

Children in Crisis III: Family Reunification after the Holocaust, War and Genocide
Potsdam January 21 2019, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam
Organized by Dr. Verena Buser & Dr. Boaz Cohen

1. Overview

In 2018 we approached the Martha Muchow Stiftung/Frankfurt, Main for support for the workshop “Children in Crisis III: Family Reunification after the Holocaust, War and Genocide. We received a generous grant for the event and wish to thank Prof. Gertrud Neck-Schlegel and Prof. Gerold Scholz for their support.

The workshop was a follow-up event of two international workshops in London (October 2017) and Berlin (May 2018), Again, the idea was that instruments and approaches gained in the attempted rescue and rehabilitation of children in the aftermath of WWII and the Holocaust, can be useful in efforts for child victims of war and genocide today. And indeed, “Children in Crisis III: Family Reunification after the Holocaust, War and Genocide” showed impressively that then and today questions like “Where are my beloved ones? Where are friends and family members?”, “How can I bring my parents?”, are issues of existential importance to refugees and survivors from war and genocide. Families and friends are a connection to the old or lost world, bear the chance to adapt better to new surroundings and satisfy the need to belong to someone. Caretakers try to build family-like structures and surrogate families for those who have to wait in despair for reunification and of whom never have the chance to meet beloved ones again. For the third time our aim was to bring together historians researching child rehabilitation in the post-WW2 with practitioners: people and organizations working with children affected by war, flight and genocide today. Our belief was that the workshop might broaden the perspectives of contemporary practitioners and scholars as well. It became be a stepping-stone for both more relevant research and further cooperation. In collaboration with Prof. Stefan Thomas, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam, the event took place on January 21.

In this workshop, we brought together participants from Germany, Israel, and Poland. Opening remarks were held by Ms. Shir Gideon, spokeswoman of the embassy of Israel in Berlin. Organizations and NGO’s working in the field that were represented including the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, the BBZ - Beratungs- und Betreuungszentrum

für junge Flüchtlinge und Migrant*innen Berlin, or social workers working in the Brandenburg area.

Results

Much was learnt from the discussions and presentations in the workshop but also from the organizational work. Already after WW2 Jewish survivor Hans Keilson examined the immediate period following traumatizing events, and pointed out that it is crucial – not important whether traumatized children and teenagers but also adults feel or are concretely left alone in the aftermath of war and genocidal events - that they experience solidarity and support. Moreover, the aftermath period is transitional phase in which it is decisive if rehabilitation of child victims of war can develop on fruitful grounds.

We learnt that there are indeed many issues that can broaden the perspectives of scholars and practitioners, and that a constant dialogue can help people in the field today in their work today. We also learnt that – once again – that there exist universal reactions of children and teenagers to genocide, loss and armed conflicts. These include:

- The behavior of children and teenagers as a response to traumatizing events may take a variety of forms, for example unhappiness, anxiety, and fear; some may appear apathetic and backward; others will be troublesome, defiant and difficult to manage, some will show more specific behavior disorders. Children were distrustful and regarded others (especially adults) as enemies; they often don't regard adults as authorities anymore as they made (repeatedly) the experience that adults are the aggressors
- Outbursts of rage and violent behavior, also as a means of “protecting themselves from anxiety by outbursts of violence” are quite normal. Some “have frequently a compulsive need to provoke anger and to run foolish risks in order to go on finding that in spite of everything they will survive”¹.
- Difficulties in regulating the amount and kind of food (“intense greed”²); closely related to that is stealing as a means to survive but which is hard for adults not to label it as delinquency
- Conspicuous sexual behavior as a result of rape, abuse which result in feelings of guilt.

¹ Ibid., p. 11.

² Ibid, p. 10.

Prof. Stefan Thomas (University of Applied Sciences Potsdam) presented the results of several studies he and his research team conducted in the Brandenburg area during the years 2016 and 2018. He stressed that traumas because of war and flight are relevant to young refugees **but** most of the stress and pressure is situated in their current life situation: the recognition as a refugee by the Geneva convention, their life in a foster home, schooling, or contact to their families. Often, they have difficulties in finding German friends as there exists a separating system of “Willkommensklassen”, special schooling for refugee minors. The teenagers themselves complained often about little contact to German youth because of that system. Parallel to this their foster homes are the center of the everyday life, roommates as friends give emotional support, and caregivers are the most important adults. Most of them want to have a future in Germany and have the desire for a "normal" life: School attendance, language acquisition, completing an apprenticeship/study, earning own money, starting a family. With regards to family they often have concerns and worries about the well-being of their families in their home countries or on flight. Young refugees have a strong links to family via social media – whatsapp, facebook and have a strong wish to bring their families to Germany. But due to the current restricted legal rights for family reunification in Germany there is only a little chance to be reunited with beloved ones.

Dr. Tehila Darmon Malka (Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel) stressed in her presentation that the search for relatives was one of the first actions that people took after the Holocaust; people today do the same thing after disasters and catastrophes. The reasons for this are understandable – relatives are perceived as an island of stability within the chaos, and they can serve as an anchor for rehabilitation. In particular, connecting with family can reduce the feelings of isolation and loneliness experienced by survivors. This is an important and necessary stage in personal and community rehabilitation after disasters, and is recognized by the United Nations and the Red Cross as a necessary action in the rehabilitation of communities. Documents from the post WW2 period demonstrate the important role played by the adults who accompanied the child in the search process – whether these were professionals or distant relatives who were in contact with the child who could help in the search for other relatives. Since these adults served as the mediators between the child and the search authorities, their role was twofold: To extract as much information as possible from the child in a sensitive way, and to serve as a stable agent whom the search authorities could contact if and when relevant

information was found. Tehila Malka is convinced that some of these things may be possible to implement nowadays as well.

Ms. Teresa Wigand (Caritas Jugendmigrationsdienst Fürstenwalde) stressed that the fear of being returned back to the countries of origin dominates the everyday life of young adults who came as refugees into Germany. She elaborated successful factors for unaccompanied minors to become active members take part in the destination society:

- To get in contact with adults who are constant and reliable contact persons for them. For example: Educators in Youth welfare institutions in aftercare, the Youth Migration Service, mentors and other volunteers who can engage with the lives of young adults and their challenges.
- Involvement in appropriate educational and professional perspectives relative to personal abilities.
- Consistently systematic language learning from the beginning regardless of the prospects of success of an asylum procedure.
- Meeting opportunities with German peers in everyday life.

Ms. Ulrike Schwarz (Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors, Berlin) reported about today's social and pedagogical challenges and obstacles with regards to reuniting families in Germany. Family Reunification is ***not working*** in cases where achieved integration and school developments might regress, and aggression and behavior disorders might increase. There are several cases where minors tried to return in the war situation to be with the family.

Family Reunification is ***successful*** in cases where the youth offices stop support upon arrival, and minors take over the responsibility the for integration of the family. The minor might drop out of school to support the family by working.

But as a result, ***different realities develop*** as the minor is living within the German system and the family differently rooted in the country and conflict they recently fled from. Moreover, there is a ***clash of expectations within the family***.

Mr. Hans Hansen (Stiftung JOB GmbH, Potsdam) spoke about practical experiences in the accompaniment of underaged refugees and family work which can be summarized as follows: Only a few young people seek a family reunification. The reasons are partly due to the complicated asylum law requirements and partly because the motives for entering Germany were often different. Most teenagers have contact with the family. Even if there is no technical requirement for the parents, contacts are held through neighbors or other members of family. ***The***

contacts are important for the most of young people: They provide emotional support and help with the orientation to the wider perspective. However, sometimes the contacts bring problems and pressure. The following questions arise from the practice

- How intensively should or can we work on the biography with the adolescents (history of flight, cultural background, traumatic experiences ...)?
- Do we have to establish a direct contact with the parents – and how can we do it?
- What references from history can we make to help us to understand better and to support the adolescents?

Ms Jessica Michel (independent scholar and social worker for unaccompanied minor refugees) showcased impressively through four individual, anonymized case studies from unaccompanied minor refugees the crucial relationship between young refugees and their families in absence. They love, respect and honor their family. Within narrative interviews each of the young people told Ms Michel that the family is the first thought and issue in her/ his life. “You have to protect the family from bad things.” The young refugees know that if they break family rules they can be punished, for example by exclusion from the family. Nevertheless, they underline the positive sides of their families. They know that the family holds together. For the young refugees, the family has a very different position, not only because it is often much bigger than in our Western understanding. Even distant cousins belong to the close family. Family is very special and sacred to the young refugees. The feelings the young refugees have for their families can be described in three words. Honor. Respect. Faith. Whether it's their own family or the “educator family”. They are always loved, respected and honored.

Dr. Ruth Amir (Yezreel Valley College, Israel) pointed out that “Child soldiers are *complex victims*. They defy the well-versed notions of children and childhood, innocence, the victim/perpetrator dichotomy, and notions of criminal liability.” She gave the following recommendations with regards to child soldiers:

- Close the “three-years-gap” of the International Criminal Court (The Hague) Statute: *Between the ages of 15 and 18 child soldiers are neither accountable for their conduct nor recognized as victims. This exclusion aggravates guilt and shame of victims.*
- Reintegration programs have also failed to systematically reach girls.
- As legal processes are delayed and protracted the rehabilitation of children and families through their *disarmament, demobilization and reintegration* should become first priority.

- If excluded from justice pursuits, complex victims such as Dominic Ongwen, one of the five leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, could become second generation perpetrators, marginalized by the judicial sector if they are over 15, and have nothing to gain from citizenship and nothing to lose from war. Ongwen was just 10 years old when he was abducted by the Lord's Liberation Army on his way to school. He was brutalized and trained in the bush to kill, mutilate, loot and rape with no mind of his own.

Conclusions

The Holocaust respectively the Shoah are one of the best researched events in history even though there are still many desiderata and blind fields. Then, international relief organizations created guidelines, appropriate strategies and principles on the basis of *learning by doing*. Their development was a historical process, combined with the formulation and application of tailored methods, with recurring failures. ***But challenges and questions from then are often the same like today!*** Despite different political, cultural and social frameworks, there are similarities for war-affected children on a psychosocial level that shape their lives: loss of family, early independence, distrust in adults, uncertainty about the whereabouts or fate of relatives, dependence on the helpfulness of strangers, the feeling to be unwelcome, the experience that help and care can be expected less through state institutions than through dedicated individuals and non-governmental aid organizations.

- There is the urgent need to develop systematically the best practices from the past for today's world
- Workshops and advanced trainings of caregivers must be developed. Cooperation between "Children in Crisis" and the Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Berlin was determined at the occasion of the workshop.
- We believe that the experience gained from the workshops can serve to enhance further work in this direction.

Participants in Children in Crisis III workshop

1. Dr. Verena Buser, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam and Western Galilee College, Akko/Israel

2. Dr. Boaz Cohen, Holocaust Studies Program, Western Galilee College, Akko/Israel
3. Prof. Stefan Thomas, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam
4. Ms. Shir Gideon, Spokeswoman Embassy of Israel in Berlin
5. Ms. Yasemin, Soytemel, University of Applied Sciences Potsdam
6. Dr. Tehila Darmon Malka, Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel
7. Ms. Teresa Wigand, Caritas Jugendmigrationsdienst Fürstenwalde
8. Ms. Ulrike Schwarz, Federal Association for Unaccompanied Refugee Minors
9. Mr. Hans Hansen, Stiftung JOB GmbH
10. Dr. Karolina Panz, Institute of Applied Social Sciences of the University of Warsaw
(could not attend because of illness)
11. Ms. Jessica Michel, Independent Scholar
12. Dr. Ruth Amir, Yezreel Valley College, Israel