

Seminar on Family Constellation
TZ Izvor
Kruh Svetog Ante
BiH
Plehan, Rep. Srpska
29 June - 01 July 2011

St. Antonius bread

The seminar on Family Constellation took place from 29 June to 1 July 2011 at the Therapeutic Centre (TC) Izvor.

The project of TC Izvor functions under the roof of the humanitarian charitable organization "St. Antonius bread" and belongs to the Franciscan province Bosna Srebrena; its main seat is Sarajevo. These Franciscans are also present in Germany, among other countries. They have been active in the Balkans region since 13th century, primarily looking after the poor and the needy. This is the only institution that has been continuously active in Bosnia and Herzegovina for more than 700 years.

TC Izvor

The Therapeutic Centre Izvor (Quelle, Source) is located at Plehan, Re.Srpska, BiH.

The facility is placed atop a beautiful green mountain, rising from a plain, so that the outlook stretches far into the distance. This mountaintop hosted a renowned monastery until 1992. At the beginning of the war, the site was destroyed completely; today, a group of monks lives again in a smaller building that has been reconstructed.

From the end of 19th century, there was also a small sanatorium, which was later used as school.

The premises of the therapeutic community are fairly large (ca. 1 hectare). They comprise the courtyard, greenhouses, the racks for a great number of beehives, the storehouse and meadows. The entire facility looks tidy and orderly. The buildings are modern and rather new. The installations are well-functioning and as new.

An old school has been refurbished to house the community.

In the main building, there are the rooms for the therapy participants, staff offices, the dining hall and the kitchen.

The annex building hosts a workshop on the ground floor (souvenir production) and a room for honey production; the laundry, a storeroom for tools and a tee kitchen, as well as a room for the heating system.

On the upper floor, there is a large therapy room and a room for worship (sitting in silence, meditation) as well as a video library with computers for the clients.

The therapy clients live in two-, three- or four-bed rooms; each room has a bath with shower and toilet. Further sanitary installations are available.

The therapy participants come from all regions of BiH. But even from abroad, families or institutions send their addicted men and/or clients to the TC Izvor.

The management of the therapeutic facility has a keen interest in having information on the TC Izvor spread among the communities coming from the region Bosnia and Herzegovina and from former Yugoslavia.

Concept

The current therapeutic concept presents all characteristics of a well-managed and clearly structured therapeutic facility for addicted people. During the seminar it could be seen how the facility and the group work, and that the entire system is well in tune and thought-out.

The differentiated therapeutic concept describes the preparatory phase, rehabilitation in the therapeutic community and rehabilitation.

TC Izvor pays special attention to the origin of therapy clients and has developed several integrating services for that purpose (see concept).

Languages

There is no language problem in the facility; everybody is fluent in the Bosnian-Serbo-Croat language (the former Serbo-Croat) and its derivatives that developed after the end of Yugoslavia, or in regional languages.

Accent and dialect of the individual indicate the biographical origin directly, as do first and second names. What is called BHS is supported today in Bosnia and Herzegovina as official version of the language. Seen from outside, it may be considered a recent version of Serbo-Croat.

What turned out to be important information during the seminar preparation?

The area of Bosnia and Herzegovina is composed of the 10 cantons of the Federation of BiH, the Republika Srpska and the Special Brcko District, a special administrative unit. The last war in the Balkans lasted 4 years and ended in 1996. Since then, the Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats segregate very strongly from each other in their areas. The division requested and imposed by the EU has led to regionalisation and political tripartite responsibility at all levels. Social, juridical and political developments have been hampered by this fact and are still being hampered. The federal and the Serb area must be considered as practically autonomous regions. The head of state consists of 3 elected politicians; the head of government is one Prime Minister. Each sector has similar administrative structures, so that a State with not more than 4.6 million inhabitants has now a much extended public administration.

Careful consideration of this background turned out to be important in the practical seminar work. The latest information about Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as insights from reading from some important books on the history of the region were included in the preparatory work.

A seminar in Family Constellation should never lose sight of the highly differentiated developments in the region.

On the history of the region

The following selected aspects characterize the development of the BiH region:

Starting with the Christian era before the Ottoman rule; Ottomans ruling from the 16th century (capital Istanbul), with concrete dominion by Ottomans, keywords: toleration and supposed freedom of the faiths (non-Islamic religious communities, however, had to pay many times higher taxes and could only preserve, not enlarge or build from scratch their churches and monasteries); political oppression of the Balkan peoples; shaping of religions by Turkish culture and administration as well as architecture; conflicts and wars; expulsion of Ottomans and enlargement of Austro-Hungarian rule; conflict of Austria-Hungary and Yugoslavia with regional uprisings; the "triggering" of World War I (shooting of Sarajevo); the kingdom of Yugoslavia; the federative Socialist Yugoslavia under Tito, division of the country after Tito's death and the beginning of the war 1992 – 1996 with all the tragic implications for the peoples of this region and their families; the reality of the division; the split-up within families, who in Tito's Yugoslavia had never segregated themselves by religion publicly.

BiH today

BiH has been restored practically in the borders as they existed during the rule of Austro-Hungary.

Colleagues of the TC Izvor reported that in Yugoslav times the issue of religious affiliation had never been nearly as momentous as today. Within families, you might belong to different ethnic groups; individual identities, however, were integrated within families.

War and families

Even if historical and political events may include tragic and dramatic facts in Bosnia and Herzegovina: afterwards, any family constellation is a highly individual matter and personal experience. During the constellation, we may delve into the impact of the above mentioned affairs, at times gaining direct insights. Every person has experienced good and bad (=war) times in a totally different manner, integrating them into his or her biographical "script". Moreover, they will report on them individually. How else could this be done?

By "script", I mean the individual biography, as someone reports it from their experience. In the process, experiences from the childhood family are paramount; the real relationships from "former times" are experienced and "written down in the internal script" in quite different ways by individuals. Even brother and sister quite often may live the growing-up in the same family in sharply different, at times contradictory views. This shows for example in sayings like "the child is more similar to the father", or "follows on the footsteps of the uncle", while the sister is "a spitting image of mother".

The war and its consequences are inextricably linked to the experienced facts, to the "script" of the concrete life. They are in Bosnia and Herzegovina as tragic and as dire as in any other war.

Members of the same family quite often fought "alongside different sides", at the outbreak of the war, large portions of the population fled from many cities, and their apartments and houses were occupied by others (e.g., Serbs fled in great numbers from Sarajevo and Bosniaks came and took over the abandoned houses; restitution of such properties after the war took many years when it was successful; many apartments and houses have never been restituted, because "the Serbs" rebuilt "their Sarajevo" in the Eastern part). Some other cities, too, have been divided (e.g., Mostar into a Croat and an Islam-shaped part). It has been reported that the communal and urban life has been divided sharply politically and culturally, but also in terms of administration, and that this results in substantial contrasts in the communities.

Addiction in BiH

The therapeutic concept of the TC Izvor quotes international organizations and agencies, saying "that in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are about 120000 addicts, among who 7500 intravenously addicted. Experts from the non-government sector estimate there could be as many as 15000 intravenously addicted persons"(page 1 of the concept / German version).

What is a Constellation?

When explaining what a family constellation is and how it unfolds, I start with the structure of the constellation:

The constellation is made up of the seeker, the facilitator (therapist), the group of observing participants and possible representatives (for family members).

Client (seeker) and therapist are sitting alongside each other; the therapist asks for the starting issue (the client's core issue and/or concern), circling around the client's important moments in life by asking follow-up questions.

The facilitator will then find out together with the Client whether the issue is related to the family of origin or the current family, and whether aspects of comorbidity (organic disorders, social

strain, diseases in the present family and in the generations of parents, grandparents as well as possibly great-grandparents).

The “script” of the client’s life up to the present point unfolds in the first portion of the talk in its main outlines. The qualities of bonds within the concrete family can be understood.

Therapist and client will now find out which family members belong to the client’s issue. In the case of the family of origin, it’s always the natural parents, and often step parents, foster parents or adoptive parents, natural siblings, half or step siblings, grandparents and other family members.

The therapist shows how the “Constellation” works:

The client asks several members of the group to represent each one of the mentioned persons of client’s family.

Once all family members are selected and represented by group members, the client positions each of them individually. The client touches every individual lightly on the shoulder and will then lead them without comment to a position in the room according to his or her feelings. Once there are at position, the client will lightly press on the representative’s shoulder, thus indicating: For the time being, this is your proper place.

The therapist asks the representative to delve with their feelings into their perception of their current position. The story that had been listened to is defined as unimportant; what really matters now is your own perception at this current place.

What results now is the “first picture”, when all representatives have been placed at their respective positions. The objective is to find a “good solution” for the seeker with respect to the raised “central issue”, involving all representatives.

If several persons of 2 or 3 generations are gathered, a family constellation may last between 45 to 90 minutes.

The objective of family constellation consists in the “good solution” to the presented issue. In the “final picture” of the constellation, the “good solution” should be grasped by the client in concrete experience.

Psychotherapy and family constellation

Family constellation as a well-defined therapeutic model has been in the focus of great attention for about 20 years. As of now, it may be well considered as a systemic method that has been consolidated phenomenologically. By this I mean that in huge numbers of constellations, the same phenomena appear again and again. In the first years, these phenomena were attributed to the family constellation facilitator, as if she or he was someone with special magical insights, able to produce such phenomena. In effect, these phenomena that can be observed and experienced are immanent, i.e. deeply engrained in the respective family system.

By “phenomenon”, we understand an event that can be perceived through human senses. I encourage the seeker and the representative to trust their feelings and their perceptions. “It is true if you feel it.”

As long as parents or institutions do not stop them doing so, children can intuitively feel and communicate very precisely what is going on in their family and which relationships are lived between the family members, and how they are lived.

What is experienced and observed?

The representatives can express impressions and events of the family members represented by them. Quite often, the seeker will then say: "Yes, it's exactly like in my family", "the same words and phrases" are used as by the 'real' family member. It must be taken into consideration that this information does not come from the brief preparatory talks.

Most of the times, when it is all about family-related issues, the deep, unsatisfied longing of the child for both parents is presented with force. This longing for the parents will always remain, even when we are grown up: if the relationship between the parents was under strong strain and the parents separated, if acts of aggression were committed against the child, if the child had to go through often painful experiences (slaps, abuse, admission to a home, adoption etc.).

Remembering

Memory of parents or of any other important family member quite often comes in a shape that cannot be understood as longing for parental love or for adequate self-love. If, e.g., a father beat his child, why should we recognize this as the memory of a family member - or even as expression of desire for parental love? Other symptoms that can be re-translated or can be "read" of a certain family dynamics: Stuttering, aggression against others, early leaving of the parental home, interruption of contact, addiction, auto-aggression, anorexia, organic disorders (e.g., heart, stomach), failure at school, ADHS and many others.

Children remember painful experiences and the family members relevant to them quite often later in life by

Auto-aggressive behaviour

Violent behaviour

Becoming addicted

Abusing themselves other people

Leaving their own family

Not setting up their own family

Renouncing their own happiness (e.g., successful professional career) and sticking to their unhappiness.

In short: They remember by re-enacting those early experiences.

Another phenomenon in family constellations is that early experiences, even those lived **in the grandparent generation** manifest today and have an impact on the present. Family facts act through the times in the "here and now".

Particularly relevant are here family members that were excluded in the past or that died through serious disease or violence. They are remembered by the descendants quite often in a way that is equally tragic.

By the same token, family members that excluded themselves from their families (for example, when the natural father leaves the mother alone with the infant) will be remembered in a way that cannot be deciphered at first sight. The same applies for children that were aborted.

We cannot explain here how these recurrent phenomena can be explained in detail. What matters is the statement that these are all concrete experiences that manifest again and again. Never do they reflect mere beliefs or supposed hypothetical facts.

War and peace

Participation in war and war crimes will always have an impact on the following generations; the impact will be particular evil if silence about those facts is kept, or if talking is banned or if those facts are glorified.

Peace can be achieved only when all involved persons and all events can be acknowledged and appreciated properly.

“Appreciating properly” means in this context: talk about the events that happened, recognize facts (at an individual, family, community and socio-political level), reaching consensus about the historical incompatible positions that lead to war, and reaching consensus about today’s unshakeable positions – in combination with a general attitude and willingness to dismantle gradually the elements that preserve the splits. Accept the other in a future point in time as a brother again, even though this can be an idea only today.

If you want to prevent new war, you have to seize every opportunity to perform peacemaking gestures and agreements.

Compensation and compensatory acts

At certain critical points, there must always be compensation and compensatory acts between family members and other involved parties.

There is no unilateral duty to compensate. Even those who expect compensation from others because of suffered injustices are somehow obliged to commit themselves to compensation. Commitment here means that they demand compensation through silence and do not prevent passively compensation from happening by insisting on their own allegations.

Compensation among those involved in a critical situation is ideally preceded by acknowledging the events that have happened. Without mutual acknowledgment of the things experienced and suffered, the door to compensation, i.e. to peace cannot open.

Compensatory acts must be seen in a very practical way:

At the level of family constellation, compensation may happen by the mother dismissing the son from his imposed role of a substitute partner that he had to fulfil because the husband left the mother early, or by a daughter symbolically handing back both parents the entire burden that she had to carry following the separation of her parents.

At a societal level, compensatory acts may consist in concrete reparation payments or programmes for reconstruction or restitution of property.

Acknowledgement

Just the simple acknowledgement of facts quite often takes years and years, or even a whole life. Silence or endless discussions prevail. Acknowledging of facts that have been experienced controversially requires an absolute will to peace, i.e. to compensation reflected in a thorough willingness to renounce violence. The skills necessary for this lie in non-violent communication. We find a model for non-violent communication in the instructions of Marshall Rosenberg.

Experiences with family constellation in addiction therapy

Experiences with family constellations in addiction therapy have been laid down in a paper by Dr. Albrecht Mahr and Horst Brömer, which has been translated into the local language (Post-avke u rehabilitaciji ovisnika – Iskustva i rezultati, Prijevod: Jelena Damjanac).

Experiences in TC Izvor

Interest in family constellation was formulated by the director of the therapeutic institution, Jelena Damjanac. The seminar was organized and the external participants were invited by her. The seminar started with an introduction with all clients, the team and guests at the TC Izvor on 29 June 2011.

The interest in the topic could be felt. The request by the seminar facilitator that all participants should reflect on a current core issue met with great interest. On the next day, all participants reported that they had a special personal issue that they wanted to consider and reflect on the two following days.

Every client had prepared very well for their issue, so that the family constellation sessions could start without hesitation on the 30 June 2011. By early afternoon on 1 July 2011, a total of 8 issues had been arranged as family constellations.

All the above mentioned phenomena and processes could be seen and supported during the family constellations of the clients at TC Izvor. The issues were, among others: strengthening abstinence, compensate damage, clarify the question of guilt, settle the relationship with a family member, and rediscover one's own feelings. "Good solutions" were produced for example when reconciliation between family members became possible, when married partners forgave each other, when guilt was recognized, when compensation for suffered damage became visible.

Confidentiality of therapeutic work allows only for this rough summary of the seminar proceedings.

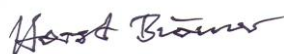
In the afternoon of 1 July 2011, the seminar portion "Supervision in family constellations" took place. Here, professional colleagues and the staff of TC Izvor had an opportunity to practise family constellation by one concrete issue in the context of supervision.

A female colleague presented an issue with reference to a current case. The dynamics between current and a future therapeutic centre, the client, the client's family and the seeker could be worked out very well thanks to the constellation. A certain perspective for further treatment was outlined.

Outlook

Feedback on the seminar has been highly positive. Everybody was surprised at good impact of the constellation and the well-defined processes, when staff members and clients realized that the arranged constellation corresponded with their families, paving the way to good solutions.

A follow-up seminar was wished by everybody. It will now depend on the financial means whether and when such a further seminar will take place.



Horst Brömer
11 July 2011