

MOSAIC OF A LOST EPOCH

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Several years ago, in an old second-hand book shop in Istanbul, the American composer Arnold Dreyblatt discovered a rare copy of "Who's Who in Central & East Europe 1933". The book was published in 1934 in Zurich and handwritten on the frontispiece was the name of its original owner - "Dr. S. Schmidt, Istanbul, Turkey."

The volume contained over 10,000 biographies: a travel and address guide for and about people from business and politics; facts about Achmed, King of Albania with lists of his decorations; a military nurse, who as private secretary to General Pilsudski held lectures on moral disarmament; an engraver of gold medallions for Pope Leo XIII; the court pianist of the last Austrian Emperor; or the man who invented the rotating therapeutic bed.

Dreyblatt, who himself comes from a Jewish family that was spread all over Russia, Poland, Lithuania, and Austria-Hungary, was seduced by the hidden layers: personal, intimate details, hopes, fears, and life philosophies. In order to search out the various connections between people, places and historical events, 771 biographies were chosen. and entered into a Hypertext computer program, where they were sorted and organized into specific categories. From this material, a working version of the text was extracted based on personal and thematic connections. This version of the text, both spoken and sung in the piece, is, as Dreyblatt explains, only one of many possible variations.

The text was put together with images which the author found in two archives in Budapest. The first was the Horus Archive which contains over 200,000 amateur snapshots collected from all over eastern Europe. The second was the Private Film Archive of performance artist Peter Forgacs who has collected over 170 hours of home movies from the pre- and post-war period.

From this material a kind of "photo-film" was created and programmed to run on four projectors. Doctors in white laboratory coats, a Gypsy violinist, an ice skater whose movements are broken up into a series of individual poses: these projections set the scene for the live performers. The speakers are sometimes off-stage commentators and at other times seen as shadows behind a transparent screen. The musicians perform in front of the screen where a virtuoso vocalist juggles fragments of speech, from Jewish to Balkan-east, making up her own artificial language. She's also a kind of dancer whose arm gestures and body-language accentuate the action.

What this Multimedia-Live-Performance shows, is an impressive mosaic of a forgotten epoch, lively and multi-faceted, yet at the same time bizarre, which today seems barely imaginable. Ultimately the piece culminates in a barrage of spinning image fragments, becoming one all-encompassing fabricated biography, that could just as well include a decorator of streets for a

royal procession in Prague, a socialist resistance fighter, a pianist with the Vienna Philharmonic under Richard Strauss or an explorer for oil in the near east.