

08. May 1945 – 2015. The Nazi genocide and some remarks on the role of social work in Germany



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I.

The liberation from Fascist rule in Germany also put an end to the Nazi genocide of Jews in Europe (often referred to as holocaust or shoa), as well as the murder of Roma, homosexuals, the psychic ill, Russian prisoners of war, political opponents and others. Crimes of such a magnitude demand an ever watchful remembrance and demonstrate, respectively, the power and powerlessness of perpetrators and victims. It also shows the constant need to be on the guard against inhumane ideologies and to be aware of the coercive character of certain structural arrangements – above all of the concentration camps, which were totally devoid of any semblance of civilisation: there was infinite suffering of millions of people who were pushed around, humiliated or murdered. Sadly, these facts are in danger of being forgotten again by the new majority society. This is what makes moments of remembrance of what happened 70 years ago so important: they admonish us, challenge us, force us to reflect, point out shame and guilt. All this underscores the validity of the fundamental question: How could it happen, to exclude whole categories of people radically, to annihilate them socially, emotionally and existentially, to murder them systematically?

II.

A comprehensive memory culture must logically also be extended by reflections on the field of social work, which had a tradition of care determined by the pedagogical, monitoring and disciplining nature of its guidelines. Thus, it was embedded in a world of events that led to terrible and inhumane practices. At issue are tasks of legal discrimination against ‘others’, for example domestic visits where the lack of an Ahnenpass would be noticed, or the establishment of youth concentration camps as a means of education. The Ahnenpass (‘ancestors’ passport’), a perversion of racial criteria, was to ‘document’ the bearers’ Aryan lineage down to their grandparents, and was introduced by law in Germany in 1933, to define the affiliation to the ‘national community’ (Volksgemeinschaft). Otherwise they were excluded from the whole social security system. Those children and youths which were classified as disruptive elements in so-called ‘community homes’ were transferred for ‘special treatment’ to concentration camps for youth and youth ‘protection camps’ where they were mistreated and subjected to experiments that showed utter contempt for humanity. Further, this approach to care, heavily shaped by national-socialist ideas as it was, brought about an ideology of education and society that became the standard practice of social work. This approach defined a group of people as ‘aliens to the community’ (a euphemism for asocial), an abstract definition that had nevertheless horrific consequences for the young people concerned as they were made ineligible for all official measures of social support. As a result, something became possible that had so far perhaps not even been thinkable: social work became implicated in all the stages of this historical perversion – in one way or another: sometimes offering support, but more often interested only in the control of its addressees, the

interference in their affairs and their exclusion from social participation. All this took place in accordance with laws that were racist and devaluated the individual, which had disastrous consequences for the children and youths involved and their families. As has become obvious, there are reasons enough to reflect on the role of social work during the National Socialist period of German history. But despite a few trailblazing studies, very little is known even today about this matter.

III.

To keep thinking about these matters does not mean to search desperately for comparisons. No, it means to submit to close scrutiny those current incidents in which ‘others’ are variously excluded and subjected to public stigma and devaluation because they are ‘foreigners’, show behaviours that are disapproved of, and carry out actions that are despised (because not understood).

What is at stake is constant vigilance against these current, everyday acts of exclusion, not least in our own field of social work, and vigorous opposition against them. This prejudice-based exclusion at present concerns fellow citizens from a great number of European and non-European countries, such as asylum seekers, fugitives and, especially relevant for child and youth welfare services, unaccompanied youth and migrants. The inhumanity of the historical events, a constant challenge to all of us, and their end 70 years ago imposes on us a duty to reflect critically on current events and to weave our insights into the web of our own principles of action. The question to ask after 70 years is even now not just what happened then but most certainly also what is happening now. Any sort of comparison must of course be ruled out of the question right from the start. The demand that faces us in social work is constant critical reflection on present events to make ourselves aware and conscious of our professional thoughts and actions.

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