following this re-opening one will be able to view the documents of Jewish life in peace.

[www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org)