

Hands On Conference in Ljubljana 2011

*Identity, Cultural Diversity and Heritage*

*The Role of Children's Museums in Times of Rapid Change*

Talk by Petra Zwaka, Youth Museum Berlin

### **Born here, but not my history...?**

#### **Intercultural history learning in the Youth Museum**

I'd like to begin with a little story.

A twelve year old girl, I'll call her Samira, is on her way to a museum with her school-class. They are supposed to spend a day working on a project. Samira, however, does not want to see the exhibition, because that would mean disobeying her Imam. He had warned her in Koran school against going. "All Jews are traitors!" the Imam had said and with that meant that the history presented in the exhibition was false. The name of the girl is made up, but the story is true – it recently happened at our Youth Museum and we thought about it for a long time.

The exhibition it refers to was called "The History Lab: 1933-45," The exhibition focused on the Nazi era and the Holocaust and was part of a model project on historical learning for children. This brief episode is one of many | that makes us aware on a daily basis of how much German society has fundamentally changed in the past decades. Germany is an immigration country. It took a long time before the political powers acknowledged this reality.

However, in everyday life, the change in the population and the growing diversity had long become visible – with all the benefits we've enjoyed – both: economically and culturally as a result of ongoing immigration since the 1950's. But naturally also with the difficulties and risks associated with so many different cultures living in the same areas side by side.

In Germany, currently every fifth citizen has a migration background: this counts as an all-time high, making up 20%<sup>1</sup> of the entire population, and rising. But there are districts in many cities and metropolises where the "new Germans" make up the majority.

So, if we are to believe the statistical projections, in 20 years every second resident of a large German city will be of ethnic descent – whether they have immigrated themselves or are descendants of immigrants.

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<sup>1</sup> From the Berlin Census Bureau, 2009

This rapid rise is not only caused by people moving here and/or having children, but also by the aging German population. The prognoses are alarming – at least from the perspective of the so-called majority population. It is therefore no wonder that the public debates are so controversial, often accompanied by fears, prejudices and horror scenarios. And they get even worse if s.th. happens in the world, like the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and others that followed. So also fears are global.

But back to my little story.

Samira, who initially stubbornly refused to step into the exhibition rooms, finally did. The museum educator on staff that day kindly cajoled her and alleviated her fears that she was doing anything wrong. She suggested Samira, – quite cleverly, I thought – that she should find out whether her Imam was actually right. With that, Samira, could spend the day at the museum exploring the exhibition like all the other children. Here she encountered the life-stories of Jews who had once been neighbours of and subsequently persecuted by the Nazis.

She listened to reports of historical eye-witnesses, she read letters of people who had been hounded out of Germany before the major exterminations began, who were able to start new lives as emigrants in foreign countries. She learned something about the deportations and the people who had given the orders. Dealing with these authentic materials affected her a lot. In her group she took active part in discussing the question of how we could prevent such injustices from ever happening again. For Samira, the encounter with history in this way was an important learning experience and opportunity. She came with a prejudice and left with a question. Along the way, in a safe environment, she learned about different perspectives on the history of the Nazi period and got a vague idea of what concepts of history are and why they should be recognized as such. Perhaps for the first time, she understood that history and the present have something to do with each other.

At the end of the project day, the girl said that her Imam wasn't right. She would go to Koran school and would ask him why he said it that way. Samira used the opportunity of a possible "space of agreement". What the history of Lebanon, her parents' country of origin, has to do with the daily political goings-on in the country she was born in, namely Germany, is most likely not as clear. But maybe she has since started to wonder...

There is a widespread notion in Germany that children and adolescents with migration backgrounds would not be interested in German history. From my long years of experience as head of the Youth Museum in the heart of Berlin, I can safely say that this statement is simply not correct.

Nevertheless, looking back, I do have to note that at the beginning of the 1990's, when immigration in Germany had reached its first peak, we worked with immigrant children as matter of course, and certainly less bias.

### **Retrospect**

Our 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. Perhaps because we knew rather little at this time about the immigrant children's personal backgrounds, we conducted projects free of prejudice, without giving special treatment to any one group.

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.

What we observed at the time with a great deal of surprise, is how interested – second generation children were in the history of their neighbourhood. They pored over historical city maps, looked for the pictures of "their" streets and houses, studied old address books for their building's previous tenants. I can remember one girl with a Turkish origin who needed some inspiration for a theatrical recreation of a scene from our historical photo collection. She absolutely refused to use one of an old woman with a head-scarf, because it reminded her too much of her grand-mother, who always wore a scarf. She wanted to try out something different and slipped into the role of a good-looking woman with naked shoulders.

After these projects, we realized that more of such encounters in the museum 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.

While it didn't seem to us to require any special issue to address for children with or without a migration background, particular topics *were* necessary to encourage interaction and reflection. At the beginning of the 90's, it was the vision of a multi-cultural society in which people could live together in peace and harmony. Looking back into history we wanted to have the children and youth think about the question why it is so necessary in a civil, democratic society to have respect for and tolerance of people with different backgrounds.

Today, almost 20 years later, the social conditions and debates have changed.

“Multi-culti” has supposedly failed in Germany, and the society finds itself confronted with issues such as honour killing, forced marriage, inadequate education and language learning.

Just finding the right term to describe the present condition in my country and the relationship between “Germans” and immigrants is a growing challenge. Do we want to say intercultural, multicultural, transcultural, mainstream culture, people with or without a migration background, new Germans, old Germans, “organic Germans”. Germans don’t have an easy time of it. Our uncertainties are not only on the linguistic front, however. They also underscore the fact that there is no unified vision on which to base the governmental programs and measures necessary for integrating immigrants. Even the term “integration” is contentious, as it is no longer about shunting people into pre-existing social structures. Public institutions – including museums and children’s museums as well – will have to change, open up to multi-cultural realities. According to Mark Terkessides, an expert on immigration : “This change has become a prerequisite for survival.”<sup>2</sup>

### **History for Everyone?**

Learning about the history of the country one has emigrated to is a widely debated subject in various institutions for the teaching of history. This is only logical. It’s impossible for the demographic development to continue without affecting the historical awareness and image of the country. The conscious involvement of young people from immigrant families in public remembrance and commemoration is thus essential. And in the German culture of remembrance, dealing with National Socialism and the Holocaust is of central significance.

An empirical study<sup>3</sup> from 2003 on historical consciousness in the German immigration society asked what significance the central events of German history – particularly the Nazi period – has for young immigrants and how they position themselves to them politically. The study was based on interviews with teenagers from immigrant families.

The questions were:

- Can we expect immigrants to take on the “negative heritage” of the country they have emigrated to?
- Is dealing with this history a kind of “entry ticket” into the dominant German society?<sup>4</sup>
- Must they, too, take responsibility for the holocaust?

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Terkessides, *Interkultur*, Berlin 2010, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Viola B. Georgi, *Entlehene Erinnerung. Geschichtsbilder junger Migranten in Deutschland*, Hamburg 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Carlos Kölb, *Mit und ohne Migrationshintergrund. Zum Geschichtsbewusstsein Jugendlicher in der Einwanderungsgesellschaft*, in: Viola B. Georgi/R. Ohliger, *CrossOver Geschichte*, Hamburg 2009, p. 61.

Rough summary of the results of these interesting studies and surveys:

Adolescents with migration backgrounds relate to the history of the Nazi era in the most varying forms. They don't do it in all the same way and the connection they make between themselves and the history of Nazism also varies. Someone might, for example, identify him- or herself 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.

At the Youth Museum, examining contemporary issues has always played a central role. We have earned our reputation by developing unconventional yet effective ways of encouraging young people with various backgrounds to examine and interact with history and build bridges between history and the present.

We have identified some basic principles to make history accessible for children of various background which I would like to share with you:

- the biographical approach: children and adolescents deal with authentic stories and encounter differing historical narratives from people they can interact, identify and deal with – or maybe distance themselves from. Example: Villa Global combined with the principle : involving the community
- topographical approach: looking at authentic places – where "big" and "small" history happened and where we can negotiate questions as to how, for example, the immovable heritage related to the Nazi legacy should be presented and perceived - now and in the future
- exploratory learning and research that make it possible for young people to choose their own thought and learning processes regarding history, and establish free spaces for questions and experiments, unconventional perspectives and forms of making ideas visible.

These forms of dealing with history are, in our experience, equally effective for most children and adolescents, as the differences in the learning groups are not only manifest in immigrant status. On the contrary:

Immigrants are not a homogeneous group at all – there are people from 190 different nationalities living in Berlin, and we can often identify up to 9 different cultural backgrounds in a Berlin schoolroom.

That we are talking here about 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> generation children means that they are all coming with a similar rudimentary understanding of history, just like the children of German descent.<sup>5</sup>

That there seems to be no “special method” necessary to address immigrant children certainly does not mean that the “multiplicity”<sup>6</sup> in the group can be left unnoticed for much longer. 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.

Exhibition organizers and educators are constantly faced with the question of what significance the memorial day has for whom, and how especially young people should relate to it – personally, socially and in their family.

Let me give you another example of our concrete work.

### **Time zero – an exhibition a starting point for discussion**

In 2005, we put on an exhibition on the 60<sup>th</sup> 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. Memories found in letters, files and diaries served as their starting point for the “relationship building” and proved to be as stimulating as those found in concrete places or reports from eye-witnesses. The workshops as a kind of memory laboratory: Who remembers what, how and why?

“Which war do you mean?” a Pakistani merchant asked a student 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 teenager suddenly it was clear that the anniversary was not only an issue for Germans. It also awakens memories in people of different cultural 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.

A few months later, when the actual exhibition was opened, the following episode happened: Seven students from a school-class entered the representation of Berlin destroyed by war after 1945. They meet six historical figures – set up as silhouettes - who describe the end of the war

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<sup>5</sup> Bodo v. Borroes, Fallstricke interkulturellen Geschichtslernens: Opas Schulunterricht ist tot, in: Viola Georgi/R. Ohliger, aaO, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Terkessides, aaO., p.

from their differing perspectives. A controversy erupts among the students around the silhouette of a returning soldier, bridging into the present in no uncertain terms.

The question which came up were: How would the adolescents themselves behave if someone demanded of them to join the army and go to war? Of the seven students, 5 of them had roots outside Germany - in Somalia, Lebanon, Kosovo, Croatia and Armenia. Their perspectives on the historical exhibition were influenced by their personal experiences and those of their families.

“If my country or my people need me, I’ll fight for them!” a 15 year old adolescent declared whose father and uncle were involved in military actions none too long ago. The boy who loudly took this position was Croatian. In two years, he is going to serve in the Croatian army. He is looking forward to it because the army “makes a man out of you,” as he said.

Another boy, whose parents came to Germany from Kosovo a few years ago, told us a story that took place in his homeland only a few years back: His uncle threw a big party for his birthday, but only half the guests showed up; because the other half had fallen victim to a bombardment. What they debated here so vehemently is hardly an issue at home. “I don’t ask my father,” said a girl of Lebanese descent. “World War 2 is not a big deal for me, where my family comes from there’s always war!” said another whose family fled the country. For a student of Turkish descent, September 11<sup>th</sup> was the “worst war” she had lived through and that had changed everything.

There were also two German-born boys in the group who were rather reserved, one of them admitted that war “didn’t interest him much” and he would rather flee than fight. Terms like courage, honour, pride come up. “Pacifists” are put on the defensive. It doesn’t take much to look like a coward. The last sentence said on the subject was: “Peace for me means that I can walk down the street and know that nothing is going to happen to me. I could go into every little side-street, even at night, and nothing happens – that’s what peace is!”

I told you this experience so much in detail because I learned from this that 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 want to work more with in our future projects. But we are aware that still we don’t know enough about what’s going on inside the heads and hearts of the children and young people. When youth engage with the subject of sensitive issues of German history, it is always accompanied by issues of recognition and belonging and their social positioning in the German majority society.<sup>7</sup> On a daily basis, however, we can see that young people from immigrant families put more stock in their origins when they start to feel excluded and discriminated against by the dominant society.

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<sup>7</sup> Viola Georgi/Rainer Ohliger, aaO., p. 103.

## **Dealing with the subject of Identity**

Learning more to know about identity and the sense of belonging we developed an experimental project at our museum.

It was a joint project for children aged between 11 and 12, developed and implemented with a partner from Israel, named Merchavim, and the Youth Museum. The project greatly affected the children. At the beginning of the project, it became clear that questions about origin, cultural identity and belonging were difficult for the children to answer spontaneously. As third or fourth generation, many of them were born and raised in Berlin. Their identification with the country they live in day-to-day is therefore highly important.

These children often define their sense of belonging at first in terms of their daily life at school, their peer groups, or sports and hobbies, whilst their belonging to an ethnicity seemed at first to be of secondary importance. What we also observed: There is always a connection to their parents' origins. The children expressed their relationship to their parents' national and cultural heritage, because they sense that their parents lay great importance in their own roots which define them. But what the children know about their parents' country of origin stems mostly from the vacations they spend there with their whole family. Yet even there, they can experience feelings of "not belonging" and being torn in different directions. Whilst during conflicts and crisis situations in Germany they are labelled (and thus excluded) as "foreigners", they also experience similar treatment in their parents' homeland, where they are given the label "German", thus also denying them a sense of belonging there.

It is therefore no wonder that most of the children have come to see their future lives centered in Berlin. The children apparently feel at home where they live and where they have friends, go to school and to clubs and where they feel a sense of security and familiarity.

### **Self-ethnicization**

The feeling of not being seen, whether it be in one's own peer group or as a result of public debate about belonging and migration, can lead to self-ethnicization, even among 11 and 12 year old children.

This then turns into a polarization between "German" and "not-German", coupled with a particular emphasis on "Turkish" or "Arabic." When children who were born in Berlin into immigrant families, are constantly stamped with the label "foreigner", yet on the other hand are expected to integrate and "become German", falling back on their ethnicity seems like the only way to garner any self-worth.



These children often choose national symbols like the Turkish flag or the borders of a free Kurdistan or even a term that can express their sense of belonging. They often do not know what ideology lies behind the symbols and words they have chosen. One teenager even said during a discussion about the individual sense of belonging, that "I am PLO." Certainly, he did not mean the Palestinian freedom organization, but that he and his parents feel a sense of belonging to "Palestine".

In this respect, the central question for our project staff, was how they, as a museum, could contribute to preventing children and teenagers from being reduced to their origins; helping them see their cultural diversity as a strength rather than a weakness in the face of a fictitious German norm. The search for one's own cultural roots is an important process for all young adolescents in developing identity, with the creation of a positive sense of self as its goal. The motivation for this search for identity must be curiosity and not a defence against racism or fear of emotional and social rejection.

### **"Berlinship"**

"My father is Berlin, my mother is Berlin, my sister is Berlin..." , wrote a girl of Turkish descent about her drawing. While the children – regardless of where their families stem from – hardly ever identify with Germany, the image of being a Berliner was of great significance. This does not mean however, that they contest their parents' country of origin or national identity. Generally, they drew from both cultures – "I'm Serbian and a Berliner" – or combined backgrounds - "I am a Berliner Turk."

The positive experiences of living side by side in urban spaces, which in part also entails overcoming conflicts, sets good conditions for experimentation with different levels of experience. Mostly due to their age, their movements are limited to a narrow radius and the identification with a neighbourhood or street is therefore strong. It was interesting to see that the children's interest in the structure of their immediate living surroundings and how they developed historically was very high.

### **Intercultural History Learning in the Youth Museum**

Given our various experiences in the Youth Museum, we have made it one of our goals to find the right ways of teaching the history of our city to a culturally diverse audience.

As I have just elucidated, we are not talking about reconceptualising the museum's entire modus operandi for the benefit of children with migration backgrounds.

But we have to ensure that those presenting history should be sensitive to the fact that more and more of the adolescent groups visiting the museum consist of multiple identities and experiences. It is an absolute must to take their present life into consideration - otherwise we would miss quite a few chances.

These differences inform the way people interpret history, as we saw with the seven teenagers I just talked about. Interpreting history requires not only multi-perspectivity, it also requires the ability to deal with multiple narratives – the narratives of the majority and narratives brought in by immigrants which are in no way homogeneous.

This is the great challenge facing all history museums, and means much more than simply throwing in a couple of stories about immigrants into the mix. The central challenge for us as children's and youth museums is to provide children and adolescents with ways in which they can take charge of their lives in an intercultural civil society. 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.

As a Youth Museum which is committed to teach history we consider history as a crucial tool to support children in searching for their identity. The history of immigration is also the history of the majority society-

We recently started a new project on this subject and we have 3 years to experiment with new ideas and methods. The project is being funded by the federal government<sup>8</sup> and is entitled "Heimat Berlin. Migrationsgeschichte für Kinder" which roughly translates into "Homeland Berlin: History of Immigration for Children". It is both a research project and an education project. We want to focus on the history of immigration in the city of Berlin and more particularly in our borough. We are not to conceive of this history as merely an appendage to the "actual" history, but as an integral part of the borough's historical development that can be looked at and understood afresh from multiple perspectives.

Looking back in history, we can clearly see that Berlin has, for centuries, been a city made up of immigrants. And people who have come here from abroad have always changed it. Hardly anyone knows anymore that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, one in three Berliners was in fact French. Huguenot refugees had a marked influence on the economy and culture of the city, and many expressions that are so "typically Berlin" stem from this period.

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<sup>8</sup> As part of the federal program "Promoting Tolerance – Strengthening Competence", Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2011-2014)

As for all newcomers, the beginning was difficult. They had to learn a new language and new rules, and get along with people who had been there far longer than them. It was a process ridden with problems, but sooner or later, Berlin became homeland for most of them. In the “Homeland Berlin” project, we want to research the history of immigration in the city, working with children between the ages of 10 and 14, and with their parents and possibly their grandparents as well. This will hopefully give us a chance to follow up on questions that arise.

The history of immigration must also be understood as part of the history of the majority. Situations from previous centuries reported in old documents are today in front of our noses, so to speak. The plurality of immigrant groups that have settled in Berlin gives rise to an abundance of various narratives, national and traditional historical knowledge of the countries of origin passed on privately from one generation to the next. People across Europe are considering how to make the history of immigration visible – in a special immigration museum or in historical museums themselves, in small ones as in large ones.

The Youth Museum Schöneberg is a small museum. It works regionally and locally. Its target group are young people between the ages of 8 and 18. 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.

I absolutely believe in this.

“Homeland is where my family is, and they live in Berlin,” the student Ali, 12 years old, wrote above a drawing at the end of a workshop day. In such a sentence, we can find our opportunities for the future and also an obligation – to Ali and to everyone else.