

Large photos of Holocaust survivors

German photographer Luigi Toscano shows Holocaust victims in large-sized photos in New York.



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New York (dpa) - Gertrut Roche's light-blue eyes look expressively out from the picture. Born in 1929 in Poland, the woman is wearing a pink earring and a thin necklace. Then there is Marcel D, likewise born in Poland five years later, whose expression looks mild. As to Andrzej Korczak-Branecki, born 1930 in Warsaw, his eyes are wide open while his lips are pressed tightly together. Besides all coming from Poland, the three also have something else in common: They survived the Nazi Holocaust. But many of their friends and relatives were murdered.

Now, their large-format pictures are hanging in the entrance hall of the United Nations building in New York, seen by the hundreds of visitors who pass through every day. "Survivors, Victims, Perpetrators" is the name of the exhibition running until February 28. It was organized by the **House of the Wannsee Conference Memorial and Educational Site in Berlin** and Mannheim-based filmmaker and photographer Luigi Toscano. The UN and the German government support the exhibition.

Originally, separate shows had been planned, according to Matthias Hass of the Wannsee memorial site. But then the two were merged.

"It was great how relatively quickly things complemented each other, these impressive large-format portraits of the survivors that tell what it is all about. And then what we are doing, with the focus on the perpetrators," he said. Thirteen information panels explain the Wannsee conference, where in 1942 the Nazis planned the mass extermination of Jews.

All around are Toscano's photos, large portraits of faces. Their eyes seem to follow visitors through the entire entrance area of the UN building. "Being perfectly honest, I can't yet really fathom it, I can't really realize it," Toscano says of the show. "For me it is great, it is beautiful. And it is also beautiful because I am still in touch with some of the survivors and they are so proud and happy." One even cried on the telephone.

For three years now Toscano, who was born in 1972, has been photographing Holocaust survivors, more than 200 so far, in six countries around the world. "It was important to me not only to portray the Jewish victims, but rather all of those affected by the Holocaust, be it the Sinti and Roma, the politically persecuted, homosexuals or forced labourers," he said.

The pictures have already been exhibited, among other places, in Berlin and Ukraine, and they are scheduled to head to Washington in April. "I continue to add on to the project," says Toscano. Just recently he met and photographed 15 Holocaust survivors in Washington.

"I simply approach the people in a wholly human manner," Toscano says. Sometimes a photo shoot lasted hours as the survivors told their stories. "And all this - call it a ritual - had various stages and was emotional, funny and everything all combined." In this way trust was built up. "Only toward the end did I pose the last question, 'Hey, can I take your picture?'" Some of the people had called their entire family in for the session because it was the first time that they had ever told their story.

Remembering the Holocaust was important to Toscano from early on. "I am Italian, but I was born in Germany, and to me Germany is now my homeland. So I can't simply do as if this does not concern me. I must, and I will, identify and integrate, and so this is part of that." He said that history lessons in school did not adequately cover the Holocaust. "There weren't any good teachers there to answer our questions," Toscano said. At the age of 18 he made his own way to Auschwitz, an experience that deeply touched him and stayed with him. "And only much later, when I began taking photographs, I decided that I wanted to take up this subject. The decision came at a point when anti-Semitism in Europe and elsewhere had been increasing," he said. The photos now on view at the UN are there to explain, and remember. "If one forgets the past, one is condemned to repeat it," Toscano says.

Meanwhile the photos are having their effect already, especially those that are posted outside on the UN fence on 1st Avenue. "UN staffers have come to me, having recognized me as the one who took the pictures. And they said, 'Luigi, it is unbelievable. Normally New Yorkers don't change their side of the street, but now they are crossing over to look at them.'"