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War Causes Traumatization in Children – In the Past and Today

Krieg traumatisiert Kinder – früher und heute

Zusammenfassung Der Artikel bezieht sich auf Erfahrungen in der deutschen Gesellschaft. Er geht aus von der Traumatisierung deutscher Kinder im Zweiten Weltkrieg, die erst in den letzten Jahren öffentlich zur Sprache kommt. Unter Hinweis auf einige dieser Publikationen und gestützt auf die von Hans Keilson entwickelte und von David Becker aufgegriffene *Theorie Sequentieller Traumatisierung* wird die Auffassung vertreten, dass traumatisierende Erfahrungen von Kindern aus dem Zweiten Weltkrieg sich bis in die Gegenwart auswirken. Ihre Bearbeitung kann helfen, destruktiven politischen Tendenzen vorzubeugen und mit Kriegsängsten von Kindern heute sorgsamer umzugehen.

Schlüsselwörter:

Traumatisierung durch politische Gewalt; Krieg und Kinder; Sequentielle Traumatisierung; Langzeitfolgen von Traumatisierung; Kriegsangst bei Kindern.

“I only learned to survive,
I never learned to live.”

Hildegard Knef

This sentence expresses an experience typical of a generation whose childhood and youth was dominated by economic crisis, a dictatorial regime, war and extreme, sometimes life-threatening difficulties in post-war times. Basic needs of children were rarely – if ever – satisfied; all the more there were few chances to digest experiences of extreme violence and death. In Germany after the Second World War an “Unnoticed Generation”¹ grew up practising survival and adjustment strategies with apparent success. Only recently a repressed suffering behind this surface started to be discussed in public.²

One reason for this growing interest may be the advancing age of the affected people: Starting at the 5th or 6th decade of life the memories and emotions of childhood emerge more fre-

¹ Originally: „Die unauffällige Generation“, in: „Andere haben es noch viel schlimmer gehabt“, broadcasted by Westdeutscher Rundfunk 3, 10’/3’/2002 in its program „Lebenszeichen“, that presents human case studies and extraordinary experiences.

² In the program mentioned above the psychotherapists Irene Wielpütz from Cologne and Helga Spranger from Stade contribute to this discussion. Peter Heini, physician and psychiatrist, describes in his book „Maikäfer flieg“, 1994, Kösel Verlag, how he discovered the significance of war-related traumata behind his clients’ multiple symptoms. Other interesting case studies are presented in: Hartmut Radebold, „Abwesende Väter“, Verlag Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

Informations about current publications and actions can be found at the internet address: www.kriegskind.de.

quently and an increasing importance for the personal interpretation of life is attached to them.

Another reason can be found in current sociopolitical structures and processes containing political violence. They may reactivate emotions linked with the old traumata. In this regard a new quality was reached by the attacks of September 11th 2001, the following German involvement in military actions worldwide and a mass media presentation of highly emotive character that has been evoking feelings of direct exposure to mortal danger in many people.

David Becker at the Free University of Berlin underlines the connection between new events of political violence and re-emerging traumata in affected people.³ His experiences are derived from the Institut of Mental Health and Human Rights in Santiago de Chile (ILAS) as well as from projects in Germany and other European countries. Though he focusses on the significance of the special cultural and political context he refers to a theoretical approach that has helped to understand and support people affected by political violence under various circumstances.

His basic assumption is that the links between psychological, sociocultural and political processes are constitutive in dealing with political traumata. Ac-

³ Becker, David, Trauerprozesse und Traumaverarbeitung im interkulturellen Zusammenhang. Zeitschrift für Politische Psychologie, Vol. 7, 1999, No. 1+2, p. 165–182.

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La guerre traumatise des enfants – aujourd'hui comme hier

Résumé L'article présente des expériences faites dans le contexte de la société allemande. Il s'agit des traumatismes subis par les enfants durant la Seconde Guerre mondiale – un sujet dont on n'a commencé à parler ouvertement que ces dernières années. Nous fondant sur certaines publications ainsi que sur la « théorie des traumatismes séquentiels » de Hans Keilson (reprise par David

Becker), nous sommes d'avis que les expériences traumatiques vécues par des enfants durant la dernière guerre ont encore des effets aujourd'hui. Un travail effectué à ce niveau pourrait permettre de prévenir des évolutions politiques destructrices et de gérer avec plus de prudence la peur de la guerre dont souffrent aujourd'hui certains enfants.

According to Becker these factors cannot be understood and cleared up separately, but only in combination taking into account their mutual influence and the source of traumatization. According to Bruno Bettelheim Becker calls this source "extreme situation", leading to "extreme traumatization". Understanding the patient's suffering and the meaning he or she may ascribe to it requires the understanding of the extreme situation in all its main facets.

"Extreme traumatization is never merely the destruction of an individual personality or merely a socio-political process; it always comprises both aspects."⁴

It is not caused by a single event but by a process that may last for a very long period or even a lifetime. In this process different sequences have to be distinguished.

This concept is derived from the extraordinary study "Sequential Traumatization in Children" by Hans Keilson.⁵ Keilson, a physician and psychiatrist, lives in the Netherlands. At the end of the Second World War and the defeat of the Nazis he was appointed member of a commission that decided on the future of the surviving Jewish orphans being hidden in Dutch families or elsewhere in the underground or – in small number – returning from Concentration Camps. Long and detailed interviews with every child were taken down and kept in files.

Twenty-five years later Keilson saw himself confronted with problems of the "Second Generation" that were related to their parents' early traumatization and changes in their personality. This motivated him to re-analyse the post-war documents. Then he made contact with all the former war orphans he could find out either in the Netherlands or in Israel. So he realized many follow-up interviews permitting of a rich and well-founded analysis of long-term effects.

Keilson as well as Becker underline the relevance of sociogenetical and political factors to understand traumatizing experiences caused by political conditions and deal with their psychological representation. In the process of traumatization he defines three sequences:

- The starting phase with elements of "preluding" threat.
- Direct exposure to extreme violence and constant threat to life (in his study this comprises life in the underground or in the concentration camp).
- The "time after" (here: the post-war period with problems in social reintegration and unbounded emotions of forlornness).

The traumatizing effects of the third sequence have been widely underestimated whereas many war orphans interviewed by Keilson as adults regarded it the worst time of all. They felt emotionally isolated while people around them wanted to forget the horrors of the past and go ahead in rebuilding their civil life.

A comparable study does not exist in Germany, but the texts cited before and many biographies and documents of Oral History reveal that during war and post-war times many adults could not mobilize enough

strength to get aware of their children's feelings, to console and reassure them in the context of extreme situations. This missing fulfillment of basic needs cannot but provoke serious consequences.

Keilson analyses in a highly differentiating way obstructions in the development of affected children according to their age at the starting point of the second sequence. So his study is of a great value to every professional who is concerned with the consequences of extreme, politically rooted violence in children.

To my opinion the attention for this topic should be intensified in therapy as well as in the public discourse.

One focus should be directed towards the children of the Second World War; their anxieties, suffering and disturbances should be named and acknowledged. (This does not at all intend to compare or even set it off against the victims of the Nazi regime. "Suffering is a subjective process and should never be abused for political attempts of justification or revenge.") But individuals having met empathy and acknowledgment while suffering will more likely pass it to others, in their private interactions as well as in a political context. The German psychiatrist Horst Eberhard Richter noted the "wave of empathy" towards suffering US-Americans after September 11th whereas voices of revenge were followed by irritation and reserve in parts of the German population.⁶ Possibly traumata of war – conscious or not – have an influence on current processes like this one.

What has been passed in the families since the World War(s) by talking about extreme experiences, by withholding them, by behaviour? May the oppres-

⁴ Becker, David, *Extreme Traumata, Arbeit mit Opfern politischer Repression in: Children, War and Persecution*. Ed. "Stiftung für Kinder" and UNICEF. Hamburg 1993, Secolo Verlag. Becker's text can be found at the internet address: www.amnesty.de/de, quoted from p. 4.

⁵ Keilson, Hans, *Sequentielle Traumatisierung von Kindern*. Stuttgart 1979, Ferdinand Enke Verlag. The English Translation was edited by: Hebrew University Magnes Press, Jerusalem.

⁶ Richter, Horst Eberhard, *Das Ende der Egomane*. Köln 2002, Verlag Kiepenheuer & Witsch.

sion of these experiences turn into a base for politically goaded anxiety or aggression? Will it contribute to unnerve adults, so that they are not able to stand or understand children who are afraid of political violence now? What happens in children whose teacher tells them that something like the attack of 11/9 will soon hit all of us and who find no other trusted person within reach to give them a feeling of security and a realistic perspective?

So if we discuss the psychological effects of war in children our main topic are the children of to-day. What strengthens adults so that they can face

precarious realities and, in the same time, remain open to children who need confidence and orientation?⁷ How can they maintain vitality, courage and chances for common enjoyment in their every-day-life with children? Recently a social pedagogue told about the following experience: Shortly after 11/9 she prepared a birthday party together with some children. Suddenly a

⁷ Some practical advices are given in: Kögler, Michael, *Wohin mit der Angst? Kindergarten heute*, 2002, No.2, p. 6–8 and: *Kriegsangst bei Kindern*. Ed. Verein für Friedenspädagogik, Tübingen 2001.

child came to her, saying with a bright smile upon its face: "I am so happy to live so that I can celebrate this day with you!"⁸

Pedagogical and therapeutic experts can support adults and children in developing inner strength and empathy. Peaceful conditions so that they may live and not only survive can only be preserved and built up by political power.

⁸ Translated from: Vinzens, Elisabeth and Albert, *Wie gehen wir eigentlich miteinander um? Gedanken zum 11. September 2001*. A tempo, 2002, September, p. 18.