

Rethinking care and violence. Dynamics in children's homes in state socialist Hungary

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Abstract: In this article, I analyze the care dynamics in children's homes as seen through the eyes of adult care leavers who grew up in state care in Hungary in the 1970s and 1980s. What is striking in the narrative interviews is the marked absence of anecdotes about staff and indeed the children's home itself. Instead incidents in school, at home, or in the wider community are recalled. I contrast the easily-recounted slaps handed out by teachers to the narrative gap of the children's home and suggest that the "nothingness" of the children's home in terms of depersonalized care contributed to the feeling for some residents of the children's home as a "panic room." Not tied into strong relationships, abusive or otherwise, children felt vulnerable.

Keywords: Children's homes, violence, schooling, oral history, Hungary

Introduction

The legacy of abuse in children's homes colors the way that we approach the topic of residential care.¹ Equally, in terms of studying state care under socialism, the chain of associations triggered by this topic is often communism – totalitarianism – terror – the systematic negation of basic human rights. (Behrends, Lindenberger and Kolář forthcoming) This paper reflects on care dynamics in Hungarian children's homes in the 1970s and 1980s through analysis of family case files from Somogy County, southwestern Hungary, and oral history. What is striking in narrative interviews with adult care leavers is the absence of staff and indeed all indoor spaces in the children's home. On closer inspection, it is teachers that populate the narratives. This raises the question of what is behind the narrating-out of the children's home and casts our gaze on the school. In the first part of this paper I look at children's relationships to teachers and the interplay between the school and the children's home. I move on to discuss violence as part of care and consider how far the state wished to control, or own up to, such violence. In the final section, I explore the dynamics in children's homes beyond the expectation of violence.

Recent major scandals of historic abuse in children's homes in Western Europe provide a disconcerting account of the everyday dynamics in many care institutions and of the unhappiness of residents. This has triggered more research in this area in the form of public inquiries, (Shaw 2007; Klausch 2010; Seider and Smioski 2012) academic publications, (Sachse 2010; Dreier and Laudien 2012) as well as novels (Burkowski 2011; Klüssendorf 2011; Wawerzinek 2010) and films, (Mullan 2002) which contribute to the view of institutional care as dangerous and uncaring, able to offer young people only negative experiences. However, there has been much less research undertaken on children's homes in post-socialist countries. While the picture painted by the few existing studies is no rosier, its concerns are different, taking up neglect and the infection of orphans with HIV in Romania, (Ward 2011) the overrepresentation of Roma children in Hungarian institutions, (Varsa 2011) and substandard education in orphanages. (Korzh 2013) Given the current surge in violence research, it is likely that this focus will be used in forthcoming studies of care in Central and Eastern European countries.

The field has so far been dominated by archival research, for instance of the files of the Ministry of Education, which in the state socialist countries was responsible for children's homes. A study that is based primarily on ministerial and administrative files is naturally

history “from above” that describes and analyzes the level where decisions are reached, laws made and measures executed. (Zimmermann 2004:12) I selected a different access point and use oral history with former children in care to contribute to the debate the perspective of those who were in state care. In 2012 and 2013, I carried out interviews with 17 Hungarian care leavers and 12 caregivers and teachers, who had lived or worked in children’s homes in the 1970s and 1980s. Their life stories were told over several meetings, and in two cases were told in the grounds of the now-closed children’s home. I drew on narrative interview techniques, where the life story is told from start to finish with as little direction as possible from the interviewer, but found, particularly at the start of the interview, that more input from my side was required.

This article is framed by the narrative of one care leaver, Zoli, who was born in 1974 in Somogy County, southwestern Hungary. He is the youngest of ten children and was in care since birth. He was together with three siblings at foster parents until the couple retired in 1979, when Zoli and his one-year-old brother György came to the Zichy boys’ home in the village of Nágocs, Somogy County. He remembers meeting his parents for the first time when he was seven when they took him out of the children’s home over the winter break. This was not frequently repeated. I met him first in February 2012 by chance in a homeless shelter in Budapest, where he has lived since 2004.² From 1979 until 1988 he was at Zichy, exiting state care at age 14 after completing his compulsory education. His experience is exceptional in that he was in the same children’s home for nine years. Many of his peers journeyed through several homes. Zichy opened in 1962 in the expropriated baroque castle of the Zichy family and catered for 160 boys from kindergarten age up to the end of compulsory education. The castle had been used since 1945 as a school, the office of a farmers’ co-operative (*tsz*) and a doctor’s practice. It closed as a children’s home in the early 1990s, and is now back in the possession of the Zichy family. In 2012, renovation started on one wing of the derelict building.

Growing up in school

At my first meeting with Zoli he stated that four of us came into care and continued:

It’s a problem that I can remember everything clearly from a young age. It’s a problem. I don’t want to, one would rather forget such things. Unfortunately we had to live through it. We had to live. We weren’t there for fun, but on the one hand I have to say that the strong discipline that they dictated to us that somewhere I profited from it. And also because [pause], to tell the truth [raw emotion in voice], now that we are grown up [pause], one then has to say that I remained alone [5 second pause] and that somewhere I profited from the teaching that we received there. There was very, very, very strict drill discipline. They handled us with iron fists. In reality it was the school that was very strict. Not the institute, rather the school. There they were very strict with us because somewhere I think they took advantage of the fact that there was no one who we could turn to.³

This passage is steeped in evaluative material, both overtly expressed (“It’s a problem”) and in repetition (“We had to live through it. We had to live”), but we are not told about individual actors or actions. There is no sequence of past-tense verbs that would form a narrative skeleton. Other researchers have found that narratives that are unpleasant or painful to recount are told in as short form as possible without any evaluation. (Linde 1993:69) In contrast, Zoli does not talk about any events in care. This passage is how Zoli started the first

interview, but in the subsequent four meetings the children's home remains an empty narrative shell. Zoli speaks of the castle grounds, of the village, of holidays, of incidents at school, but no stories that took place inside the children's home or of the Zichy staff. He rattles off the daily routine of waking up at 7am, breakfast 7.30am, school until 1pm, lunch, free time 2-4pm, study time 4-6pm, dinner at 6pm, bath time 6.30pm, tidying up, room inspection and lights out, but the spaces and what happened inside the walls of the home are missing. Even in the visualization of how lunch was served Zoli stops at the queue at the side entrance of the building.

The only indoor space that Zoli recounts in some detail is the local school that was 100 meters from the children's home. He recalls the school hall where assembly and celebrations were held, the library and several classrooms. I suggest that the school is the only place where Zoli received individual attention. Here it was not purely about obedience within a group, but to some extent individual performance and nurturing talent. Zoli mentions fondly his Russian teacher, who hauled him off the football pitch to the Russian study group in order to enter a language competition to go to Moscow. It was for this teacher that Zoli bought a small bottle of vodka after graduating from school. The teacher offered that if Zoli would continue to study Russian he could come back anytime and he would help Zoli further.

Zoli equally tells of teachers he disliked and problems in school such as being slapped for saying "nigger" in a geography class on South Africa or hit with a ruler and made to run laps until the end of an art class for ineptly drawing a seahorse on the wall as part of the decorations for their graduation ceremony. Slaps were presented by Zoli as strict control, which some teachers used: "There was such a teacher, who if during the class we did something stupid then, "come out!" [thwack]." The teacher caned pupils on the hand with a long ruler. These actions were an outburst of the teacher and instant; there was no waiting until the end of the day to be seen by the headmaster or for a smack at the end of the class.

It is notable in the interviews that disciplining tends to be remembered as the purview of school teachers, not staff at the children's home. On a Sunday, a teacher out for a walk with guests in the Zichy grounds saw Zoli and a group of boys messing about with a small bone swiped from the crypt. She "nicely" remarked that we will see each other on Monday. "We didn't have to say which class we were in because she knew everyone." In school the teacher "thoroughly gave it to us, using every word from bloody gypsy to [gestures]. It wasn't that she thought a lot about which words she used. There it was possible to speak in such a way." The teacher only felt empowered to discipline on a weekday on school premises, but nevertheless it was for misbehavior outside at the weekend. It was she who called the children up on their actions, rather than pass the information on to staff at the children's home. Indeed Erzsébet, a teacher at a special children's home in the eighties in southeastern Hungary, remembers how afternoon supervisors would complain to her about the behavior of certain children. It was left to her to talk with the child and ensure obedient behavior beyond the classroom.⁴ Not all teachers had the relevant qualifications for their post – Erzsébet was a kindergarten tutor assigned to teach children from 3-18 at a special children's home – but had at least some type of childcare training and felt often more capable of disciplining than untrained supervisors plucked from the village.

Striking children

Zoli said that slaps were what some teachers saw as care. It is this factor that makes interpretations of acts of force against children so complicated. (Kelly forthcoming) While it is hard to tell whether and when educators saw acts of violence as justifiable, it is very clear that officially "all forms of physical punishment count as a criminal act," that is, as violence. This is what the director of the Esze Tamás children's home in Budapest wrote in 1966 in a

written warning of a caregiver, who had shaken a pupil for whistling during a silent study period.⁵ In another disciplinary matter that year at Esze Tamás – this time passed up to the local district education department – a caregiver stated, “I didn’t use any other method to keep order beyond a cuff to the head. The pupils probably call that “beating.””⁶ He was dismissed on the grounds that as head caregiver in the children’s home and as a Party member it was felt that he should set an example in the use of correct socialist pedagogical methods. His attitude and practice had contributed to new staff members using physical punishment or the belief that they could use such methods.⁷ These files represent the official line in Hungary on violence against children by “the state” in the mid-1960s. It is extremely difficult to obtain any statistics on the frequency of beatings in state institutions in 1970s/1980s Hungary as it had already become rejected in mainstream pedagogy, therefore virtually no one would have admitted to exercising physical force. (Apor forthcoming) Nevertheless, disciplinary files, oral history interviews and journal articles suggest that the use of force was a regular practice, even if at an ever decreasing rate.

A primary school teacher with 28 years’ experience in the post praised in 1980 that journals are now openly discussing discipline and beatings in school. (Csák 1980:8) The pedagogical journal *Köznevelés* (Public Education) ran in 1980 (Vol. 37, No. 19) a two-page spread on discipline and the front cover lead article of the next edition (Vol. 37, No. 20) was on rewards and punishment. This frankness about the use and contestation of physical punishment resonates with how slaps are remembered by the care leavers I interviewed. It did not come as a surprise to pupils to be slapped if they messed about in class. Scheper-Hughes (1998:308) points out that the liberal use of caning and other forms of corporal punishment in schools could not be maintained without the tacit approval of parents and a home environment and core values supporting physical discipline.

The bar of what is not acceptable is usually placed far lower for the state because it is supposed to “provide professionalized care based on scientifically approved methods.” (Asztalos Morel 2012:66) For teachers this meant, as Erzsébet the special education teacher referred to above remarked, that where “there is a family background, one can write in the report book or send for the parents, so that once the child is at home he gets a right scolding or slap. But in the children’s home you could not threaten the child with that.” This seemingly presents institutes as safe havens from the physical punishment doled out by parents, but what if children in care were conceived of as “little devils” and not “little lambs”? The debate on violence in children’s homes has so far gone on with little attention to the broader context of the conceptualization of childhood. Ferguson argues that the community may have “ambivalently known about and been complicit” in accepting the harsh treatment of children in the Irish industrial schools because they were perceived as “socially dangerous.” (Ferguson 2007:129-130) In the educational press in Hungary, there was certainly support for a stricter education of the growing number of youths who, as a 34 year old special education teacher put it, “paint the town red and form gangs in subways and housing estates, sometimes threatening public safety.” (Kulcsár 1980:7)

As such violence is a fluctuating concept not just temporally, but spatially. What seems horrendous within state care might excite less interest from the state in families. Indeed, as Peter Wawerzinek writes in his novel *Motherless Child* (*Raben Liebe*), “The child can be beaten in his own home because he is not a state child, but home property.” (Wawerzinek 2010:100 author’s own translation) An assessment in 1976 by a Hungarian case worker of a single father with three children states that “recently he is completely off the drink and in relation to his children only beats them when it is necessary, e.g. during the summer he slapped repeatedly his son for aimlessly wandering the streets and constituting a public nuisance [*csavargás*] for several days.”⁸ As far as the family was concerned, the state de facto tolerated, indeed naturalized, corporal punishment. Excessive beating or arbitrary

beatings – not as part of disciplining – by a parent in the mid-1970s represented a problem, not the beating of children per se.

The welfare services and police might intervene if the domestic violence, including that directed at women, was blatant (for instance if it left physical marks), but from early state socialism there was already such overcrowding in children's homes that only children at immediate risk were taken into care. (Hanák 1978:22) A passage in György Konrád's novel *The Caseworker* highlights the overstretched system in Hungary when looking to place the orphaned Feri somewhere: "Regular homes won't take him, neither would the psychiatric institute because he's unteachable; but there's no room in the mental hospital, and even if they let him share another patient's bed, he'd have to wait six weeks, because they've been quarantined for scarlet fever." (Konrád 1974:105) The case file of István, who was born in 1970, suggests two dynamics with which the state approached violence in the domestic sphere.⁹ In June 1975, reports arrived at the child protection agency, *Gyámhatóság*, that István was regularly mistreated by his parents. He was cut, bruised and had patches of his hair torn out. He was registered as endangered, but left in the family home. His ticket into state care a year later was not because of continued or increased violence at home, but a long spell in hospital due to an illness. Once within the state sphere he was transferred to a children's home. His four siblings were left in the one-room family house. The state could discount parents being violent towards their children at home, but once a child, for whatever reason, was in a state space then the state was more directly implicated in that child's well-being and violence, and its prevention, started to count.

A children's home sized gap in care

The examples at the start of this article from Zoli reflect that he is highly articulate about his childhood. Yet there is a clear children's home sized gap in his narration of growing up in care. He does not refer once to a specific member of staff at the children's home, always "they." This "they" could be any number of faces within the children's home. Half the village worked in some capacity at the Zichy home, as a cleaner, washing laundry, in the kitchens, tending the grounds, as a supervisor, in the administration. This lays bare the strange situation in Zoli's narrative that his evaluation of the children's home as "a horror he would not wish on his worst enemy" is not grounded in concrete stories. The few stories Zoli does tell of the children's home are not unpleasant and he refers to physical punishment only in connection to the school and yet he maintains it "was really for many, for many, as if it would have been a panic room. The whole institute a panic room. Daily dread, anxiety." How can we interpret this fear, this leaving out of people and places in state care and the large space dedicated instead to the local school?

It is difficult to find out what is not told and in the times we now live in we are quick to interpret gaps in an interview as signs of a painful, hidden memory. Research on state care is framed by high profile abuse cases, which fuels the conviction that there must have been violence in care. My impression, though, is more that the children's home was faceless, a timetable that ran with minimal personal interaction, which could make children feel vulnerable. For an event to be included in a biographical narrative, argues Linde, it has to be unusual in some way or run counter to expectations. (Linde 1993:22) While the slaps in the school were nothing unusual, it was not the very stuff of everyday lessons, thus making it narratable. Zoli might be able to "remember everything clearly from a young age," but he can only express the children's home in sweeping terms as no one and nothing stands out. Arp found the same for GDR children's homes, that there was little space for individual experiences inside of state care and accordingly the number of personal anecdotes is limited. (Arp 2014:3) The atmosphere that unnerved Zoli in the children's home sprang from this lack

of possible stories. He received scant individual attention in care and without anyone to depend on felt vulnerable.

Dependence has often figured in liberal thought as the opposite of freedom, but Ferguson (2013) reconfigures it as a mode of action that enables membership in society and full personhood: “The perilously insecure and unattached will accept (now, as then) subordination in exchange for membership....Their problem today is *not* that they are being subordinated and subjected – it is worse. The real problem is that they have become not *worth* subjecting.” (Ferguson 2013:231 italics in original) To be dependent on someone is to be able to make at least some limited claims on him or her. Children in care were not enmeshed in such networks of dependence, which was felt while in care, but even more strongly so afterwards when square meals and a roof over your head fell away. It seems that “it is not dependence but its absence that is really terrifying – the severing of the thread, and the fall into the social void.” (Ferguson 2013:232) In the place of pedagogy and interaction between staff and children, was a clearly defined routine that for the most part ran itself. In so far as 60 per cent of the inflow into state care in 1977 in Hungary was under three, (Siklós 1983:174) most of the children were weaned on obedience and a regimented day.

This rigid timetable could scar children in two interrelated ways: through the oppressive atmosphere created and the feeling of vulnerability it engendered. Zoli says “The worst was the strictness, their attitude to us. That was terrible. Constant terror, strictness. Truly one was not allowed to step with the left, because they said we had to step with the right.” The favorite teacher of Zoli, who I interviewed in Nágocs on November 7, 2012, said of the atmosphere in the children’s home that “there were a lot of advantages. The strict rules were very useful afterwards in the workplace. There was the feeling that they knew the rules. Children from families were not so used to listening to other people.” In this respect, he was proud of the downtrodden state child. This expected mute compliance could be found in other large institutions at the time such as hospitals. The socialist state gave great authority to professionals in caring for the physical health of citizens to the extent that, as Read illustrates in the following comment from a Czech nurse, “I think lots of nursing staff got the idea that ... they didn’t need to discuss things with patients ... [It was rather a case of] ‘I’m the doctor and you’re the patient. I have declared something, and you will obey.’” (Read 2014:96)

This oppressive atmosphere was not restricted to the walls of the children’s home, but extended to holidays. The Zichy children spent 10 days each summer at Lake Balaton, a major tourism center for Hungary and indeed much of state socialist Central Europe. The older year groups asked to swim in the lake or to go to the edge in the morning, but this was not permitted. The drill was that after lunch the camp gates were closed and from four until six the children were not allowed out of the water. “There they let us feel that we were different to the other children.” It was always possible to spot who was a child in care. “We were not allowed to go anywhere, rather we had to go together,” in pairs, on one side of the street, in “uniform.” Most of the children from the home had the same color T-shirt and the same type of swimming trunks making them easily identifiable as state property. If the Zichy crew went across to the disco at other camps they had to listen out for what camp number to say to gain entry. “If we said the eighth [camp], then they would not allow us in.”

Zoli spent nine years at the Zichy children’s home, but in his narrative there is little sense of the passing of time. It is all state care, a place where time has a different meaning. The routine is the same for all age groups and therefore every year is the same: “When we were a little bit bigger in the sixth-seventh class, one realized just that, that there is still the same iron strictness and no improvement. When one sees no kind of improvement then it just doesn’t have a point.” In Khlinovskaya Rockhill’s study of social orphans in contemporary Russia, she identifies the weakening grip, though not will or tone, of the carer as children’s increased physical development and maturation gives them greater scope not to follow orders

and directions too closely. (2010:229) As a teenager, Zoli indeed had more agency than as a young child in the children's home, being able to stray while collecting snails to his favourite teacher's house or hurling his school bag into the air on his last day of school, but these are short intervals in the otherwise strict routine that he was confronted with daily.

The routine never let up, but this "iron strictness" paradoxically did not instill a sense of security in the children, rather the opposite. The rules removed much of the need for interaction, leaving some children feeling vulnerable, as there was no one in their surroundings to talk to. "For us there was no one to go home to and complain. No one listened to us," says Zoli¹⁰ The children were wary of complaining about teachers to caregivers or vice versa, as both staff bodies were from the village. The staff of the two institutes "saw each other every five minutes, or in the pub, or somewhere," as Zoli put it. In both settings, "they knew we are at their mercy there, and they exploited this. That's the stance they took with us."

The dread of the children's home for some children came from knowing that there was no one to retreat to and nowhere to go. Zoli remarks: "To where would we run? We couldn't run to the village because to whom? To the farmers' cooperative or something? There we had no business. There were supervisors, dogs [trails off]." Not shored up by strong relationships to others, Zoli felt that if staff did do something it would go undetected and unpunished. The threat that something might happen was all the more scary for remaining undefined.

Conclusion

Zoli said of state care that "I think that a lot of us wanted nothing more than in the eighties or, what do I know, when that person was free, to stand in front of the world and scream about how it was there. What happened there? Because that amounted to nothing." Zoli expected more of the children's home than food, clothes and shelter from the streets. Being on tenterhooks was his basic feeling in care. This atmosphere sprang not from the doings or misdoings of staff, but from a lack of relationships in general. In my interviews, no violence in the children's home is raised, but the perceived threat of it saturated all the more the atmosphere at Zichy for Zoli. Not shored up by strong relationships, he felt vulnerable.

Actual physical violence is easily recalled about the local school by the care leavers I interviewed. While not part of the curriculum in the 1970s and 1980s, it was no surprise at that time for a teacher to slap a child in Hungary. At the start of the first interview with Zoli, he stated that in the Zichy home they were very, very strict with us, but that actually it was the school. Tibi was in the year below Zoli at Zichy and his narrative has the same gaps and the same furnishing of information. He first states that "when we were bad, then the caregivers hurt us," but he clarifies in the next breath that "In the school it was the same. They hurt us the same."¹¹ All of the concrete stories that he tells are of teachers. This ordering of information together with the density of stories about disciplining in the school presents the children's home as a nebulous place that preys on their mind. It is the first thing to be mentioned, but for which no details are told. When really pushed, they identify the atmosphere in the home as scarring.

The contrast between how specifically the school and how vaguely the children's home is recalled rests on the intensity of relationships to staff. Some children found a patron in the teacher of a subject that they excelled in, but even without this the school was a space where children received individual grades. Here they broke out of the collectively managed group of state care children. It was revelations of historical abuse in children's homes across Western Europe that put state care on the agenda. The value, however, of the current focus on violence in care lies in invigorating the history of children's institutes and not in setting a

paradigm for research. As my interviews reflect, the depersonalized, faceless care that children in Hungarian children's homes in the 1970s and 1980s received was often more distressing than a slap from a teacher.

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² My access to care leavers in the homeless shelter was facilitated by a popular member of staff there, who passed on messages. The first interview was clearly as a favor to him, but in later visits care leavers I had talked to previously heard that I was there and came again to the group room, bringing along other care leavers with them.

³ The Zoli interviews quoted in this article were carried out in Hungarian by the author on February 28, 2012 and June 1, 2012 in Budapest. The translation is my own.

⁴ Interview on February 23, 2013 in Mesterszállás with Erzsébet, who was a teacher at a special children's home in the eighties in southeastern Hungary.

⁵ Esze Tamás institute, Director Gyula Ujfaludi, Official warning issued to caregiver István, September 30, 1966. Esze Tamás file 231/B/1966, Author's private collection. All the Esze Tamás files cited in this article were photographed by the author on March 19, 2012 at the children's home itself. The director produced a pile of documents spanning 1962-1966 that included disciplinary decisions, staff lists with political reliability assessments and invoices. It is not clear why these documents were still flying around the office fifty years later, while more recent paperwork had been either destroyed or transferred to the Hungarian State Archive.

⁶ Esze Tamás institute, Director Gyula Ujfaludi, Investigation into the actions of caregiver József, April 28, 1966, [No file number], Author's private collection.

⁷ Executive Committee of the Local Government XII District, Education Department, Director Mrs Kovács, Decision to dismiss caregiver József, June 19, 1966, Esze Tamás file 10.482/1966 VII, Author's private collection.

⁸ Gyámhatóság case file 3020/1976. Notes about a home visit to Márton by the head case worker at the Somogy County Gyámhatóság, Mrs Szecsődi, Kaposvár, January 21, 1976. All the case files cited in this article are in the Somogy County Archives, Kaposvár, Hungary, Somogy megyei tanács v.b. Siófok járási hivatalának iratai, igazgatási osztály, XXIII.21.b.

⁹ Gyámhatóság case file: 1203/1978. Decision RE: the transfer to GYIVI of the minor István, by Mrs Pilipúr, director of the administrative department at Törökkoppány, April 29, 1976.

¹⁰ This is not to say that the parents of children from the village would complain to the school if their child came home bruised or even believe what their child said. In her research on a British residential school for visually impaired girls in the 1950s and 1960s, Sally French points out that "nearly all the girls came from working-class homes and our parents trusted authority figures and were in awe of them." (French with Swain 2000:168-169).

¹¹ Tibi (b. 1975), care leaver, group interview by the author at a homeless shelter, Budapest, February 28, 2012.