

Bridging Gaps

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Encouraging tolerance among children and adolescents - Multicultural reality in Berlin and its challenges for cultural institutions

In today's Berlin, young people are growing up in a city that is more diverse than ever. People take for granted that they feel at home in various cultural spaces and traditions. Children and teen-agers of diverse backgrounds go to the same day-cares and schools. There is a mix of families that may originally come from Turkey, Lebanon, Poland, the Ukraine, Serbia, etc. or of German old-established population in Berlin.

Diversity today is the hallmark of a cosmopolitan city, and Berlin is proud of the fact that it can call itself home to people from over 180 different countries. For centuries, Berlin has been a destination for immigrants of all kinds and their energy has always enriched the society.

The number 180 also happens to be the number of museums and historical sites that Berlin houses. In the last few years, the subject of an increasingly diverse society has become of great importance to them. Since public cultural institutions create their exhibitions with visitors in mind, it was initially embarrassing to realise that certain members of the audience – those with immigration backgrounds – were not at all represented in these cultural institutions. This forced to fundamentally rethink and change the habits in order to both accommodate and welcome the social changes that had taken place. "This change," says German immigration researcher Mark Terkessides, "has become the key to survival" for cultural institutions.

However, it is not only the thought of underrepresented visitors that should make museums or other institutions ask themselves how they can better understand and participate in the cultural development and societal changes brought on by immigration.

Especially in urban history museums, a general discussion has been sparked on how to protect and ensure immigrants' heritage, how objects they have brought with them are cherished, and how they can influence the continuation of our national history and identity. The German Museums Association has recently published guidelines for museums on how to work with the topic "migration and cultural diversity", promoting new strategies. "Even if the 'museum for everyone' remains a utopian idea, the 'museum for as many as possible' should become reality,"¹ was the guiding principle. A new attitude is needed – with multiple perspectives that represent diversity in society. It should work *with* not *for* the audience. It should realise the need to be more open, to let go, not to hang on to our own pretensions of owning answers.

If we are to believe the statistics, in 20 years, every second resident in Berlin will have this kind of background – be it that they have immigrated themselves, or as descendants of an

¹ www.museumsbund.de

immigrant family. This rapid growth is not only caused by influx and birth-rate, but also by the simultaneous decline of the overaged German population.

For some, these prognoses are scandalous. These are the people who want to think that “multi-culturalism” in Germany has failed, along with all the in-roads and models that have contributed to the successful integration of countless immigrants.

Who belongs in Germany and who doesn't? When it comes to “living together in diversity”, we are far from being on solid ground. This question is heard more and more often. Problems are only taken seriously when they rise to the surface. But they begin long before that, deep in people's hearts and minds. Personal experiences of exclusion and defamation always leave their traces. And this starts at an early age.

So, how to face this situation in cultural institutions? Are museums places of cultural and intercultural dialogue and experience? And how - in particular - can they help children and families from many different cultural backgrounds live in harmony? I would like to look at these questions from a perspective out of my long-lasting experiences as the head of a Youth Museum in the heart of Berlin.

The Youth Museum in Berlin as physical space for intercultural experience

The Youth Museum was founded in 1994. In a time where a lot of children's museums started to exist. In Germany it was the same time when xenophobia had been on the rise since the fall of the Wall, and had reached its first apex with arson attacks on homes for asylum-seekers. So, one of our very first projects was to start developing programs for children and youth in the neighbourhood to initiate sensible dialogue between the cultures.

Instead of talking with the children about a “problem” we undertook historical exploration in the museum and in the city itself, tying historical narratives in. History serves not only to widen our scope of knowledge, it is also a body of thought bearing multiple perspectives and raising ever new questions. After these projects, we realized that more of such encounters were needed to provide children and adolescents of different backgrounds with a safe and creative environment, where they could make learning experiences together and test each other out.

For this reason we developed lots of creative ways to encourage children and teen-agers of diverse backgrounds to actively participate in the museum program and in society. Almost everything we do has something to do with history and the children's relationship to their everyday environment. We explore history in the museum and in urban spaces, combining historical narrative with artistic and multi-media forms of expression. The methodological approach underlying all our projects is enquiring-explorative learning. The children decide for themselves what their research interest are and how to acquire new knowledge.

In response to our question why teen-agers of non-German descent should be at all interested in German history, we almost always hear the same answer: “Because we were born here, and we want to know what happened here in the past!” That we are talking here about 3rd or 4th generation children means that they are all coming with a similar rudimentary understanding of history, just like the children of German descent. Let me give you some examples how we try to get children and young people of diverse backgrounds engaged in and excited about history.

There seems to be no “special method” necessary to address immigrant children. But this certainly does not mean that the “multiplicity” in the group can be left unnoticed. It is not enough for a teacher to know a lot about history, they also need to be culturally sensitive. A marked example of why a multiple perspective is so necessary can be found in the way memorial days – a substantial part of the German culture of remembrance - are dealt with.

Born here, but not my history...?

Learning about the history of the country one has emigrated to is a widely debated subject in various institutions for the teaching of history.

In 2005, we put on an exhibition on the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War – “time zero. 2005 | 1945.” In the workshops which were conducted beforehand more than 150 students had the opportunity to make historical research on their own and present what they personally associate with the Memorial Day and how they associate their own story with the “big” history. How did this work in detail?

For example: Kids got a box, each contained a “research assignment”, fully equipped with materials a real researcher would need – an interview guide for the encounter with eye-witnesses, a notepad to record the results, a camera to take pictures, a contract in case they get an original object to present in the exhibition, and acid-free papers and cardboard boxes for private photographs and documents. After four weeks of research in their families and neighbourhood the students came back proudly to the museum with their full boxes, containing now letters, photos, diaries and objects. Most of these were linked to memories and a personal story which they now could take as starting point to step deeper into a topic.

Such Workshops have the function of memory laboratory: Who remembers what, how and why? Some of the kids didn’t bring any objects, they were sad, because they seemed to have failed. But they brought personal experiences which came along dealing with this topic. These experiences caused many questions and discussions in the museum, which were as meaningful as an object with a true story behind.

Just like this experience of a 14 years old girl: “Which war do you mean?” a Pakistani merchant asked her when she was conducting her first street interview about 8th May 1945. She wanted to know what experiences he personally associates with the Second World War. For the girl suddenly it was clear that the anniversary was not only an issue for Germans. It also awakens memories in people of diverse backgrounds - memories of leave-taking and new beginnings, but also often of war, flight and deportation. These people are now living in Germany and see themselves suddenly connected to the national way of remembrance. For the student it was a remarkable experience. She understood why it is so necessary to be aware that the same historical event can be remembered differently, and that other historical narratives might be associated with it. This is an approach we worked more with in other projects.

Can we expect immigrants to take on the “negative heritage” of the country they have emigrated to?

The conscious involvement of young people from immigrant families in public remembrance and commemoration is essential. And in the German culture of remembrance, dealing with

National Socialism and the Holocaust is of central significance. Young people with migration backgrounds relate to the history of the Nazi era in the most varying forms. They don't do it all in the same way and the connection they make between themselves and the history of Nazism also varies. But they do, in one form or the other. One might, for example, identify him- self with the historical victim and draw parallels between current modes of discrimination and the oppressive mechanisms of the Nazi regime. Someone else might willingly take on the "negative historical heritage", in this way trying to qualify as a "fully-fledged" German.

In the "History Lab 1933-45", we wanted to enable children of all backgrounds to make historical inquiries into the period of National Socialism. Strong narrative and visually catchy, comic strips and comic book drawings provided here the point of departure. The various drawings introduced different themes and were linked to the authentic objects and documents in the exhibition. Their purpose was to be viewed, questioned and studied exactly. As a research place, the "History Lab" unfolded its correct effect first when it is also actually used as one. And like in a proper lab, one could also make mistakes while experimenting and try out alternatives. For example in the accompanying archive and a mysterious depot with a lot of other objects that were supposed to help deepen the children's historical investigations.

Learning more about identity and the sense of belonging

Referring to my question from the beginning - are museums places of cultural and intercultural dialogue and experience? – we have made it one of our goals in the Youth Museum to find the right ways of providing children and adolescents with ways in which they can take charge of their lives in a diverse society.

For over 10 years, we have been concentrating on the history of immigration, working on it with young people and their families. Our most representative viewable example in this context is the Villa Global. The Villa Global is not only an exhibition. It is an attitude towards a society where "hybrid identities" are a given fact, where people who feel they belong to several cultural spaces can change their identities as they see fit.

We staged a house or living situation – the VILLA GLOBAL – whose "tenants" are from varied backgrounds. They aren't presented as a problem group here, but as people who have belonged to urban society for three decades and who live here in this house next door to each other.

In the exhibition, 14 little rooms are created, by involving 15 people of diverse backgrounds as experts who now reveal their life-stories, with everyday objects, culture-historical items and pictures – a staged arrangement and point of departure for other activities.

The Villa Global is made as a permanent exhibition and now the new heart of our museum. Thus, it fulfils a double role: On the one hand, for children and youth it serves as a place of information and exchange about life-stories and personal experiences. The other essential role of the exhibition is to inform adults about immigration history as a crucial part of the history of Berlin and the current living conditions of these people.

What makes a person interesting and what can children learn from it?

In our search for the “tenants”, the ethnic-national background was thus far less decisive than the qualities that would make this or that person interesting for children and teenagers. What similarities could they see to their own lives, what are the differences?

For example Laila, her mother is from German descent and her father grew up in Lebanon. In her room you can read the following sentence: “I’m Muslim and I have a Jewish girl-friend. No one can believe it!”

Let me give you another example how this exhibition can work in terms of dismantling prejudices: One of the most beloved rooms is the room of Jonni. He is a well-known Rapper in Berlin and many kids know and admire him. Especially for Muslim kids Jonni is a model. He is smart, he looks great and the texts of his raps reflect the everyday problems of the youth. When kids look around in his room they can find out more about his life. They will discover that his parents originally came from the Ukraine, immigrated in to Israel, where Jonni was born. He lives now in Berlin, but he still has an Israeli passport. So, the moment the kids understand where he comes from, they are shocked and won’t believe: How can such a fantastic rapper be Jewish, he must be an Arab!

Outlook

The Youth Museum, which I have just told you about, is a small museum. It works regionally and locally. But its potential lies precisely in the fact that its focus is so local and thus narrow, the subjects connect directly to the target group’s environment and that the small history instantiates the larger. It is narrow on one hand. On the other hand the authentic experiences children can make will widen their view and change their perception.

www.jugendmuseum.de

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She is author of several books and articles on local history and cultural education. In 1994 she founded the »Jugend Museum« (Youth Museum) and brought a new institution from concept to reality. She is an advocate for the benefits of exploring history with children and young people through methods of experiential and interactive learning strategies. The playful experiences and inspiring environments in the Youth Museum are used to help children and youth to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

Petra Zwaka has been involved with the world-wide acting Children’s Museum’s Association Hands on International since 2005, until recently she was an active part of the Board. She has developed and managed the 6th Children’s Museum’s Conference “Action, Interaction and Reflection. Children’s museums in the 21st century, Berlin 2007. Since 2012 she is part of the Jury for the *Children in Museums Award*