



## THE CENTRAL EUROPE CENTER

**From preserving Jewish memory to bringing Jewish history to life**

**The old-fashioned art of story-telling, oral histories and searchable databases.  
Or how we built a digital bridge back to a world destroyed.**

**By Edward Serotta**

Centropa was born in 1999, when I was working in Arad, Romania, making a film for ABC News Nightline (USA) about a small and struggling Jewish community. Although the film was about the wonderful meals they were preparing in their soup kitchen, each afternoon I went home with the elderly Jews who worked and ate there.

As I sat on their sofas, and while they plied me with tea and poppy seed strudel, these last survivors of a world destroyed showed me their family albums and regaled me with stories of stiff-backed uncles in the Austro Hungarian Army, grandparents who had been deeply religious; parents who were less orthodox and who had run small shops, and there were a great many pictures of brothers, sisters and cousins on hiking holidays, in school, and in Jewish youth clubs.

Every picture they pointed to had a story. Every story led to another. Even though the majority of the people in those family albums had been murdered during the Holocaust, this is not what they wanted to talk about. It was as if they had a need to share these stories, if only to keep alive a tiny flame of remembrance.

Sitting there, however, it was clear that these stories, like so many others, would die with the people I was sitting with, and we would all be the poorer for it. I decided I had to do something. But what?



Soon after, while editing my film in Budapest, I met two young historians, Eszter Andor and Dora Sardi. Their grandparents were Holocaust survivors. Their parents had been Communists—until 1956. Their children were attending Jewish kindergartens. And Eszter and Dora wanted to make sure that their children, who would be graduating university in 2020 or thereabouts, would know something of their great grandparents' lives.

Eszter and Dora had watched their grandfathers' Shoah Foundation video interviews. They felt not only deeply moved by what they had seen, they told me they were proud that these interviews, along with so many others, would help document mankind's single greatest crime.

But that was not enough, they said. “We cannot just show our children how their families were murdered. Once they are old enough, and once their great grandparents are no longer here, they will want to know how they lived.”

I thought back to the sofas I had sat on a few months earlier in Arad.

That is how Centropa was born: with the clear goal of preserving the memories of an entire century, and to do so by using new technologies to marry together old pictures with the stories that go with them.



### **Our methodology**

Having worked in both print media and in television news, I have never been convinced that video was the *only* way to conduct an interview. We decided to use audio tape and build a methodology that would revolve around our respondents speaking about their lives. We divided every life story, as best we could, into a series of chapters, all of which can be found in our online oral history tool kit, accessible from [www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org). For photo and data capture, we used Filemaker, a low cost, sturdy database that allows great latitude when it comes to creating keywords and cross referencing.

Time and space does not permit me to go into detail about how we conducted our interviewing, but here is a brief summary.

First, we have to thank Kim Simon of the Shoah Foundation, for Kim set us right from the start: do not rely on interviewers to coordinate their appointments and all the technical follow up work. We would need a strong coordinator, and the success of our project in each country would depend exactly on this person.

Rarely have I received such excellent, life saving advice, and where we had strong, coordinators, we succeeded brilliantly. Where we did not, I fired them and shopped around until I found the right ones.



Second, Centropa never used volunteers. That is because our methodology is murderously complex and time-consuming. It took an interviewer a *minimum* of thirty hours to complete each interview:

- four to twenty hours with each respondent;
- transcribing every word in the original language into an MS Word file;
- entering the data into Filemaker databases we created for capturing the data;
- going back to the interviewee after the editor read the interview;
- taking the entire transcribed interview, knocking out all the questions and putting the life story into chronological order;
- working with the scanner, the translator and the coordinator.

No volunteer would dream of spending 30 to 40 hours on any project—at least we never met one. And so we had to pay the going rate, which even in Central Europe, started at €100 per interview and quickly climbed to €300 to €400, depending on the country.

But when you add in the transcription, translation and editing costs, plus fees for scanners and all the data entry time and work by the coordinator in each country, interviews ended up costing between €800 to €1,500 each.

Third, we began by holding a training seminar in St Petersburg for prospective interviewer in 2001. We asked historians, college professors as well as local and international Jewish organizations for names of prospective interviewers.

More than forty-five people were happy to accept free trips to Petersburg, eat good food and take part in our seminar. When they saw how difficult and complex our methodology was, all but four dropped out.

Eszter and Dori then devised a plan. In order to take part in a Centropa seminar, each participant had to submit a very basic Centropa interview beforehand. They would receive €50 for their trouble, and if we ended up working together, they would receive the full amount.

Our next seminar was in Budapest. Seventy-five people applied. Thirty sent in test interviews and were invited to attend. Of those, twenty stayed with us for more than two years.

As for how we found our interviewees, that was easy. Since most of our interviewers were Jewish, the first people they interviewed were their grandmothers. The very next day, our interviewers would get a telephone call from someone who played bridge with their grandmothers. “Darling, you know I love your Oma and you know I love you. But with all due respect, your grandfather, may he rest in peace, was a butcher. A wonderful, honest butcher I can tell you—and that is no small feat—but darling, my husband was an attorney, one of the most famous...”

That is how we found the majority of our interviewees.

## **Lessons learned**

This list is by no means complete but it gives an insight into some of the more ironic and downright funny things we learned.

--when phoning an elderly Jew to ask for an appointment, he or she will invariably say, "But I don't have any pictures." Go visit them anyway. Sitting on their sofa, they will immediately start telling stories, and suddenly they will get up, go into the bedroom and lay a picture before you. They will continue, and in a few more minutes, they will dig into a draw and pull out a second picture. This will go on until they pull out at least a dozen.

--our best interviewers proved to be women in their 40s or older. In fact, we can be even more specific: married women with children. Why this is I cannot tell you, but in general, women with a couple of children are invariably geniuses at organizing. They also have the patience to listen, and listen, and listen. Further, while these women are not generally adept at using our Filemaker databases, we must say they displayed an almost stubborn attitude toward learning it, and by and large, this subset of our interviewers did a marvelous job.

--resist, if you can, interviewing the most famous Jew in town. This is invariably someone who is used to presenting their story exactly as they want to present it. They do not like needling questions, and questions that double back or dig down past their standard presentation. They will get angry. You will not succeed.

--always check dates, facts. We aren't concerned if they get a date or fact wrong, but we always try to spot the errors and then place an editor's comment in [ ] next to the error.

--check the Jewish references, especially if the interviewer is not Jewish, or isn't up to snuff on Jewish traditions. That's because often times, respondents will want to sound like they remember their Jewish backgrounds even when they get a bit confused. My favorite, which we heard in Belgrade. "Of course I remember Yom Kippur! That's the night my parents would put on their very best clothes and go to synagogue for gambling night!" In a very few cases, like this one, we deleted such comments.

--be extremely careful when mentioning children and grandchildren. It's better not to mention them by name in the published versions at all. Try and get their permission. And do not print negative comments about daughters-in-law, of which, I can assure you, we could fill a book.

--obviously, you need a contract written by a rights attorney in each country. We have done this. It does not always protect you from relatives calling and claiming "My mother never told you that." Even though we have their words on tape, we generally remove the offending comment.

--never allow your interviewers to purchase photos. This would open a Pandora's box that we made sure stayed closed.



### Putting the database online

Between 2000 and 2008, we interviewed 1,300 elderly Jews in fifteen countries. We digitized 25,000 old photos. We have around 55,000 pages of MS word documents in the way of biographies.

Since no one has ever done just what Centropa has done—using new technologies to combine oral histories with family photos in a searchable online database, our search engines and databases have been in a constant state of upgrading and adapting since the launch of our English language website in 2002. Our Hungarian language site was launched in 2005 and our German language site was launched in 2006.

More than 260,000 unique visitors come to the English language site annually and return at least 3.5 times each year for a total number of visits of nearly 900,000 visits. They register nearly 4,000,000 hits per year.

We have created special search engines not only for each country, but special thematic ones as well: Jewish soldiers in the Soviet Army, Jewish families that fled to Central Asia, Jewish family stories of those who survived the Stalinist purges.

The site needs continual upgrading and adaptations but with the current economic situation like it is, we are being quite cautious. At this stage, we have around 700 family stories online in English with 12,000 photographs. The final edits are costly and time consuming but we are adding a few more each month.



## Education

Centropa has three distinct audiences we are developing our pilot educational programs for, and all of them are interlinked:

- Jewish high schools in the US
- Jewish high schools in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic
- non-Jewish high schools in Austria, Germany, Hungary, Romania

These will soon expand to non-Jewish high schools in the US, Jewish congregational schools in the US, as well as high schools in Israel. By fall 2009 we will also be working in non-Jewish schools in Bulgaria, Czech Republic and later into other countries as well.

Our largest potential market, obviously, will be the non-Jewish schools in Europe, and as of June 2009, we are piloting the program in one form or another in nearly sixty schools in seven countries (ten of them in the US).

## The genesis of our educational project

No sooner had we launched [www.centropa.org](http://www.centropa.org) in 2002, than we began receiving emails from teachers in American Jewish high schools telling us how much they liked our approach to 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish history. They wanted to know what sort of education program we were offering.

At the time, we had none, so we began visiting these schools to query teachers and students what they liked about Centropa. The answer: stories! Personal, human stories that the teachers and students were drawn to, could learn from, and relate to.





In 2006 and 2007 we hired Ulrike Ostermann and Wolfgang Els, star graduates of Austria’s best film schools. They began making short “films” comprised of old family pictures and biographies and used special effects and music composed specially for the films.

We took the films back to the US and in the course of visiting these same schools and conducting focus groups in them, we asked nine history and Holocaust teachers to become our sounding board as we developed the program. The idea would be to use them all during the pilot, or beta phase, of our project, which is now at the end of its second year.

To help professionalize the program, in 2007 we hired two California-based educational consultants, Eileen Soffer and Nechama Tamler, who have been working closely between us and our core teachers ever since.

This has been the key for developing our program ever since. Since 2007 we have conducted two eight-day international seminars, bringing together American, Hungarian, Romanian, German, Austrian and Bulgarian teachers.



During these seminars, our teachers worked in small groups to watch our films, and then presented these same films, and their ideas for teaching them, to the rest of the group. At each of our seminars, the teachers gave us a list of improvements we needed to make so that they could more easily use the programs in their classes. For instance:



Teachers told us they needed “one stop shopping,” a single website to send their students to dig down deeper into each story. We therefore created an online study guide for them to use—in six languages so teachers elsewhere can now use them.



Students and their teachers both asked for a more interactive program, so students can add their own content. In response, we created Border Jumping, which allows the students to photograph Jewish sites in their towns, upload them onto a page we make for them, and then describe those sites—in English.

Teachers in Germany and Austria asked us to make available to them our Slovak, Hungarian and Romanian films with *English, not German subtitles*. This allows them to use the program in English class, not in history class.

In other words, by having listened to teachers on both sides of the Atlantic, we have created a cross competency program that students not only learn from, but lets them participate by using the social media programs they love to use.

We pay our teachers to write their own lesson plans for each of the films. We post these lesson plans online so that when Kristallnacht is approaching (for instance) teachers can find a lesson plan for which of our films to use waiting for them online.





We have also established a model for shorter seminars, which we have now conducted in Cologne, Hannover, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest (three), Timisoara, Arad and Bucharest. The photo above was taken in June 2009 in Budapest, with teachers from Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary.

These weekend seminars bring teachers together to exchange best practices after watching our films in small groups, and they also visit Jewish sites, listen to lectures by well-known historians, and return to their classes committed to using our material. We even follow up with kaffee und kuchen round tables to make sure the networks we are establishing will continue.

### **Evaluation**

Because we test our program at every stage, much of our evaluation is built in as we move our pilot program from beta to alpha. We have developed two low cost methods that provide an acid test of sorts to the project's attractiveness.

First, we ask each teacher to write up an honest assessment of the program and we ask them a simple question: *will you use Centropa next year?* Considering how busy teachers are, and how much they have to get through in a single year, this is far and away our most effective question.

We also ask students to fill out surveys, rating each film and the effectiveness of the course itself. We ask the students for their frank and honest opinion of the program, and we ask them what else we need to do to make it more engaging.

It was, in fact, students who suggested we put the films on the iTunes Apple Store as free video podcasts, and it was a group of American students who asked if we could develop an online micro philanthropy project, so they could send flowers, tea and cakes to some of Centropa's seniors' citizens, who meet regularly in Vienna and Budapest.

### **Further development**

Regrettably, during these very difficult economic times, we are hampered from developing the program as quickly as we would like, but these are the programs now in development:

- the aforementioned online micro-philanthropy project;
- an online homework form, so that after each film, students will find a set of questions waiting for them. They fill them out, add the teacher's email address, and then send them the answers.
- more films on Jews from the former Soviet Union, which will include stories of being imprisoned in the gulag, fleeing to Central Asia during the war, and more Soviet Jewish

soldiers stories;

--more films from Poland and the shtelts of the Baltics

--more films from Sephardic communities.

--an online grid for teachers to use, in which they can choose an event or year or theme, and a menu of films fitting that description will pop up for them.

Finally, there is another project we are now beginning to develop: a set of films from Bosnia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Turkey, all created from Centropa interviews that show Jews, Muslims and Christians getting along remarkably well—Serbs saving Jews during the Holocaust; Bulgarians saving its Jewish population from deportation, Jews, Muslims and Serbs and Croats all helping each other in Sarajevo in the 1990s war, and finally, the story of a woman in Istanbul who converted from Judaism to Islam to Judaism and back, while her children are Protestants in Scotland.

These are films that accent civil society and we call the program Living Together; Standing Together: The Sephardim, the Ottomans, Turkey and the Balkans.

We will aim toward those schools in Germany and Austria with high populations of students from these countries, especially those students in technical schools.



### **A surprisingly effective teaching tool: our exhibitions**

We are now creating exhibitions based on our interviews. We simply take the best pictures and stories, color code them by theme: at work, in school, portraits, Holocaust, in the army, religious life, etc, and print them on two-meter tall roll ups.

Although we made two smaller exhibitions in 2005, it was our Romanian team that created an exhibition of these roll ups for Sibiu 2007, EU Capital of Culture. This exhibition, consisting of 93 posters, proved to be so popular it was not only shown in the national parliament, but has since traveled to six cities throughout the country and has now been seen by an estimated

5,500 high school students.



Dr Felicia Waldman, director of the Jewish studies department at Bucharest University, and Anca Ciuciu, our coordinator there, devised a teacher training program that brings dozens of teachers to the exhibition when it arrives in each city, and they spend an entire day with them. By watching Centropa films online, and then reviewing Romanian Jewish history, teachers begin to establish ownership of the exhibition, and look forward to bring their students.

Further, teachers and their students are encouraged to interview their own grandparents and bring their pictures to the exhibition as well, where they also tell stories.

This exhibition has now been replicated in the Czech Republic for the EU Presidency, 2009, for Linz 2009 (the EU Culture Capital), and a special exhibition is being made for the Swedish EU Presidency.

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