

„...so that my story takes a happy ending”

Story Telling in “Willkommensklassen”¹ in Schools in Berlin

Hannah Arendt writes in her essay “We Refugees” in 1943 about the destiny of Jewish refugees and others:

Wir haben unser Zuhause verloren, das heißt die Vertrautheit des Alltags. Wir haben unseren Beruf verloren, das heißt die Zuversicht, in dieser Welt zu etwas gut zu sein. Wir haben unsere Sprache verloren, das heißt die Natürlichkeit der Reaktionen, Einfachheit der Gesten, den ungekünstelten Gefühlsausdruck [...] das heißt, unser Privatleben ist zerrüttet.

Can you find a more precise, more emphatic way to outline the situation of the refugees that are currently coming to our country than with those modest words? The immigrant, as Hannah Arendt writes furthermore, is *the stranger*, that has to try and orient oneself in the civilisation and culture of a completely foreign group, a group, that should *accept him or tolerate him at a very least* (Arendt, S. 34).

Initially, the individual focuses - besides the protection of existential needs – on learning the language of the “destination country”, which happens to be of more complexity than getting to understand words and grammar.

Jedes Worte und jeder Satz ist, [...], von ‚Sinnhorizonten‘ umgeben, die sie [...] mit einem Hof emotionaler Werte und irrationaler Implikationen umgeben, [...] die sie mit einem Hof emotionaler Werte und Implikationen, die selbst wiederum unaussprechlich bleiben, umgeben. Die Sinnhorizonte sind der Stoff, aus dem die Poesie gemacht ist; man kann sie in Musik setzen, aber man kan sie nicht übersetzen. (Schütz, S., 53).

Those meanings are determined by cultural and traditional codings having to get decrypted, which implicitly happens through perception and interpretation of nonverbal signals – often times a trigger of irritations, as well as misconceptions.

Hence those thoughts, the members of the association “Erzählkunst e.V.” in Berlin reinforced their engagement in different areas of charity work for refugees. Amongst other things they offered the “Storytelling Arena” – a forum in which young Syrians, connected with story tellers of the association, told traditional and autobiographical stories in Arabic, German, and

¹ classes provided by certain schools for the children of refugees who come without any German to Germany

English, accompanied by music, songs, and dances. Likewise, other story tellers invited families to story telling events, just as they cooked and told stories together with women who fled from their home countries. In conjunction with those and other events, the first care was for children and teenagers. Due to the long-time experience of story telling in schools of inner city districts, they were aware that with the mentioned art, an access to the German language could be created, which, as described earlier, opens culturally embossed “Sinnhorizonte”, conveys verbal and gestural codings and lets language become a bridge to emotion and imagination. The story tellers campaigned for six “Willkommensklassen” in two schools in Berlin from January to July 2016.

However, despite their social competence with students and toddlers, the encounter appeared to be an extreme challenge at first. The students were mostly only endued with rudimentary to no knowledge of the German language at all. They originate from foreign cultures, have to deal with the experience of escape and war and a majority is living under the depressing conditions of refugee camps.

How does one tell those children and teenagers a fairy tale? In what scope do you embed the story? How do you get those children to listen, how do you reach their fantasy, but especially their emotional sympathy? How do you motivate them to tell stories themselves, even in broken German?

What happened in the schools from January to July is truly impressing: The six- to nine year olds quickly developed a ritualised schedule concerning the story telling units: Week after week it was started with the same song, which was easy for children to remember, and that they sung with huge excitement. Signs of exhaustion were not visible. Next, every child presented a picture that they had drawn individually in class after last week’s story. The applause by the classmates made the faces glow of pride. Along with the story teller, the children left reality with a rhyming language game and made their way to the land of fairy tales. The porch only first opened, after they had solved three riddles. While in the beginning those riddles were provided by the storytellers, after a short while the children exceled each other with, as it seemed, unsolvable tasks.

The main part consisted of the actual storytelling. Firstly, the storytellers relied on trans lingual signals going along with talking, to help understand the language beyond lexis,

especially the intensity of the attention, which substantially distinguishes the live storytelling from listening to audio-visual media and that is of elementary significance for the children.

Sprache und Sprechen – so Marion Glück-Levi – entwickelt sich in dialogischen Situationen, in denen das genaue Hinhören, Nachahmen und achtsame Aufeinander-Reagieren unerlässlich sind. Kinder eignen sich Sprache vor allem in Beziehungen an, also dann, wenn sie Menschen um sich haben, die achtsam auf sie hören und die ihnen viele Gelegenheiten zum Hören geben (Glück-Levi, 489).

Furthermore, the storytellers increasingly used graphical material – mostly images in Kamishibai, which illustrated the story line, just as requisites, natural materials, and other illustrative objects. Thus, despite verbal gaps, the children got to understand the story initially only roughly, and little by little even in detail. Especially in the pictures they drew afterwards, a huge increase in comprehension was visible.

Even with this description, it is hard to create an accurate impression of the excitement with which the children entered the “Story telling room” (an additional classroom provided by the school) week by week, how joyful they listened to the chanted rhymes, how statically and breathlessly they followed the fairy tales. Occasionally bursting into exuberant laughter or – during the last weeks – even warning the hero of the story of upcoming danger or imprudent actions by verbal remarks. The intensity of their concentration and the eruptive joy that seemed to fulfil the entire body of the children and made their faces light up in beauty – those are the moments that hold their very own magic.

One of the educators, that, (along with the teachers), accompanied the hours of story telling, claimed she had never seen the children as lively as during the fairy tales. Lively – yes, sometimes they were delirious of bliss, though at the same time completely at peace with themselves. Lively – in all their childlike impartiality and integrity.

On the other hand, the children experience an irreplaceable form of self-acknowledgement by becoming part of the story telling, despite their lack of German words and phrases. They convey the gestures of the storytellers into pictures in their head and fill the gaps of comprehension with material of their own associative memory – a profound mental task that strengthens and expands imaginative and intellectual competences. During the telling, they experience language differently than in educational contexts or their daily life. Hence, even children that possess little to no knowledge of the German language follow the “signals” of

the storyteller with unhindered concentration. Language – just as the gestures and mimic of the storyteller – transforms into pictorial associations, triggering emotions or foreshadows. The plain understanding of lexis becomes witnessing happenings, developing affective sympathy, becomes interpretation and an enjoyment of oneself.

This gain of linguistic competences, that has been proved by various story telling projects, results from, as H. G. Gadamer explains in a different context,

dem allmähliche(n) Sich-Einspielen des Verständigungsgeschehens in die Konventionen des Wortgebrauchs, die eine Sprachgemeinschaft konstruieren – und diese selbst besteht nicht in dem starren Regelsystem der Schulmeister, sondern im biegsamen Übereinkommen der miteinander Sprechenden (Gadamer, S. 11).

After all, the project in the “Hildebrandt” school can be carried on next school year. This time, an additional involvement of the parents is planned. We are hoping this will result in the parents telling stories from their home countries, while the children operate as interpreters.

However, working with 14 – 18 year olds demanded different competences from the storytellers. This time they managed to find a generative balance between their experiences with both theatre pedagogy and storytelling. Thus, Christine Lander writes in her final report:

“Along with other things, the students conducted partner interviews, drafted stories in self-drawn pictures and improvised on stage. Every one of them had outlined their body shape on a piece of paper that he or she filled with symbols of his or her biographical story. By the aid of those pictures, the message that everyone is filled with stories was successfully conveyed. Even the teenagers that initially claimed they had nothing to tell, soon excitingly started to search for stories. Eventually, every student had settled on a story they found worthy to keep on working on. [...] During the second phase of the project, the stories were written down and, encouraged by teachers and group leaders, revised in content and language. First, the teenagers started practicing to tell their stories freely in small groups, soon bigger ones and in the end in front of a camera and the entire class. Furthermore, anyone who had the desire could even present their story to a bigger audience of three other classes. As medial results of the project, the story videos of the students, a video documentary and pictures can be named.”

After firstly hesitating, the students started to remember more and more stories from their home countries: Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo, and so on. The majority

consisted of “wisdom stories” with often times a funny or philosophical punch line. Here we have two examples:

A little turtle walks into the forest and sees how fast the rabbits can run. Oh, it thinks, I want to be just as fast as them! It asks the animals what it could do to become as fast as them. However, the rabbits tell it that the house it is carrying on it's back will be too heavy for. It could never win a running competition with it. Deeply saddened, the turtle walks home and tell its mother about its sorrows: “I won't ever be able to run fast because my house is too heavy!” The mother answers: “The house will protect you from the sun and danger!” “Yes, but it is too heavy!” replies the little turtle. “Yes, that is life – it is too heavy” says the mother.

Guha owns nothing except for a sheep which he loves more than anything else in the world. Wherever he goes, the sheep will accompany him. One day, his friends want to slaughter and eat it, though Guha does not want to give it to them. His friends convince him by claiming the world would be ending the next day and he would not need the sheep anymore. Thus, Guha gives them the sheep and they slaughter and eat it. The next morning, Guha takes all his friend's clothes and burns them. As they wake up and ask him why he did that, he answers: “You said the world was ending today. You won't need your clothes anymore!”

It seems likely that the students, and refugees in general, hold way more of those treasures or are willing to quickly look them up on their phone. Without being aware of it, they come to our country with immaterial treasures. Those treasures let the buzzword “diversity” become a sensual experience and convey a foreshadow of the expansion of our cultural horizons that we can expect from those certain encounters.

Additionally, the project showed that the phrase “Storytelling creates community”, is not a meaningless sentence. It was truly touching to witness the teenagers supporting each other throughout the process of telling, helping one another when they were lacking German words, or how they looked up phrases and equivalents from their mother tongue on their phones. With an invisible tie, the students were bonded together by storytelling, which made feelings foreignness and isolation vanish unexpectedly fast.

Creating their safe space in a community which was embossed by support, attention and affection, the students became storytellers themselves, which made them experience an irreplaceable form of self-confirmation.

One of the most impressive experiences regarding the works with the teenagers was their sudden openness with which they started telling details about their escape once in while, even without demand. You could barely hear breathing in the silence that arose afterwards. What an evidence of trust towards the storytellers. What a sign that storytelling starts to clear the tight netting of memory. Almost physically perceptible was the feeling of community in those moments. Looking in the teenager's faces, you could tell that they were friends with both themselves and the others. It was not about having to prove oneself or recognition, but about being understood, by oneself and by others. It was about being friends – with oneself and the others.

The prosecution of the project with the teenagers – due to funding – is still uncertain. In case we can keep working on it, our goal is to motivate the students to tell stories in the “Willkommensklassen” of the 6-9 year olds by the end of the year.

If we manage to continue the project, in the mutual exchange, the dialogue, the mutual communication about disconnections and relations something new, something unexpected can develop (Wagner, S. 245).

By this, the term “interculturality” gains a sensual resonating cavity that is about respect, attention and curiosity towards the stranger – the stranger on both sides!

Hence, it is not about one-sided adaptation (of the refugees) to the deeply rooted lifestyle of a norm group, neither about an adjustment of norms, but about mutual commitment that provides the willingness to change on both sides. Even considering all the difficulties connected to such transformational processes, we should not forget that our own culture developed its profile only by being in constant exchange with other cultures: The minnesongs, Goethe's “West-Eastern Divan”, Grimm's collection of fairy tales, Brecht's epic theatre – all of them are not imaginable without the influence of other cultures.

Kulturen entstehen immer aus der wechselseitigen Durchdringung der verschiedenen Einflüsse. [...] Kultur bedeutet schon immer ‚zwischen den Kulturen‘ (Alexander Düttmann), ist nie ‚rein‘, und homogen, sondern hybrid, ein Bastard. (Wagner, 249).

My point is: By working with refugees we, ourselves, will change as well. How I wish the media would not constantly focus on the cost of the refugee policy or the fear of terror, but rather take the infinite multiplicity of examples, in which participation is being lived, not only claimed and in which the exchange with other cultures is an impregnating substance and source of inspiration that helps experience energetic potential.

Personally, I find those projects, which I accompanied voluntarily, to be some of the most important and touching experiences of my entire life.

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