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Hermann Gmeiner (1919–1986) – the Greatest Foster Father for More than 2000 SOS Children’s Village Projects and Facilities

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*Love children especially, for they are
without sin, like angels. They live to give us
joy, to purify our hearts. Woe unto him who hurts a child.*

F. Dostojewski

1. Foreword

Despite the passage of the United Nations` Convention on the Rights of the Child, countless children continue to be the victims of violence, abuse and many military conflicts. In the few minutes it takes you to read this text, hundreds of children will lose their parents or be separated from them. Children will be beaten, injured, abused, or become the victims of war. Despite daily reports on the multifaceted traumas experienced by children appear in the media, only the tip of the iceberg is visible (Ullmann, Hilweg, 1999: XV). Traumatic events can massively and permanently destabilize the self- concept of children, the way they experience the world and the way they behave (Ullmann, Hilweg, 1999).

The 1996 UNICEF Report under the title “The State of the World’s Children” stated that in 1994 there were 1.881 billion children under the age of 16 worldwide. Of these, approximately 169 million lived in the Western, industrialized societies and nations, around 105 million lived in the former Eastern Block countries, and over 1.607 billion children lived in the Third World. Developing nations, where over 85% of the world’s children live, have at their disposal only almost 15% of the world’s income, while in the developed countries, where only 9% of the children live, over 80% of the global income is squandered. Thus, while the majority of children in the richer countries live in affluence, most of the children in the impoverished nations suffer from destitution, hunger, war, and a lack of health care (Wintersberger, 1999: 3).

All divergencies in living conditions between industrialized and developing nations and countries are even more extreme for children than for adults. For example, the child mortality rates in 1994 ranged from 5 per one thousand in Sweden to almost 320 per thousand in Niger. And the life expectancy of a child born in Sierra Leone is 39, while that of a child born in Japan is 79 (Wintersberger, 1999).

In his book "The SOS Children's Villages" Hermann Gmeiner wrote: "The disastrous effects of the Second World War and the chaos which followed the end of hostilities on many of our children were all too apparent. Countless children and young people of all ages were victims of the tragedy and bore the marks not only of material suffering but also of an unparalleled disintegration of the whole moral and spiritual fabric. These children were suddenly confronted by tasks far beyond their years; insurmountable barriers were placed in the way of their development" (Gmeiner, 1988: 6).

Very many children grew up amid the ruins of the bombed cities or shared the mass quarters provided for the millions of refugees. Desperation, confusion and hopelessness prevailed among their elders. They grew up often in want, exposed to moral weakness, indifference, even cruelty. They were ignorant of the stable principles of law and order, nor had they vital sense of good and bad, right and wrong, which is normally handed down from generation to the next one. The existing charitable organizations were unable to cope with the thousands of children in needs (Gmeiner, 1988).

2. The SOS Idea and its fathers

"To be happy is to be always available to the others" – the words which were said by Hermann Gmeiner determine his position in the history of education. The scope of his activities, his iron will and perseverance in striving to realize his objectives are a powerful testimony to his outstanding achievements, the significance of which we are trying to evaluate many years after the first house of the SOS Children's Village was opened in Imst, Austria in the 1949. This House Frieden step by step had been transformed itself into the European Federation of SOS Children's Villages, the European Association of SOS Children's Villages, which since 1964 has been successfully operating as the SOS Kinderdorf International. Currently there are more than 380 Children's Villages worldwide supported by more than six million people of goodwill (Łobocki, 1999: 7).

If Hermann Gmeiner were still alive, he would have certainly been a man for the others and might even be happy. The measure of his achievements are today hundreds of SOS Villages scattered all over the world, and many thousands of children and youth to whom his idea provided the opportunity for proper development and entry into adult society in many countries. It was about Gmeiner and the children that Helmut Kutin wrote many years later, saying that Hermann

Gmeiner “looked into sad, dark corners where lonely children wasted away. He kept looking for such children, whom he wished to re-introduce into the society of their country and nation, their culture and religion. He wanted to give them a new home resembling their family, and create the foundation of decent existence” (Festschrift, *Kinderleben*, 1989: 88).

It is not easy to be a good educator, it is even more difficult to win people’s recognition and respect, lasting enough to remain – when one’s life on earth is over – in the memories of the descendants. And H. Gmeiner lived to see his thesis come true: “it is easy to good when many help”. It is to the assistance of all those who trusted him that about forty thousand abandoned children got their new home and care in more than 130 countries worldwide (Kucha, 2004: 117–118).

The idea of caring for orphaned and abandoned children in family home is no means new, but the practical application on a wide scale has only been attained after the Second World War. Additionally we can say that no one person can claim sole authorship of this idea, which has blossomed differently in many countries. Though great pioneers such as Johann H. Pestalozzi, Dr. Barnardo, Father Flanagan and Don Bosco have all played their own part in moulding actual SOS thinking, so it means that these educators were the important source for much of the original SOS Children’s Village ideas (Gmeiner, 1976: 8).

As early as the end of the XVIIth century August Hermann Francke from Halle (Germany) sought to place orphan children with trustworthy artisan families. His efforts failed, for he could not find enough suitable families. He was forced, against his convictions, to place these children in orphanages which, though they provided their charges with food, schooling and training, could not give, what we know well today, must be substituted – the vital function of the good family (Gmeiner, 1953: 12).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi took orphans into his own family home and educated neglected children on the Neuhof, his farm in Switzerland. Some times later he founded an orphanage for vagrant children in Stanz. As a creator of the idea Pestalozzi met with little sympathy because he was not a brilliant organizer. But his efforts to help poor and orphan children sprang from the idea that the family is the only place where education in the fullest sense is really possible. Thus Pestalozzi saw child welfare work no longer in terms of individual rescue work but rather in a wider and social sense. His idea of social education was rooted in the principle of the family, the intimate domestic community in which man feels loved and secure (Gmeiner, 1976: 11).

Johann Heinrich Wichern was the first to take in vagabond boys in his “Rauhes Haus” in Hamburg, Germany. This experiment was followed by further rescue houses and rescue villages. The number of twelve to fourteen boys of all ages were collected into family groups and looked after by a “brother”. Each “family” lived

in its own little house which was often built by the boys themselves. Wichern opposed against crowding children into large institutions or orphanages. In his rescue villages all “families” lived together in harmony (Gmeiner, 1976: 12).

Eva von Tiele – Winkler expanded Wichern’s idea of the rescue village. Ten to fifteen of both sexes, ranging from infants to apprentices, were grouped in what were called “Kinderheimaten”, under the care of the nursing sister- mother (Gmeiner, 1976: 12).

The first SOS Children’s Village in Imst, Austria, was not in a position to be a large reception centre. It had to start in a small way, within the fund of 600 Austrian Shillings. This sum of money nevertheless sufficed to interest a small group of people in the SOS idea and to demonstrate a new and revolutionary way of solving the problems of caring for destitute children. But this first SOS Village was a surprising success. It soon grew far beyond the size originally planned. The SOS Hermann Gmeiner Idea spread very fast throughout the world. (Gmeiner, 1976: 14) Today SOS- Kinderdorf International is a private, non-political, non-denominational social welfare organization. It still is the umbrella organization with which all national SOS Children’s Village associations are affiliated. Today this organization offers abandoned, orphaned and destitute children – regardless of race, nationality or religion – a family, a new and permanent home, and a solid foundation of an independent life (Pichler, 1999: 15).

The SOS Village brings the orphan child back to the natural order of the family. The “social womb” from which the child was torn by the loss or failure of the parents must first be replaced, for this vital and normal development. Even more damages will be done if the institution to which the orphan child is entrusted does not make up for his family. Admittedly the structure of the family has changed radically in our day, but its all functions, very important for all children, should be preserved, because only by growing up in the family can a child develop own experience, which will be needed later in his or her adult life. Thus, all modern institutions or organizations for the care of destitute children must adopt the family principles in their method of education of all future generations (Gmeiner, 1976: 14–15).

Today, more than 220,000 children and adolescents live in or are being cared for at almost 400 SOS Children’s Villages and more than 1100 SOS different projects like kindergartens, schools, youth facilities, vocational training institutions and production centres, social centres, etc. in more than 130 countries all over the world (Pichler, 1999: 15).

The basic focus of SOS Children’s Village work is the long- term care of children and youth for whom no one can or wants to care for, until the young people become self- responsible and independent. Within that families there are average of six to eight children of both genders and different ages, who live together at the same home under care of their SOS Mother (Pichler, 1999: 15).

3. The Four SOS Children's Village Principles

SOS programme of work in education can best be defined by the four principles on which it is builded. It will be seen that the first task of the SOS Village is to integrate needy children as full members of the human society. So these four basic principles of the SOS Village are till today:

1. The SOS Mother
2. The brothers and sisters
3. The Home
4. The village (Gmeiner, 1988: 25).

Hermann Gmeiner as founder of the Societas Socialis said that all over the world there are women without family duties, unmarried or widows, for many of whom their job is not enough. They wish they had children, they long to be able to give them own care they need. And all over the world there are the children without parents they need to have a mother. Then it is the task of the SOS Children's Village to bring these women and children together.

The SOS Mother must be really ready to serve children and she need to have a talent for educational work, especially for children who are coming to SOS Villages and they are special psychological cases. They have inferiority complexes, they suffer from anxiety neuroses or simply crave for affection. The SOS Mother assumes the role of the biological parents when they are no longer able to provide adequate care for their child or children. This mother receiving a salary, getting a household budget connected with the number of children under her care. She is supported by a family assistant in fulfilling her tasks. And all over the world, the women who decided to become SOS Mothers have to pass strong selection and educational training. On this loving mother, first and foremost, depends the whole work of education. But this loving mother should have a talent of educator and experience of the problem involved. But love it should come first, because if the child has no love, all well intentioned educational measures will not give positive results (Pichler, 1999: 25–29).

The second principle of the SOS are brothers and sisters up to the ten and older. Biological siblings are not separated, but rather live within the same SOS family. Boys and girls of different ages grow up together as brothers and sisters (Pichler, 1999: 16).

The third principle of SOS is that every family has a house of its own. This home provides the security and safety that the child needs, as well as a sense of belonging. The community within a child's own home establishes the framework for developing dependable, trustworthy new relationships. This house must be a real family home, not just a some place in which the child can sleep and eat. Real centre of the each SOS House is the living room, where the life of the family is

concentrated. Here all children are working, reading, writing and listening the music, as well as celebrating special occasions. For the SOS child this home is a refuge to which it can always return from the world around him (Pichler, 1999: 16).

The fourth principle is a village. According to the actual regulations 14 to 20 SOS Families live in one SOS Children's Village. The village itself is made up of this number of family houses, a community house and a kindergarten. More building are rarely necessary. Every child feels secure living with own family in the own home. The village opens the doors to the world outside but at the same time ensures control. It has its own function in education and care as the wider community beyond the family, and provides the child with opportunities of establishing further contacts with other people. It is the bridge to the outside world. But at the same time it assumes for the child the role of an institution. This involves a certain danger of isolation which must be deliberately counterbalanced. The village community provides a natural and valuable extension of the SOS family unit. The broader community, also responsible for rising the child, provides her or him with the opportunities to forge the broader contacts vital to the child development. Attending public schools and having contact with a greater community outside of the village fosters the children's integration into their respective environments.

Every SOS village has a director (male or female), who is supported in the work by an assistant, as well as by the experts in pedagogical knowledge and psychology (Pichler, 1999: 16).

4. Ancillary SOS Facilities and Projects

As a rule, there are SOS Kindergartens associated with SOS Children's Villages. Building on the pedagogical theories of Friedrich W. Froebel and Maria Montessori these facilities are designed for stimulation of the children's interests and aptitudes in social, intellectual and manual skills at as early an age as possible, and to prepare them for further school education. These institutions are attended at the same time by SOS children and the children from neighborhood. Children from socially disadvantaged families are given particular consideration for enrollment to these facilities.

SOS Youth Facilities represent a logical addition to existing other institutions. If vocational training or special schooling necessitate a move to the different town, young people can move to an SOS Youth Facility. This is the first step toward achieving self-sufficiency. There are SOS Youth Houses, Youth Communities and Youth Villages available for SOS Youth. The general goal of these facilities is to serve the needs of the youngsters on their path toward a life of self-sufficiency and to help them make and implement realistic plans for their future. Thanks to this young people are able to further develop their sense of responsibility and

decision – making skills. They are also required to take on additional household responsibilities. The youngsters are also offered support in their contacts with biological relatives and friends, as well as those with various public institutions and administrative local authorities.

If it is possible, children living in SOS Villages should attend neighborhood schools. It means that SOS Hermann Gmeiner Schools are established whenever the local infrastructure surrounding does not provide adequate educational institutions, and therefore does not offer academic opportunities to the children. These SOS Hermann Gmeiner Schools are open for children from the greater local community. All children from socially disadvantaged families are given priority for enrollment. These SOS schools are designed for serving as model educational facilities with a maximum class size of 30 to 40 pupils, qualified and committed teachers, an adequate supply of good-quality educational materials, as well as structurally sound school buildings.

SOS Vocational Training and Production Centres offer SOS youth, as well as the young people from the surrounding community, the opportunity to gain well founded, qualified vocational training in marketable skills, adapted to fit their specific needs. For example, socially disadvantaged young people are given preference for enrollment. These centres are designed for meeting local marketplace needs. And school certificates and diplomas granted by SOS facility are recognized by the state authorities.

Mostly in non – European countries, where most people do not have access to basic medical services, it is the policy of SOS Children's Villages to establish its own medical facilities, customized to meet local needs. So Hermann Gmeiner Medical Centres aim at improving the standard of public health, administering prophylactic medical care through information campaigns and vaccination programs, helping reduce infant mortality, and providing first aid at accidents.

SOS can offer as well special social services according many different local needs. The Association is an organizer of the SOS Hermann Gmeiner Social Centres at any particular location depend on the local needs and connect3ed with existing infrastructure. These institutions are very diverse in their concepts and educational design. First and foremost, the main goal is to help local families living near SOS facilities. These centres are open for the people faced with particularly difficult living conditions, such as single mothers or fathers, women and families living below the poverty standards, as well as women with children from disaster areas and war zones. Other target groups include at- risk children and youth, those from broken homes, orphanages, and other institutions, as well as the street children (Pichler, 1999: 17–19).

SOS Kinderdorf is trying to help many children and youth by own SOS Emergency Relief Programs. This is regular help given by this association especially

in the following countries like Mozambique, Somalia, India, Bosnia, Mexico, Rwanda and Sri Lanka (Pichler, 1999: 17–20).

SOS Association is always assisting children and youth providing personal and professional long term assistance. Children who come to SOS Children's Village have no one capable of or willing to take care of them, because by the death of one or both parents, serious illness, inability to raise children, disinterest on the part of the parents, divorce or poverty. These children are refugees, homeless youngsters, children who have been abandoned or cast out as "children of sin", children who are transferred from one foster care institution to another, and children who have suffered numerous traumatic experiences before to their entry into the SOS Mothers and other employees. What kind of assistance does The SOS Village provide for them?

First the dependable relationship to their SOS Mother and the safety and security provided by the SOS family help traumatized children to regain trust and hope. Gradually, these children develop a positive and realistic sense of self, which is the foundation for a child's development into a self – reliant and socialized personality. At this time the SOS Village is serving as a "therapeutic environment".

But if children have been many times traumatized, it may also be necessary to offer additional special education and therapeutic support, sometimes by external specialists and consultants. This situation had been comment by Hermann Gmeiner by his words: Don't just talk, do something! (Pichler, 1999: 20–21).

5. Woman as the SOS best guide and educator

The correct examination of Hermann Gmeiner's work as an organizer and his pedagogical views permits us to assume that many events from his childhood may have a big impact the directions of his educational considerations as the proponent of the idea of the Children's Village. For example, the fact that he lost his mother when he was barely five years old influenced his psyche and the way he idealized his mother, who always remained for him as a great woman and wonderful mother. He also wrote that he and his brothers and sisters were made aware of her strength through her ability to give and give up that which she believed unnecessary. Most of her perseverance in pursuing an objective and her endurance remained in the Gmeiner himself. And she was all the world for him and the beginning of his existence. This image of the mother seen through eyes of a five-year-old child, together with her characteristic features and motives for action, exerted an immense influence on the construction and development of the SOS idea.

The second woman who influenced the direction of development of little Hermann was his older sister Elsa. After their mother's death, as the oldest of

the nine, she had to take over the maternal duties and functions. It is not very difficult to see a certain analogy between the situation in the Hermann Gmeiner home after the death of their mother and the later concepts of education adopted by him. Additionally, many years later he wrote in his memoirs that the SOS Children's Villages owed their establishment to his mother (Gmeiner, 1981: 5, 10–11).

The existing analyzes of Hermann Gmeiner's pedagogical achievement lead to conclusion about a huge influence of women upon the development of his educational ideas and creed. It was a big contrast connected with the role of his father, who was "a reticent man, who worked very hard in the field. He struggled arduously with the nature, snow, rain, and stones. Several times all his work went to waste, but he relentlessly started again" (Kucha, 2004: 121). The father showed himself therefore in the son's memory as a less colourful character, whose dominant feature was perseverance, while hard work on the farm did not allow him to take care of the children's upbringing. The figure of his father also served as one of the dominants of the educational and care system for orphaned children, as closest as possible of the family in which he himself grew up. That image also determined Gmeiner's voluntary choice of service to destitute children. And finally very many elements in activities of the Children's Village show that Hermann Gmeiner largely leant on the memories of his own family (Kucha, 2004: 121).

The influence of a mother and close bond between her and her child are decisive both for his education and character formation. The mother is virtually irreplaceable in childhood. The functions of the father can relatively easily be assumed by persons outside the family. In the SOS Village the father's functions are performed by the village director, village handyman, the sports instructor, youth leaders and school masters further represent the male elements in the children's education and care (Gmeiner, 1988: 54).

6. School years and early adult life of Hermann Gmeiner

The school years of Hermann Gmeiner were the time when his interests developed and he was coming of age to enter adult life. His grammar school teachers suggested that he was a diligent and gifted student who already dreamed about attending the university studies.

However, when he was a seventeen young boy, he started attending the grammar school at Feldkirchen because he was granted by stipend. For the grammar school student, Gmeiner, the school years were the time of accelerated coming of age intellectually, while youthful idealism failed to change into cynicism or relativism. His emerging interest in the existential and moral problems survived in the ideals and practical activities of young Hermann Gmeiner already as a grown up man. Also the time of the Second World War and military service as a soldier

of the Nazi army were a successive stage of his spiritual development (Reinprecht, 1984: 20).

7. Hermann Gmeiner service for children and youth

After he returned home, finished grammar school and received certificate of general education. Then he decided to attend medical studies. At the same time in 1946 he talked to the vicar of the St. Mary Parish that they set up and work with the group of the homeless youth. The first, very sporadic meetings with the young people gradually turned into long pedagogical and teaching activities. All difficulties he encountered and highly diversified all educational problems he had to cope with prompted young Hermann to deepen own pedagogical knowledge and first of all to become acquainted with the system of caring for orphaned children (Reinprecht, 1984: 51).

The process of growing ripe for subsequent great decision began. Hermann Gmeiner had earlier come to the conclusion that overriding educational goal of the most institutions providing full care was to teach their charges the principle of obedience and order. Upbringing therefore – he believed – denoted only the provision of a good citizen to the society, a citizen who would observe the law, be obedient and respect the authorities (Kucha, 2004: 122). This system of the full care – in his view – was in urgent need of reforms, because it was necessary to take care of the spiritual life of these children and youth and give them more freedom. Hansheinz Reinprecht wrote that he said: “All pedagogical knowledge, the previous and latest scholarly achievements do not support the fact that a properly developed child, both physically and mentally, should be placed in a closed institution simply because he or she has no parents” (Reinprecht, 1984: 20).

That was the reason that Hermann Gmeiner started to think about absolutely new, better organization system of care for orphaned children and youth. He also revised the whole previously system of values, plans and expectations. As a result of it the new idea of care was born, and he started to build a new society with doctors, nurses and social workers (Kucha, 2004: 123).

The founding meeting took place on 25th April 1949 and already on 13th of June the society under the official name Societas Socialis was registered. Organizers planned to build one house for homeless children and adoption centre only. But next plans included the establishment of the Children’s Village and the House for Single Mothers. I have to add that within barely a few months the Society managed to prepare the draft of the construction and operation of an SOS Children’s Village. In December 1949 Hermann Gmeiner, already a fourth-year medical student, had stopped his studies and he entirely committed himself to the process of realizing his fantastic dream (Reinprecht, 1984: 106).

8. Development and internationalization of the SOS Children's Villages

On 24th November 1950 the board of SOS Children's Villages decided to extend its activities across all of Austria by establishing branch offices in the form of unincorporated associations. The main reason for this decision was that Austria had been still occupied by the Allies military troops and that it was considered expedient to establish an organization in each of the four occupied zones (Schreiber, Vyslozil, 2003: 164).

The propagation of the Children's Villages in Europe began in France, West Germany and Italy, where the SOS holiday camp on Lake Caldonazzo broke the ground for the first children's village in South Tyrol. While the South Tyrol turned out to be the first setback in the association's records, the French venture was successful even if not entirely without discord. In the summer of 1953, a French delegation paid a visit to Imst. As a result of it two French villages were built in Connelles and Busigny (Schreiber, Vyslozil, 2003: 177).

Expansion into Germany turned out to be of much greater significance for the future of the SOS Children's Village movement. Among the first friend were two Germans: Wilfried Peters (a friend of Hermann Gmeiner from the time of war and military service in Wehrmacht) and Juergen Froelich from Hamburg, who had visited Imst and had spent some time some time in an Austrian hospital during the war. Hermann Gmeiner asked him for preparing the establishment of an association. Very fast 600 hundred of members signed up the act of membership. Then the German association had been established in Munich on the 8th February 1955. In a very few years 16 of the new SOS Children's Villages were established in the West Germany (Schreiber, Vyslozil, 2003: 187).

In October 1959 Hermann Gmeiner found that the establishment of an European – wide association could not be put off any longer. It had become indispensable to unite the SOS Children's Villages in the individual countries under one umbrella organization. Although the headquarter remained in Vienna, the constituent assembly was to take place in the European town of Strasbourg. On November 1960 all representatives of the SOS Children's Village associations from Austria, West Germany, France and Italy founded The European Association of SOS Children's Villages. All SOS Children's Villages associations in the various countries joined the European umbrella organization as independent legal and commercial entities (Schreiber, Vyslozil 2003: 188). But process of growing SOS is very fast, because in 1964 this is SOS – Kinderdorf International (Łobocki, 2011: 25).

9. SOS Kinderdorf International today

SOS Children's Villages is active in the 133 countries and territories. The variety of this international work is brought together by the umbrella organization SOS

Children's Villages International, which unites all of the autonomous national associations. More than 2100 facilities in these 133 countries and territories are working now for systematically growing number of children and youth. The real father of this responsible educational work is Hermann Gmeiner from Austria. Almost 500 hundred of villages, 400 of youth home facilities, over than 231 kinderdgartens, almost 200 Hermann Gmeiner schools, more than 60 vocational training facilities, 575 social centres and 65 medical centres and so on are giving us the international picture of the Hermann Gmeiner idea condition today (Łobocki, 2011: 121). I do hope that it will be never ending story for many homeless children and youth.

Hermann Gmeiner (1919–1986) – wielki twórca ponad 2000 projektów w Wioskach Dziecięcych SOS na świecie

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera przegląd najważniejszych dokonań Hermanna Gmeinera na polu opieki zastępczej sprawowanej nad dziećmi pozbawionymi własnej biologicznej rodziny, obrazuje wielkość i rangę międzynarodową twórcy SOS Kinderdorf International w najważniejszych rejonach świata.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, opieka zastępcza, matka SOS, wioski dziecięce.

Summary

Article shows the great activities of Hermann Greiner (1919–1986) as the greatest foster father of SOS Kinderdorf International as the biggest international association in the field of foster family care. Since 1949, SOS Children's Villages has offered abandoned, orphaned children and adolescents worldwide a family, a permanent home and a solid foundation upon which to build a self-reliant future.

Keywords: SOS, Societas Socialis, SOS Children's Villages, foster father, mother SOS.

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