

70 Out of the Shadows: A Photographic Portrait of Jewish Life in Central Europe Since the Holocaust

Edward Serotta

Edward Serotta, a Jewish photographer raised in Savannah, Georgia, set out to memorialize Jewish life in Central Europe, but in the process discovered that Jewish life, although irreparably scarred by the Holocaust, remained a vibrant force. The photographs span a five-year period beginning in 1985. After talking with a survivor in Prague, who spoke optimistically about the ensuing political changes, he began reassessing his initial intent:

“Here was a woman who had gone through enough to make Job wince and she was looking toward tomorrow. And that got me thinking about this so-called epitaph. Who was I to be writing on their tombstones when they had no intention of climbing into the grave? Better yet, the question was turned back on me: ‘What grave?’”

Still, in this wonderfully conceived book, the inclusion of memorial photographs signifying the loss of Jewish lives is important. They include various types of cemeteries, a mass grave, tombstones in varying conditions, and a particularly eerie picture from a morgue of recently unearthed jawbones, with teeth lined up in rows like ribs, from the little Majdanek ghetto in Poland.

Serotta divides his chapters by countries: Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and the German Democratic Republic. He begins each chapter with a detailed essay of the country’s history and the people he has met there.

From these essays we gain a good sense of the various Jewish communities and their inhabitants. Following each essay are the photographs themselves, in which we witness Jewish life today and meet many of the people about whom Serotta has written.

His essay on Hungary, for example, begins with a description of a hotel in Budapest filled with three thousand Jews attending a Chanukah dance. Hungary has the largest population of Jews in postwar central Europe—at least eighty thousand. Through the pictures, one easily imagines widespread Jewish life before the war. A compelling reminder of how it appeared before Hitler's rise is seen in photographs of several synagogues, including the Grand Synagogue of Szeged in Hungary, which was built at the turn of the century, fell into disuse after the war, then was restored by an anonymous donor. The structure is so huge and ornately detailed—with Gothic arches and domed ceilings—that it looks permanent, as if it has been there for centuries and will always remain so. In contrast, the Spanish Synagogue of Prague is now used only for storage.

"This baroque jewel of a city" describes Prague, where Jewish intellectuals played a vital role in the arts in the prewar era (most of them considered themselves simply European artists and did not speak Yiddish). Serotta quotes Milan Kundera about Central Europe and its Jews: "that they were 'its intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit.'"

Prague's old Jewish cemetery is beautifully photographed; it is fantastic—the tombstones are crowded so tightly that "it looks like a sculpture garden." The reason: "for hundreds of years this was the only place Jews were allowed to be buried so bodies were buried in layers up to twelve deep."

The portraits of survivors are equally moving. Jiri Lauscher, who has an incredibly sweet face, holds a charming wooden puppet he made while at Theresienstadt concentration camp. Made for children of German soldiers, the puppets "kept him from being deported to the death camps," since so many Nazis wished to give his puppets as gifts to their children. And we meet Petyus, a double amputee resident of the Budapest Jewish hospital, who witnessed the death of his entire family at the hands of the Nazis, and never recovered from the shock. Petyus sits upright, shirtless in bed, surrounded by "those things he found most precious: prayer books, postcards of Israel, even a key to a synagogue far away."

In Poland, anti-Semitism remains strong while education is still weak. Under Communism, Jewish suffering was not included when teaching about the Holocaust. Serotta recounts a discussion with a nun who teaches children in the village of Sandomierz. While looking at seventeenth-century oil paintings of Christians being tortured, she explains with sincerity that the paintings are about "Jews killing Christian babies to make their matzoh." One of the saddest, most revealing photographs is of the yard in a priest's home in Poland. Upon first perusal, the picture looks mundane: a building, two people, a yard. This makes it even more horrifying when we learn that the stones paving the yard are Jewish gravestones. In case we begin to draw negative conclusions about all Poles, Serotta introduces us to Artur Krol, whose family hid a Jewish family for four years "under penalty of death" because they were good Catholics, and it was the right thing to do. In spite of the country's anti-Semitism, the Poles saved more Jews during the war than the citizens of any other Nazi-occupied country.

Bulgaria has a history of ethnic tolerance, and the Jews have long had a history there, dating back to Roman times. In 1910, the Czar helped dedicate the Synagogue of Sofia. Things changed during the war, when all Jews had to wear stars, and their businesses were confiscated. The Jews were sent to internment camps, but the government ultimately refused to deport its forty-five thousand Jews. In Romania, the Jewish population is small and strong; many make aliyah; they are grateful for Israel's presence and understand its importance.

In Yugoslavia, the Jewish population is about a tenth of what it was, but Jews hold well-respected positions in every facet of life and the "Jews there have created the most active small community in the whole of post-Holocaust Europe." In October of 1989, the Zagreb Jewish kindergarten opened with seven students. In the German Democratic Republic, Jews are busy advancing their careers due to the allure of capitalism. "Unlike anywhere else in the world, Jews living in Germany are defined as much by their country as by their identity as Jews."

With the emergence of democracy in former Communist nations, Jews are finally able to explore their roots openly. This book, ultimately, is about hope, and Jewish life being lived fully in places where only the most optimistic person could have conceived that it could emerge again.