

Reading Images

European Jewish life from 1900-1945

Teacher

The Assignment

From 2000-10, Centropa interviewed 1,200 Jewish Holocaust survivors living in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and the Balkans. Using ten images plucked from our database of 22,000 photos, this lesson has been designed to help the student learn how to analyze primary historical sources.

Objectives

- Enable students to analyze primary historical sources.
- Teach Jewish history and life through photos and stories.
- Foster students' ability to work independently.
- Promote anti-Semitism, tolerance, and respect for diversity.

There are three steps. First, the student will look at ten historical photos without knowing anything about the individual images, except that each photo is from one of ten countries and was taken in one of five eras (two photos per era). The student's work is to match each photo to its place and time. When they are finished, the teacher will provide the date and location of the photos.

In step two, the student will choose one photo and write a one-page, double-spaced hypothesis describing the photo's contents. The student should conduct research into the historical context of the period to understand the history of the Jews (i.e. occupations, family arrangements, culture, etc.) in that country, city, or town. This background information will complement an analysis of the image itself, which should include using important details in the image to understand who are the photograph's subjects, what are their relations to each other, where they are, their socioeconomic status, etc. Upon completion, the student will receive the caption provided for the photo by the interviewee.

In step three, the student will compare their own hypothesis with the caption. In a double-spaced half-page, the student will assess their own analysis of the photo. Why did they see it as they did? What did they see and how did they interpret what they saw? What did they miss or misinterpret? How did receiving new information change their perception of the photo?



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photo one
COUNTRY
ERA

COUNTRY
ERA
photo two



Reading Images

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photo three
COUNTRY
ERA

COUNTRY
ERA
photo four



Reading Images

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photo five
COUNTRY
ERA



photo six
COUNTRY
ERA

Preserving Jewish memory. Bringing history to life.

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photo seven
COUNTRY
ERA

COUNTRY
ERA
photo eight



Reading Images

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photo nine
COUNTRY
ERA



photo ten
COUNTRY
ERA

Preserving Jewish memory. Bringing history to life.

The Answers

photo one

Szeged, Hungary, 1906

This is a picture from a ball. Mom, Ilona Mestitz, is second from the left in the second row. She was around sixteen at the time this picture was taken, so it was probably 1906. This was most probably in Szeged, but I don't know if there are any of her classmates in this picture. My maternal grandparents, Albert and Hermina Laszlo, nee Spitz, had to be living alternately in Szeged and Mako because Janos, my mom's older brother and my mother, Ilona, were born in Szeged, while Margit, her older sister and Erzsebet, her younger sister were in Mako. A few years separated each of them. I don't know exactly when they came to Marosvasarhely. My grandparents weren't wealthy, but they had everything. They had a four-bedroom-apartment and a servant. If Erzsebet had to go to a ball, she always wore a new dress. Grandfather Laszlo was the manager of the timber mill. My dad, Henrik Mestitz, was then 32 and visited them. Mom was sitting on the stairs with her younger sister and they were licking a casserole dish in which they mixed the cream for a cake. It was the first time he saw her. He didn't pay much attention to her, then one day they were both invited somewhere and my dad noticed her beautiful legs. Then he decided to propose to her, but they didn't want to let her go, because they first wanted to marry off her older sister Margit, who was one and a half years older. They wanted him to marry Margit, but my dad refused. Mom graduated from high-school and she got married as soon as she turned 18. They were married in a normal wedding by a rabbi. They must have had a beautiful wedding.

photo two

Sokoliki, Poland, 1915

This picture of my father, Henrik Mestitz, was taken in Sokoliki in 1915 during World War I. After the war broke out, my father went to Galicia as a captain. He was sent there, to the outskirts of Lemberg [today Ukraine], because the enemy had destroyed fourteen sawmills, and they knew he owned one here, and he had the proper competence. He was commanding a full crew. There were many officers, and each brought along his wife. There were times when the blanket of snow was so thick the soldiers had to dig tunnels in it from house to house. It looks like it was fall in this picture because they are wearing warm clothes. I don't know anybody else in this picture but my father. He's the one standing on the woodpile. They probably burned charcoal there, but I don't really know what they were doing. After I recovered from pneumonia, the doctor recommended a change of air. I don't know whose idea it was to go there - looking at it today, it seems absurd. Probably my dad was longing for us. He sent a sergeant for us, and he took my grandfather Laszlo, my mom, me, my older sister Klara and my brother Mihal to my dad's place in Galicia for a change of air. I think it was total nonsense to make such a venture during the war. We went there by train, and we had to change trains many times. I remember that they tied us together by our hands in order to keep us together. Despite all this Misi still managed to free himself and he wandered so far away that when they managed to find him, it was just one minute before the train's departure. We planned to stay only for a few months, but we remained there until 1916. Dad was stationed 80 kilometers from Lemberg, and he had a lot of people under his command. There were many officers, and they were building, as well as repairing the sawmills. Although I don't remember, I'm quite sure there were other Jewish soldiers there, as well. We came back from Sokoliki in 1916. Miraculously, our house was untouched [even though the war had broken out in the meantime], only the rugs were missing.

photo three

Lucenec, Slovakia, 1926

This photo was taken in 1926, and shows the family business of the Fischer brothers in Lucenec. The mobile gas pump (in the left of the photo) that belonged to the store was the first of its type in the town. The Fischer brothers were murdered during the Holocaust. The second one from the right is Julius Fischer, whose son Juraj Fischer (1921 - 2007) participated in the invasion of Normandy as a soldier. For his merits, he in 2004 became one of four Slovaks in history to receive the highest French award, the Legion of Honor. Before him, this award was received for example by Milan Rastislav Stefanik as well. Before he accepted this award, he experienced utter hell. The Communists accused him of sabotage and jailed him as a spy and Zionist. They even wanted to execute him. He also survived the fact that after 1989 the courts of a democratic country weren't capable of seeing justice done, and compensate him for the fact that their family's home in the center of Lucenec had been confiscated during the war on the basis of race laws of Szalasi's fascist government. The work of the Nazis was topped off by the Communists with an unbelievably shameless act, when they applied a decree on the confiscation of the property of Nazis and their collaborators against a hero of the anti-Fascist resistance! As if it wasn't enough, in 1996 the District Court in Lucenec refused his request for compensation with the argument that he wasn't the owner of the house: according to the laws of the Fascist Szalasi regime. But the fate of their house had come to an absurd end long before ? when in 1975 they tore it down and on its property built the building of the Regional Committee of the Communist Party of Slovakia.

photo four

Sarajevo, Bosnia, 1919

Wedding of my parents Rifka Levi and Albert Papo in Sarajevo on June 26, 1919.

Sitting row, from left: Hajim Levi, my mother's brother, Bojna Levi, my grandmother, my mother, my father, Sturlaca Papo, and Moshe Papo, grandfather's brother.

Standing row, from left: Klara Almuzlino, my mother's sister, Isidor Levi, mother's cousin, Safira Papo, father's sister, Albert Papo, father's brother, Bukas Finci (nee Papo), David Finci, Rena Papo, Jakov Papo, Anula Levi, mother's sister, David Papo.

Some of the clothes are interesting, as they are traditional: My mother is wearing a cap tocado without coins, as she was a widow. Sturlaca Papo is wearing a tocado with coins, as she was married. Men are wearing dark caps as Muslims wore red caps.

The closest family came to the wedding, my parents' brothers and sisters. Next to my grandmother Hajim the oldest son is sitting. On my father's side his brother is sitting as his parents were not alive. Bojna Levi, who is the main person on the photo, is sitting next to my mother. She doesn't wear coins over her cap tokado, as she was a widow.

My father and mother met each other in Sarajevo. Jewish women in Sarajevo went to dances. My paternal grandmother instructed my father, when he went to the dances and when he shakes hands with a girl to touch the palm of her hand. If her hand is smooth she is lazy. If he sees calluses, it is rough, a worn hand - then she is a hard working woman. That is how the love between my parents began.

photo five

Bucharest, Romania, 1907

These are the Schonfeld sisters around 1907. The photo was taken in Bucharest. From left to right: my mother, Henriette Mizrahy [nee Schonfeld], Mina Solomon [nee Schonfeld], and Annie Segalescu [nee Schonfeld].

My maternal grandfather, David Schonfeld, was born in 1851 in Iasi. He came to Bucharest as a grain merchant after the death of his first wife. He worked for over 30 years as the administrator of the Filantropia Jewish cemetery in Bucharest. It was in the small house at the entrance of the Filantropia cemetery that my grandparents' three daughters were born and raised. Mina, Henriette, and Annie Schonfeld went to the 'Moteanu' boarding school, where they were taught to treasure the value of money and to earn their existence. They all worked as clerks until they got married.

Mina Solomon was born in Bucharest in 1896. She worked as a clerk until she married Moritz Solomon. He was a self-made man, an oil man who had a small refinery at the entrance of the town of Ploiesti. He built himself a four-floor apartment house, with two apartments per each floor, in Bucharest, on Sfintilor St. They were the only ones in the family who had a car and a chauffeur. The ties between the three sisters were very strong. In particular, my mother and Mina were extremely close and this is how they remained until the end of their lives. Mina died in Tel Aviv in 1986.

Annie Segalescu was born in 1900 in Bucharest. She was the most religious of the sisters, but she had her limits; she didn't wear a wig. She married Eugen Segalescu, with whom she had a son, Gabriel Segalescu, born in 1926 in Bucharest, seven weeks after I was born. She got divorced in 1939, remarried, but kept her maiden name. She emigrated to France and died in Paris in 1982.

My mother was born in 1898 in Bucharest. From the moment I could understand and judge, I realized that the day of 29th March - my mother's birthday - was a holiday in our home. The house filled with flowers, the phone didn't cease to ring, and, in the evening, when all preparations had been finished, the family gathered together with some couples of friends who were as close to my parents as their brothers and sisters.

photo six

Russia, 1918

During World War I, my father served in the Austro-Hungarian army at the Russian front; he made it as far as Lieutenant. Once, when he was on leave, he went to visit his uncle in Jihlava, where he met my mother. That was in 1916. Then he again left for the front and was captured, which is where this photo was taken. He managed to escape, and arrived in Vienna on 28th October 1918, on the exact day that the independent Czechoslovak Republic was proclaimed. My father used to recall that on that day his faithful batman, a Czech, left him, because he no longer saw a reason to serve him.

photo seven

Makarska, Croatia, 1935

Photo of my father Abram Papo, Makarska 1935. He is standing in front of his shop in Makarska, with a friend Povic, who had a shop next to ours.

My father was a merchant and my mother a housewife. We owned the shop which was registered in my mother's name because my father did a little of everything. He finished one year of Jewish school and then spent nine years in the Austrian army. He spoke German, Hungarian and Spanish and learned them all while he was in the army. The textiles sold in the shop were mainly supplied from Sarajevo, and my father also sold seasonal goods - souvenirs. Since the shop was not big enough, we moved to a bigger store in which they sold many souvenirs, especially in the summer-time. They did not sell any kinds of ritual items in the store, only those things that were used by the people of Makarska and those from the surrounding villages. There were a lot of confections, pants, jackets and coats. My father brought the merchandise in trunks from Sarajevo. The store functioned until 1941 when we emptied it but even then a section continued to work. At the beginning of 1942, we received orders that I was to and over the store keys to the local municipality which would take over the store, since the confiscation of Jewish property had begun. The day before I had to turn them over, I opened the store and permitted the young people to take whatever they needed in order to empty the store, leaving only one piece of each item. Afterwards, I took the keys of the liquidated shop, the municipal authorities took them and sealed off the store. The shop was called a manufacturing merchandise.

photo eight

Faleshty, Moldova, 1941

This is a picture of me greeting the people of Faleshty at the meeting on 1st May on behalf of the pioneer organization of Faleshty. The photo was taken in Faleshty in 1941. I started to study at a Romanian school for girls in 1937. There were no Jewish schools in Faleshty. We studied in Romanian. All children spoke fluent Romanian. There were many Jewish girls at this school. I had finished the 3rd grade before Moldavia became part of the Soviet Union. In 1940 the USSR declared an ultimatum to Romania about the return of Bessarabia, which became part of Romania in 1918. Romania agreed to transfer these areas. There was anarchy in our streets for three days after the Romanian army had left and the Soviet army hadn't arrived yet. Everyone came into the streets when the Romanian army was leaving. There were tables with bread, butter, sausage and new Moldavian wine in the streets. People liked the Romanians - life in town was good when they were in power. On 28th June 1940 everyone in town came out into the streets to meet the Red Army. According to Russian tradition the 'liberators' were met with bread and salt. We liked to see Russian soldiers talking to officers and addressing each other with the word 'comrade'. There was a strict subordination in the Romanian army, and it was hard to imagine anything like that. The euphoria about the 'liberation' was over soon. There was a lack of food products in stores, and people were queuing to buy food. Bread in stores had a terrible taste. We were starving. Children and older people were starving to death. Due to the currency change one ruble was 40 lei, and we didn't have enough money to buy the most necessary things. People who moved here from the USSR were astonished how inexpensive life was in our area. A chicken cost 40 lei at the market. It was rather cheap for them while my father had to work a whole day to earn 40 lei. Many wealthier people, Zionists and even those that had been involved in revolutionary activities during the Romanian regime, were arrested and exiled. The Soviet power didn't touch my father since he only had a few apprentices in his shop and therefore wasn't considered an 'exploiter'. A Russian school was opened in town. All Romanian schools were closed. We didn't know a single word in Russian, and our teacher didn't know Romanian. I was lucky that my parents knew Russian because they grew up in Faleshty when the town belonged to Russia. I became one of the first pioneers in Faleshty, which was a big honor for me.

photo nine

Sofia, Bulgaria, 1943

Here you can see me and my husband, Nissim Uziel, photographed one the day before our wedding, 30th January 1943, in Sofia. I met my husband through Hakoah, in the sports club. I married him in January 1943 in the synagogue in Sofia. My husband, Nissim Leon Uziel, was unemployed. When he was interned to a camp in Gigen in 1943, I was interned to Pleven. Gigen was a camp for Jews. Jewish men used to be taken there from February to December; then they let them go home because they were all ill. My husband was taken to Zvanichevo first, then to Mihalkovo, then somewhere along the Struma River and finally to Gigen. He spent four years in forced labor camps altogether. They worked hard there; they constructed bridges. They had to wade in water up to here [pointing at the height of her chest]. Different locations, different rivers... There were only Jews. A boy even drowned in the Iskar River. Our life was a great tragedy. My hair stands on end when I think of those years. Could I endure all that now? I was in Pleven from 24th May 1943 till October 1944. This is the reason I'm so ill now -I lived through very hard times during the evacuation. I returned from Pleven to Sofia by train. I was pregnant at that time and gave birth to my son, Leon Nissim Uziel, on 7th December 1944.

photo ten

Paris, France, 1936

This is my eldest uncle, Laci, the philosopher, and if I remember correctly, this is Rue Mazargran in Paris. I just know this street, but not in connection with him. I know very little about him, because I only heard about him. I saw him once. He was a typical bohemian. The photo was taken in 1936. He lectured at the Sorbonne and he had a lot of money. For example he went to Nice for the summer holidays and he spent all his money there. It happened that my father didn't receive any letters from him for a long time, and then a letter came from Zanzibar or somewhere that he didn't have funds to get back to Paris, and he wanted them to send money. I remember that my father received a letter in 1937 in which he was urged to go to Paris immediately because something bad had happened to Laci - I was named after him by the way. I only found out the whole story later. My father went to Paris, he went up to his apartment, and he rang the bell. 'Jeno!' cried Laci, 'What are you doing here?' My father didn't know what to say because he was told that something bad had happened to him. 'Is something wrong?' he asked. 'No,' came the reply. He didn't understand why he had been summoned by telegram. They went to have lunch somewhere, and there it came out that he had pawned everything, even his clothes. So he had a completely bohemian life. Laci never got married. But he had partners until the end of his life; in fact, his last one was scarcely a year or two older than my wife. I still keep in touch with her. He had no Jewish girlfriends, but he didn't change his Jewish religion. He is buried in the Jewish part of a cemetery in Paris; his last live-in girlfriend buried him there in 1967.