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HEADLINE: Exhibit shows how tragedy affects people like us

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BODY:

TUCKED along a side street off Central Avenue between Baltimore and Lombard streets in East Baltimore stands the one-story brick structure that houses the Jewish Historical Society. The building sits between the old Lloyd Street Synagogue, the first synagogue built in Maryland (in 1845) and now a museum operated by the society, and B'nai Israel Synagogue, the only functioning Jewish house of worship left in downtown Baltimore, which the society owns and leases to the congregation for a dollar a year.

It's not the sort of place where curious passers-by drop in often. The area, which from the early 1800s to just after the turn of the century formed the heart of Baltimore's Jewish community, today is a depressed inner-city neighborhood surrounded by public-housing projects, several of which are scheduled to come down eventually.

Jews began leaving the area for the northwestern part of the city in the early part of this century, a movement that accelerated after World War II. Today the area's residents are mostly African-Americans.

Still, the three buildings operated by the historical society remain as a tribute to the roots of Baltimore's Jewish community. Currently, two major exhibitions are on display. One, an exhibition by photographer Edward Serotta titled "Survival in Sarajevo: How a Jewish Community Came to the Aid of Its City," chronicles the work of the Jewish aid organization La Benevolencija in the war-torn capital of Bosnia. The other, "Daughter of Zion: **Henrietta Szold** and American Jewish Womanhood," examines the career of the Baltimore-born founder of Hadassah, the Zionist Jewish women's organization.

Each of these shows is deeply moving, albeit in different ways. Mr. Serotta's photographs and the texts that accompany them portray a once-beautiful city ravaged by war and the grim, daily struggle for survival.

The early photographs document placid scenes of Jewish life in prewar Bosnia: a view of Sarajevo's old Turkish quarter, the courtyard of the city's oldest synagogue, Il Kal Grande, which dates from the mid-1580s.

A picture taken in July 1988 shows two Sarajevo teen-agers, Milan Hamovich and his girlfriend, Rosita Danon, lounging on a beach towel at the Yugoslav Jewish summer camp on the Croatian coast. The camera records a wonderful tangle of youthful limbs and sunburned flesh; there is a carefree innocence about the couple that seems totally uncontrived.

Two powerful images

The photographs that follow calibrate the city's at first nearly imperceptible, then precipitous and irreversible slide into chaos and war. The tragedy of Sarajevo is summed up in two powerful images displayed side by side halfway through the exhibit. The first shows the marble-columned atrium of the Sarajevo University library in 1989, three years before the war began. The second shot records the same scene in 1993, after Bosnian Serb gunners had reduced the once-elegant structure to a rubble-filled shell.

It is a show that derives its power not from the kind of startling, eye-catching images we are accustomed to seeing on television but rather from the casual accumulation of small, everyday details whose cumulative effect is all the more devastating because Mr. Serotta makes it so easy to imagine something similar happening to people exactly like ourselves.

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Perhaps ultimately that is the greatest gift photography can offer in furtherance of the common human enterprise. If Mr. Serotta's pictures do no more than persuade us to consider this possibility, they will have done their work.

Henrietta Szold, the subject of the second exhibition, raises many of the same issues, but framed in a different perspective and narrated even more richly through an array of objects, images and texts. The exhibit calls upon an extraordinary variety of materials to re-create a tangible sense of who she was as a person — from Szold's own clothing to her writing desk; from the pet dog of her childhood to gifts she treasured as an elderly woman. Many of the artifacts were donated by Szold's nephew and niece, M. Jastrow and Alexandra Lee Levin.

The exhibit recalls both the vanished Baltimore Jewish community into which Szold was born in 1860 and the vastly different era in which she lived until her death in Palestine in 1945. She was a contemporary of both Eleanor Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln, and during her long career she wore so many hats — as feminist, educator, social worker, political activist — that it's difficult to overstate her achievement.

In 1912 Szold helped found Hadassah in New York, with the mission of setting up a district nursing system in the then-British protectorate of Palestine. In 1916 the organization assumed the staggering task of funding and organizing a convoy of medical personnel and equipment — the American Zionist Medical Unit — to ease the desperate health conditions of Palestine caused by World War I.

Youth Aliyah

In the 1920s Szold moved to Palestine permanently to supervise the training of nurses and distribution of medical care; she never returned to the United States except for brief visits. A decade later, in her 70s, she organized Youth Aliyah, a massive effort to save young Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. The project became her consuming passion and the culminating achievement of her life. She became the surrogate mother to thousands of refugee children, who called her "our beloved mother." Yet touched as she was by these tributes, Szold, who never married, once confided that she would "exchange everything for one child of my own."

The exhibit is a fascinating attempt to capture the complexity as well as the accomplishment of Szold's life and career. As museum curator Barry Kessler writes in his excellent introduction to the catalog accompanying the show, behind the image of the revered public figure known lay another, private Szold, an "uncertain, austere person, a woman full of yearnings and melancholy as well as astonishing determination, vast knowledge and diligence and profound love for the Jewish people."

"Perhaps some will find in 'Daughter of Zion' a heroine they can emulate unequivocally — the **Henrietta Szold** whose life was dedicated to doing good for humanity," Mr. Kessler writes. "Others may see personal parallels with the challenges **Henrietta Szold** faced as a modern woman dealing with age-old religious traditions or with her work to define an identity as an American and a Jew. To me, though, the most compelling and poignant edge to her story is her personal struggle with her own alone-ness in the world, her effort to take the unique combination of gifts that she alone had inherited and to make the most of them."

It is a compelling story, and, like the Serotta portrait of Sarajevo's agony, one well worth the trip to East Baltimore to experience firsthand.