

ORESTA KARPENKO

## HERMANN GMEINER'S HUMANISTIC CONCEPT

### INTRODUCTION

Hermann Gmeiner was an Austrian pedagogue, educator, a talented and experienced organizer, creative mentor, reformer of the foster care system, founder of SOS Children's Villages and SOS-Kinderdorf International. He was a worthy representative of Austrian and European culture. His educational activities had no boundaries, because the teacher was known, loved and respected on different continents of the globe. Thanks to his unselfish desire to help the orphaned child to find her home and love, he achieved extraordinary prestige. Gmeiner's date of birth – June 23 – is now a holiday celebrating all SOS Children's Villages. Gmeiner was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize (1962, 1979), but in 1979 it was Mother Teresa who received this award. However, today the figure of this Austrian teacher personifies Peace, Humanity, Manhood, and the like.

The study of Gmeiner's works is a vivid reflection of cultural and educational processes in post-war Austria, his efforts to establish the first SOS Children's Village in Imst (1949), and the creation of SOS-Kinderdorf International in 1964 (Reinprecht, 1976, p. 31). Their careful study gives grounds to assert that the pedagogical outlook and humanistic attitude of Hermann Gmeiner to children was based on the philosophical, medical and psychological understanding of their needs. Reading books, visiting circles, discussing scientific and philosophical problems, participating in the provision of social care after eliminating the consequences of the accident in Nuremberg (1938), in western Germany (1939), five-year military service (from

---

ORESTA KARPENKO, Doctor of Pedagogical Sciences, Professor of the General Pedagogy and Preschool Education Department, Faculty of Psychology, Pedagogy & Social Work, Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University, Ukraine; e-mail: [ochepil@gmail.com](mailto:ochepil@gmail.com); ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1841-882X>.

February 1940) in Finland, Russia, the Caucasus and Hungary, studying at the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Innsbruck (since September 1946) (Schreiber & Vyslozil, 2003, p. 59) – all have shaped the views of the Austrian teacher. Gmeiner thoroughly examines the studies of pediatricians (P. Faundler & F. Lubner) on hospitalization and development, the progressive ideas of humanists (I. Bosco, A.H. Francke, J.H. Pestalozzi, J.H. Vihern, Eva von Tile-Winkler, E. Flanagan), visited orphanages, children and young person's houses, tirelessly sought truth in life, trying to help orphaned children as much as possible – and improve the world in this way (Schreiber & Vyslozil, 2001, p. 39). He was guided by the Christian love of children, and the need to take care of orphans and street children became the credo of his life.

#### THE AIM OF SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

The pedagogical concept of Hermann Gmeiner is based on traditional humanistic views and religious laws, which urged a person to do good, protect the weak and, as in our context, save single children and create normal conditions of their life and development. In Gmeiner's pedagogical theory and practice the central place is occupied by the organizational foundations of the activities of SOS Children's Villages, which define the essence of the program for upbringing children. The purpose of the SOS Children's Village, specified in the "Charter of the SOS Children's Village" (1986), remains relevant today – it is helping orphans and street children, and all those who for other reasons were left without care –providing them with family care and creating the necessary conditions for a full life and the development of their personality in society (*Dorfordnung*, 1986).

Gmeiner believed that the SOS Children's Village should admit, first of all, those children who, having lost their biological family, suffered mental and physical injuries (Gmeiner, 1960, p. 30). It aims to protect them from spiritual and moral degradation, not only to protect and help, but also to treat the pupil. The main tasks of the SOS Children's Village are to educate and care in the most natural conditions of a complete family. SOS Children's Village is not a division of an organization or a certain institution which admits a child only for some time. In such places, pupils find not only a home but also strong and reliable spiritual support.

The idea of SOS Children's Village, in his opinion, should become international and find support and understanding among all peoples, and the

family form of guardianship should completely replace the institutional one. "There are a lot of discussions around this. There are supporters of educational institutions for orphans; there are also supporters of family forms of child custody. There are disputes over whether SOS Children's camps should be as large or small as possible, and about how much effort must be made to restore communication between the pupils and their relatives. I just want the children who found a home in SOS Children's Villages, and all other children around the world to live well. In some countries of the third world, SOS Children's camps are like oases of peace and security in the midst of indescribable disaster" (Gmeiner, 1987, p. 27).

Actually, this tendency is observed even nowadays. One of the latest studies conducted by Estonian scientists, designed to analyze the daily life of SOS Children's Village pupils, showed that the process of deinstitutionalization occurs gradually, which creates many challenges and difficulties in the care system of abandoned children in Estonia (Sindi, Strömpl, Toros, 2018).

#### THE MAIN PRINCIPLES OF FUNCTIONING SOS-CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

Hermann Gmeiner was convinced that the only fair and proper way of helping disadvantaged children is to establish a "family education model," which will be able to restore not only their lost home and family, but also the ability to develop normally in conditions of security and love. Despite the crushing criticism and frank resistance of opponents, Gmeiner boldly defended the idea of the SOS Children's Village, the practical implementation of which was doubted by the vast majority of people.

For decades, the four principles grounded by Gmeiner – mother, siblings, home, village – remain essential for the functioning of the SOS Children's Village.

According to the concept, Gmeiner believed that the **mother** of the SOS Children's Village should be a single woman aged between 25 to 40, of a different social background and a profession, who wants to perform guardianship tasks related to the care and upbringing children, and to deal with them on an ongoing basis (*Mütterstatut*, 1965: 5). It is worth noting why Gmeiner limited the criteria to "single women." The historiography of the investigated problem indicates that the founding of the SOS Children's Village took place in the post-war period (1949) with many orphaned children

and widows. In addition, the absence of the father was compensated by other male employees (director, gardener, etc.). Werner Schreier, director of the SOS Children's Village in Imst, with whom we had the opportunity to communicate in 2011, also voiced his concerns about employing married couples. He noted that there is a very high risk involved in married couples assuming the role of adoptive parents because a child who has just suffered hardship and has been going through the period of difficult adaptation and developing trust must not be harmed again.

However, in recent years, spouses who have shown willingness to work in a children's village, undergo special training and attend courses, after which the village selects those who can professionally perform the duties of adoptive parents, and these couples are actively involved by directors. On the other hand, children need to be prepared for difficulties in the family, be able to negotiate to achieve give-and-take. This practice is aimed at meeting the needs of the child in a full-fledged family. The *Mother's Charter of the SOS Children's Village* states that without rigour, insistence or determination of requirements for the child and without proper pedagogical knowledge and skills, there can be no success. Nonetheless, it is the unconditional love for the child that is the basis and guarantee of a good upbringing, during which he or she again feels confident and loved (*Mütterstatut*, 1965, p. 6).

**The second pedagogical basis** of the SOS Children's Village is **having brothers and sisters**. The children's village family consists of six or seven children of different ages – from infant to adult (Gmeiner, 1987, p. 27). Every child must find respect, understanding and love in his family, and she should not suffer because of lack of communication. Children, except mothers, have enough older family members with whom they can relate, learn and receive love from. Additionally, the “elder” opens up a variety of opportunities to acquire skills in building social ties, as well as the ability to perform their tasks and responsibilities in a small community, learn how to be responsible. In order for educational work to be more successful, the child needs to spend a longer time at a children's village home.

Hermann Gmeiner is convinced that children in the SOS Children's Village must grow with their brothers and sisters; siblings should be placed in one SOS-family, where they will live, be educated and study together. Co-educational training is of great value for the development of pupils living in the SOS Children's Village. It fosters a benevolent attitude towards other family members. Of course, this must be taken into account when creating a family, when selecting children and adults. Means of education in a SOS

family are the same as in its biological counterpart, children are gradually assigned certain responsibilities (for example, watering flowers, helping during harvest or in the garden), and the SOS mother in turn cares about the development of children's talents, so they attend choir sessions, craft classes or orchestra practice.

#### PERSONAL REFLECTIONS ON THE SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

During our stay in the SOS Children's Village in Hinterbrühl (2011) we were able to speak with Director Martin Wiener. We also visited the therapeutic centre and spent an unforgettable day with one of the families. The contentious issue is the placement of brothers and sisters in the village. The director argues that all blood brothers and sisters should live together because this contributes to their development, helping social integration more quickly. Employees of the therapeutic center, on the other hand, see this problem in two ways. For example, Erna Rederb, Gerhild Ablaydinger and Uta Dennstedt agree with the director. Moreover, Eva Bagherpur believes that siblings in most cases need to be resettled since their cohabitation causes many conflicts in the family with other adopted children. Four professional teachers in the institution have 15 children who are so easy to manage. The relationship between children is quite complicated because everyone gets here for "treatment." During their stay in one of the families, the children (6) in the conversation distinguish between siblings who are "my blood brother" and "my home brother." In this family, the relationship between blood brother and sister is very tense. As for the other children, they are united, the older ones willingly help the younger ones, and this causes admiration.

Hermann Gmeiner constantly emphasized that the SOS Children's Village family must live in *their own home (the third basis)*. Usually, this is a traditional family-type dwelling. A home for a child is not just a room for eating and sleeping – it must become a cozy nest, a reliable guard, a protective fortress of its not yet stable life (Gmeiner, 2006, p. 28). In the house, each room has its own purpose. The child has her own place at the family table, her own bed, a place for playing and learning, which teaches her to keep order, but the main thing is that she has a home, holidays and weekdays, mutual care and motherly warmth. According to Gmeiner, it is especially important to have a common room in the house in which the whole family life

would concentrate. Here, they work and celebrate, laugh and cry, eat and pray. It symbolizes the spiritual support of the child in the face of world threats. In such way, the value of culture is realized, the child learns love, learns to be virtuous, and forms features of her character. In the common room, the child acquires the previously necessary social contacts, communication skills necessary in later life. It contributes to the development and testing of social educational strengths (*Dorfordnung*, 1986, p. 5). Later, when matured, each pupil will always remember his or her healthy, well-organized and happy social life in the SOS Children's Village. Gmeiner firmly believed that.

Gmeiner believed that each family should be financially independent; receive funds for the maintenance of children in accordance with their needs (to buy clothes, food). The mother distributes money in accordance with the age needs of the child. Children and their mother learn to allocate funds to each family member, choose the type of expenses, and save (*Die 20 häufigsten Fragen*, 2009, p. 6).

The majority of family expenses are covered by the mother who does the shopping on her own or with the children. She has a monthly support for household expenses, which should be enough. Gmeiner said that the child should feel the burden of everyday worries in the family and learn to share them with the other family members. (*Wer wir sind*, 2010, p. 16).

Children in SOS Children's Village should live in an appropriate environment, so both grown-up and small children, boys and girls can be seen living together. When an adult child leaves the family, a new brother or sister is settled there. The decisive factor is the difficult situation in which the child finds herself (dead end, poverty, etc.), while the external data of newcomers, their social relations, religions or other moments play no role (Haider, 2003, p. 11). As practice shows, it is very important that the family of the SOS Children's Village is correctly formed according to age and sex. In Austria, Germany and France, where today there are about a hundred families of the SOS Children's Village, excellent conditions have been created for the proper upbringing of children.

**The fourth basis**, substantiated by Gmeiner, is the **SOS Children's Village**. Usually, from 10 to 20 families live in it, each in a separate building, there is a room for the managing staff and a kindergarten (*SOS-Kinderdorf*, 1999, p. 23). Other facilities are optional. Living in an own home and in own family gives the child a sense of security. The SOS Children's Village does not have its own school or its own church. The children attend a local

school, communicating with other students. The principle of social integration of orphaned children was realized through their expression and activity in the living space of the community to which it belongs. The SOS Children's Village offers family-pedagogical care for children and young people to their separation, post-separation care, additional assistance in education, leisure, and in particular, psychotherapeutic care, cooperation with the biological families, other types of assistance (youth, housing, etc.). Most of the funds for guardianship work are allocated by the SOS Children's Village from its own funds, as well as from voluntary donations (*Die Integration*, 1988, p. 19).

Hermann Gmeiner paid great attention to the role of the director in the SOS Children's Village, because he acted not only as a pedagogical, regional leader who was responsible for the institution entrusted to him, but also had to become a loving father for the pupils, took care of them and organized the work of the SOS Children's Village, as well as performed other tasks (*Bericht*, 1964, p. 11).

The major problem relates to the distribution of children in the appropriate or new family, which occurs when there is free space, taking into account age and sex. For example, in Austria, the SOS Children's Village Association of Austria, together with the Youth Affairs Department, is involved in the placement of children (orphans, street children, social orphans) in children's villages. The latter institution sends documents to the Association, seeks appropriate shelter for children which would better suit their needs. The data are collected by the central commission, consisting of specialists and experts dealing with a particular issue. If the conditions for admission meet the regulatory requirements, they decide in which village and house the child will be placed. The necessary admission conditions are children's spiritual and physical health or the objective impossibility of their returning back to their family environment (Leixnering, Posch, & Vermeer, 2003, p. 138).

#### CUSTODY AND EDUCATION IN SOS CHILDREN'S VILLAGE FAMILIES

Since the establishment of the SOS Children's Villages, numerous offers of provision and forms of custody have been constantly developed and diversified. The Minor's Service offers children and young people who, for various reasons, cannot live with their parents, providing many services, ranging from home or socio-pedagogical short-term care to separating a

child in one of the SOS villages. The main option is the custody of children and young people in SOS Children's Village families based on the four educational principles formulated by Gmeiner. Special directions of work of the SOS Children's Village (retardation therapy centre, help in crisis situations, etc.) provide the necessary help to children and young people (Vierzigmann, 1999, p. 28).

Nowadays, a lot of attention is paid to the problem of preparing young people for independent living. Hermann Gmeiner understood the fact that after leaving the SOS-family, the young person will end up on the street again. To avoid such a scenario in countries where SOS Children's Villages operate there are also SOS Youth Houses. It is here that teachers help the young generation become independent adults. For example, in Austria, the SOS Children's Village Association continues to help young people for longer periods, both to find work and accommodation (rent, purchase), and education. However, a recent survey of African youth (in particular, Ghana SOS Children's Village) showed some difficulties in preparing them to leave the SOS Children's Village. The key problems that young people report are: money, housing, cultural skills and the lack of contribution to their future. We believe that the recommendations made by scholars to improve the practice of preparing for independent living in the near future will be implemented in practice: the formal involvement of legal guardians in this process and the inclusion of young people in decisions related to their preparation (Kwabena & Frimpong, 2012).

Nowadays, the organization of SOS Children's Villages, depending on local needs, covers the following facilities: SOS villages, family strengthening programs, kindergartens, schools, youth facilities, vocational training centres, medical centres, emergency relief programs (*Where we help*).

The SOS Children's Village is one of the few forms of child custody and education, which found support in 135 countries (Africa – 47, America – 22, Asia and Oceania – 31, Europe – 35), where every pupil feels loved, supported and understood (*Where we help*).

In Ukraine, the SOS Children's Village began its activities with the project "Family Strengthening" (2003) in Kiev. As early as in 2006 the first SOS village was built in Brovary, Kiev Region. Subsequently, in 2012, another program was launched to support families and protect the rights of children living at SOS villages in Luhansk. With the outbreak of the 2014 conflict they moved their activities from Luhansk to Severodonetsk and Starobelsk and started the Emergency Response Project, which is designed



to help children from internally displaced families, as well as residents of the territories affected by the conflict in the Luhansk region. Since 2003, more than 20,000 children have received support from the SOS Children's Villages Ukraine.

Taking all of the above into consideration, the basic principles of the SOS Children's Villages, as formulated by Hermann Gmeiner, have not lost their relevance today. Our interviews with employees of the SOS Children's Villages in Austria, Poland and Ukraine, the teaching staff and SOS mothers demonstrate the existence of diverse approaches to the placement of siblings and ways of professional and personal growth of SOS mothers. The essential purpose of the SOS Children's Village is to create families in which children know the content of human values (love, good, humanity, tolerance, self-esteem, morality, trust, respect for older individuals, family belonging, mutual understanding) and national values (love for the inner circle or the home country), or find custody (long-term, short-term, individual, socio-pedagogical, therapeutic, retardation-pedagogical). Teaching independence as a personality trait and forming the ability to solve life problems are the most important issues to be addressed when upbringing children in the SOS Children's Village. This process is personally focused on the needs of each young person. Founded by Hermann Gmeiner, SOS Children's Villages set out a social-pedagogical direction in which the family is not only a way but also the purpose of custody and education.

## CONCLUSIONS

The works of Hermann Gmeiner in the field of pedagogy should be widely used during practical training in care institutions; they are the basis for setting priorities in social and educational work. It is necessary to conduct a reliable study and analyze the history of the emergence of humanistic pedagogical concepts in Austria, the activities of SOS Kinderdorf International and the Hermann Gmeiner's Academy, especially their role in spreading the ideas of the SOS Children's Village in the countries of the world. We consider it expedient to popularize Gmeiner's pedagogical ideas, to promote the dissemination of the activities of SOS Children's camps, to form an adequate public opinion regarding the needs and problems of pupils, to inform the public about their life and problems on the pages of international periodicals popular science magazines.

## REFERENCES

- Bericht der SOS-Kinderdörfer zum Problem „Mutter ohne Elternpaar“.* (1964). Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Die 20 häufigsten Fragen zum SOS-Kinderdorf und zur SOS-Kinderdorf Familie.* (2009). Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Dorfordnung für die SOS-Kinderdörfer.* (1986). Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- FRITZER, E. (1999). *SOS-Kinderdorf (Festschrift)*. Osttirol: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Gmeiner für Nobelpreis nominiert. (1962, October 3). *Österreichische Neue Tageszeitung*. p. 1.
- GMEINER, H. (1960). *Die SOS-Kinderdörfer: moderne Erziehungsstätten für verlassene Kinder*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- GMEINER, H. (1987). *Meine Töchter, meine Söhne*. Innsbruck, München: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- HAIDER, F. (2003). *Wurzeln des SOS-Kinderdorfes*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- HILWEG, W. (Ed.). (1988). *Die Integration des SOS-Kinderdorfes und der ihm anvertrauten Kinder und Jugendlichen*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- KWABENA, A., & FRIMPONG, M. (2012). Preparation for Young People Leaving Care: The Case of SOS Children's Village, Ghana. *Child Care in Practice* 18(4), 341-356, doi:10.1080/13575279.2012.713850.
- LEIXNERING, W., POSCH, Ch., & VERMEER, T. (Eds.). (2003). *Übergangen Raum Geben. Kinder zwischen Daheim und Zuhause*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Mütterstatut des SOS-Kinderdorf e. V.* (1965). Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- REINPRECHT, H. (1976). *Verdammt zum Leben. Das Abenteuer einer Idee: Hermann Gmeiner und seine SOS-Kinderdörfer*. München: Molden-Taschenbuch-Verl.
- REINPRECHT, H. (2006). *Hermann Gmeiner. Alle Kinder dieser Welt. Die Botschaft des SOS-Kinderdorf-Vaters*. Wien: Styria.
- SCHREIBER, H., & VYSLOZIL, W. (2001). *Die Dynamik der frühen Jahre*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- SCHREIBER, H., & VYSLOZIL, W. (2003). *SOS Children's Villages. Tracing our Roots*. Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Inter.
- SINDI, I., STRÖMPL, J., & TOROS, K. (2018). The Estonian way of deinstitutionalisation. Experiences from an ethnographic research in SOS Children's Village. *Child & Youth Services* 39(4), 305-332, doi: 10.1080/0145935X.2018.1511975.
- SOS Children's Village in Ukraine*. Retrieved December 14, 2018, from <https://sos-ukraine.org>.
- VIERZIGMANN, G. (1999). *Qualitätsmanagement in der Jugendhilfe*. München: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Wer wir sind.* (2010). Innsbruck: SOS-Kdf. Verl.
- Where we help?* Retrieved December 14, 2018, from <https://www.sos-childrensvillages.org/where-we-help>.

## HERMANN GMEINER'S HUMANISTIC CONCEPT

## SUMMARY

The article describes the main idea of the concept developed by the Austrian pedagogue Hermann Gmeiner (1919–1986), i.e., that of SOS Children's Village as a model of family education. Four principles substantiated by him (mother, family, home, village), which for decades have underpinned the work of SOS Children's Villages, are analysed here. The following aspects are discussed: the essence of the work of children's villages, the specific problem of setting up a structurally and functionally feasible natural family, in which the child learns human and national values, receives long-term, short-term, individual, socio-pedagogical and therapeutic care. Some attention is also given to the popularization of the pedagogical ideas of Gmeiner and the operation of children's villages in different parts of the world.

**Key words:** SOS Children's Villages; custody; upbringing; foster family; family educational model.

## HUMANISTYCZNA KONCEPCJA HERMANNA GMEINERA

## STRESZCZENIE

Artykuł opisuje główną ideę koncepcji pedagoga austriackiego Hermanna Gmeinera (1919-1986), jaką jest stworzenie SOS Wioski Dziecięcej jako rodzinnego modelu opieki. Przeanalizowano cztery zasady, które Gmeiner uzasadnia (matka, rodzina, dom, wioska), będące od dziesięcioleci podstawą funkcjonowania wiosek dziecięcych. Omówione zostały: istota pracy wioski dziecięcej oraz specyfika utworzenia naturalnej rodziny zastępczej o funkcjonalnej strukturze, w której dziecko uczyłoby się wartości ogólnoludzkich i narodowych, a także otrzymywało opiekę długoterminową, krótkoterminową, indywidualną, społeczno-pedagogiczną lub terapeutyczną. Autorka także poświęca uwagę zagadnieniom takim jak popularyzacja idei pedagogicznych Hermanna Gmeinera i działalności wiosek dziecięcych na całym świecie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** SOS Wioski Dziecięcej; opieka; wychowanie; rodzina zastępcza; rodzinny model opieki.