

Now Here's a Way to Teach History (and Much More Than That)

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Towards the end of July more than eighty educators from fifteen different countries sacrificed a whole week of their summer vacation, to work together in Berlin.

Teachers of history, English, social studies and other subjects studied aspects of German and European Jewish history, shared ideas, developed lesson plans, and laid foundations for future international online and face-to-face school projects.

The teachers – from elementary school teachers to college professors – were brought to the German capital by Centropa, a Vienna-based organization with offices in Washington DC, Budapest, and Jerusalem. Centropa aims at preserving the history of Jews in 20th-century Europe, by collecting the family stories of elderly Jews, mostly from Central and Eastern Europe. Centropa staff members conduct and edit interviews with those people, their family pictures are digitized, and so far more than forty life stories have been turned into professionally made multimedia and multilingual movies, several of which have been shown at international film festivals. One video, which was shown at the Berlin seminar, is titled “Renée Molho – A Bookstore in Six Chapters”. Through the story of Renée Molho and her and her husband’s bookstore, in 25 minutes it basically tells the story of the Jewish community of Thessaloniki in the 20th century.

All the interviews, the movies and tens of thousands of pictures are freely available on Centropa's website (www.centropa.org). The website also offers complete lesson plans, a forum for teachers to exchange ideas and to show their students' work, and many other resources that teachers and students can use. In addition, the organization puts together exhibitions that are based on the stories. Schools and other institutions can host those exhibitions. Finally, several times a year there is Café Centropa, in Vienna and Budapest, where elderly interviewees are invited to meet each other, listen to lectures, participate in social programs, or have a festive Jewish holiday meal.

Centropa was started in 2000 by Ed Serotta, a journalist, photographer and filmmaker, after he had been working in Central Europe for more than a decade. Ed had come across many Jewish men and women whose stories he thought should be saved and passed on to future generations. He bases Centropa's work on three core beliefs: stories are universal and stories connect us all; nobody teaches teachers better than another teacher; borders are irrelevant when it comes to teaching and learning.

He has surrounded himself with a multinational, young staff, who together with him have turned Centropa into a very professional education center. The organization receives funds from and uses the facilities of a variety of foundations, Jewish and non-Jewish. For example, sessions of the Summer Academy 2013 were hosted by organizations such as the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the Future Foundation of Germany, the Claims Conference and other organizations.

The program of this year's Summer Academy was meant to use the city of Berlin as a classroom. It included, among many other things, walking tours of Berlin, visits to historical sites, Holocaust memorials, an art gallery, the Jewish Museum, discussions around Eyal Press's book "Beautiful Souls", and a video conference with its author. Every day small work groups worked on a lesson plan, which they presented at the end of the seminar. For both new and experienced teachers the week was the perfect eye-opener. I got plenty of ideas for projects with my different classes, many of which can be done in cooperation with other schools.

Here is one example of how we used the city as classroom. Centropa brought us to the ruins of the train station in Berlin where Jewish parents brought their children, never to see them again. Then

they handed us first hand stories of Kindertransport children whom Centropa has interviewed over the past few years, and we read those stories to each other. Between 9 November (the 75th anniversary of the Reichspogromnacht) and 10 December (Human Rights Day) I will have my own students think, talk and write about what it means to leave your home and family, and how you could help somebody who finds himself in a similar situation. In some Centropa interviews we found on their website, food plays a prominent role. Based on those accounts others students of mine will do a project on the link between food, memory, and stories. They will ask their (grand)parents for a recipe that comes with a story, and those recipes and stories will be turned into videos in the style of one of the many cooking shows that we see daily on the television.

Some of the most important work was done during the breaks, the meals, and in the evenings, when friendships were forged, and great ideas for future cooperation were brought up and explored. We learnt about each other's, often totally different, school systems, about various historical narratives, and about Holocaust study programs in different schools and countries. From a colleague from Charleston, SC, I learnt for example that US students have special drills that teach them and their teachers how to respond in case an armed person enters the school. I also heard for the first time about La Benevolencija, a cooperative initiated by the Jewish community of Sarajevo, in which Jews, Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats work together to help anybody who needs help. During the war in Bosnia the organization provided food and shelter to many people who could not leave the city.

Centropa cooperates with more than 600 partner schools throughout Germany, Central and Eastern Europe, Greece, Israel, the United States and Canada, and new partnerships are constantly being established. It provides perfect material for school projects, and can help facilitate international contacts, student exchange programs and interschool partnerships. Two of the most appealing features of working with Centropa are that it makes extensive use of social media, and that as a teacher you are given all the freedom that you need, as long as you somehow use Centropa material. Most teachers and students love to work with colleagues and peers from abroad, and students are anxious to use the media and hi-tech tools that form such a central part of their lives but that in most of their classes hardly play any role. Since as teachers we are always encouraged to make our students' learning more fun, exciting, and relevant, I am sure most teachers and school directors won't have any trouble finding a way to integrate Centropa in their

curriculum.

(All pictures: courtesy of Centropa and Daniel Gruenfeld)

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