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The severe fate of a man, who experienced war and the hard time afterwards

A case study from Germany

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Background

A neighbour drew my attention to Mr. K., who is attending the parish men's group on an irregular basis. It was her impression that he is suffering from severe depression - and could I visit with him?

My first attempt to visit failed because of unfavourable circumstances. We made a new appointment at which we were able to talk in depth.

Life-story

Mr K. was talking about himself without further introduction and hardly interrupted by my few questions:

He was brought up in a strictly Germanic neighbourhood in the South of the then newly established Soviet Union. His ancestors emigrated from Germany in the 18th century. His was a strictly fundamentalistic Christian community that connected the group in its minority situation, as well as it formed its identity. The whole village seemed to belong to this fundamentalistic community and no one was able to escape it, even if they wanted to. It was my impression of Mr. K. that he participated in this fundamentalistic belief with utter conviction until the age of fourteen. After this point slowly distancing himself from this form of rigorous Christian existence. To me this seemed to be a first, rather harmless rupture in his biography.

A second all the more drastic rupture was his deportation. At the beginning of World War II the family was brutally split up. He was kept in the "Gulag" (a work camp, installed by Stalin), and he didn't know whether he would ever see again his wife, parents and siblings. He survived the time in the work camp fairly well, because he was able to utilize his craftsmanship as a wheelwright, since there was no shortage of repairs to defect wheels of horse drawn carriages. His skilled hands

soon brought the carriages to order as well as making the scarce life of the camp more bearable by using his skills for various repair works. Therefore he never seemed to be short of friends among the prisoners who in return supported him in emergency situations. It is also my impression that the Spartan life style of his home parish (no smoking, no drinking, etc.) in the end helped him to cope with the difficult situation of the camp.

After the war he was reunited with his family. Up to the beginning of the seventies they were able to live a relatively normal life in modest terms. Then came the third rapture: His immigration to East Germany. Mr. K. chose not to talk about that in too much detail. Judging from his scarce comments and my impressions of him, the following image revealed itself: For the sake of the children's future he had moved to Germany. But only a part of his "self" arrived here, the greater part remained in the expanse of the Russian countryside. He now mainly lives from his memories, and in talking to me he became more lively. For me listening to him was more exciting than any thriller or crime story.

But shortly after telling his story, he collapses like a weak shell. "Yes, his children are well; they also survived the fourth rupture, that is Germany's reunification." But they seem to be very busy with themselves, and don't contact him very often. He became a lonely man in a small one bedroom apartment.

An afterthought

I am bringing this example because it is my opinion that here we are dealing with a fate that is very common in our times. There are still Germanic families emigrating into Germany from the states of the former Soviet Union. But elsewhere similar human tragedies occur, and we encounter people with similar life stories. Bosnia, the distressing situation in the Balkans. Their refugees who are coming into the states of the EC all that is very present to us here in Europe.

The following question arises in a camp situation – a situation which is imposed on human beings and is extremely traumatic; a situation which Mr. K. and many other people in various different parts of the world have experienced (especially in the refugees camp).

How, is it possible to find the small path between adaptation and resistance, to walk it and not to be worn out by the inhuman conditions, and not to become cold, hard hearted and indifferent for the rest of one's life.

The other typical question which arises out of this biography is as follows: To stay or to leave?

What is proper for my family? On the one hand we are barely able to stay in our country, on the other hand we are not certain of what we will experience in the country we are about to move to. Young people have already returned to east Europe because they could not deal with our so called western civilisation. The elderly have not moved since they are afraid and feel unable to deal with yet another change in their lives.

How can we help people to make the right decisions which are so relevant for their future? What are the focal points, when one has to decide whether to go or to stay? As a citizen of the former GDR, I know what I am talking about. Some left for Western Germany, others stayed. yet others are glad that they stayed after the change. Recently one of them said, "Had I known what to expect in the West, in

what kind of human and social conditions I'd find myself, I would have never applied for immigration." Subconsciously we projected all our longings and everything that was missing in East Germany into the West, which to us seemed to offer much more freedom and possibilities. Now we became much more sober and see that next to the freedom one also finds many social constraints and needs for adaptation, a fact which not only in the West plays a formidable role.

How, then do we deal with the ruptures in our lives? What is our conscious and subconscious involvement in all of this? How can we continue life despite of everything, and how can we accompany others and help them to discover new possibilities of living?