



THE B.R.O.T. – HERNALS COMMUNITY – A REALISTIC MODEL

Households and Family Life – Networks of Communication and Co-operation

The B.R.O.T.¹ - Hernalts community is one way of living in social and familial relationships. It is a non-profit association that constructed a residential home in Vienna's 17th district, at Geblergasse 78 between the *Gürtel* and the suburban line in the vicinity bordered by *Hernalser Hauptstrasse* and *Ottakringerstrasse*. The house was built using a low-interest government scheme to promote affordable housing. The association held its constituent assembly in January 1987. It found interested parties by distributing pamphlets, advertising and passing on the information by word of mouth. Membership in the association is limited to adults so as not to force children into membership; it goes without saying that the children can live in their parents' household. In addition, each family is given a total of one extra vote for its children. The inhabitants moved into the home in May 1990.

The association wishes to enable life in a community, based on a Christian spirit that is also conducive to rendering social services. It does not offer such specialised services as therapies but wants to provide mutual help through the specific way its members live their everyday lives. It also serves as a passage to an independent life for people who have experienced difficulties or are in a difficult situation. The services are rendered by the members themselves and not by employed staff. By integrating people, the association deliberately rejects and tries to overcome the model of carers and persons to be cared for typically found in specialised institutions.

The inhabitants are characterised by a mix of age groups and mental, cultural and physical conditions; they comprise families as well as singles who live there permanently or for limited periods of time. Old and young, healthy and ill, poor and rich people want to share joy and sorrow with one another, while fully respecting the privacy of the individual, married couple and family.

The legal form of a residential home was chosen because it seemed most appropriate for this underlying idea. While no single inhabitant can acquire ownership or the customary rights of a tenant, each of them has a contract entitling him/her to use one place in the home. The same formal conditions of use apply to all inhabitants. On the one hand, this scheme eliminates the negative connotation often associated with the term "home"; on the other, it overcomes the disintegrating formation of different categories of inhabitants.

The residential home in Geblergasse 17 is not only a sociological but also an architectural innovation. A column design was chosen to ensure flexibility concerning the layout of the flats. In fact, during the first nine years, the size of the flats was actually altered in three cases. The area of useage is around 1,770 m² for a total of 25 flats: 18 for members and 7 for guests. The house has five floors and flat sizes range from 22 m². to 130 m². In addition, there are around 600 m². for common use, as well as several terraces.

At the present time the community is made up of 27 members with 21 children aged 6 – 23: ten families, among them one single mother, one widowed father and mother, two married couples and six singles (one man and five women). Three of the women are over 70; the oldest is 85. The youngest member is 28. Two members have a disability, one a physical and the other a mental.

Since 1990, ten children were born and one child was taken into foster care. Two members died at age 90, an one at age 40 and one at 44. One member left the community after four years. Three couples and a single person joined the community later on.

The seven guest flats are reserved as temporary dwellings for people in difficult situations who want to find their way into an independent life. The flats have often been used and are persistently in demand. From 1990 to this day, about 80 people from various countries – among them 24 children – have lived in the B.R.O.T. house for varying periods of time.

¹ The individual letters of the German acronym "B.R.O.T." stand for Beten-praying, Reden-talking to each other, Offensein-being open, and Teilen-sharing. The term "B.R.O.T." as such means "bread".

Original German

When the first large wave of refugees from former Yugoslavia started in 1992, 17 Bosnians were initially accommodated in a camp hastily set up in the gym hall. In the meantime, all of them have found flats of their own. With the exception of one elderly couple who meanwhile has returned to Bosnia, all of them are gainfully employed.

All inhabitants must pay a user fee that covers the cost of their flat. Those unable to pay are supported via the Solidarity Fund. This fund is fed by self-taxation of the community members and by donations from relatives, friends, neighbours, etc. Until now, around € 260 000,- had been raised, € 75 000,- from this fund have been used to support the Bosnian refugees.

The development can be described as a combination of success, “muddling through” and failure. On the whole, most expectations have been fulfilled. Some experiences are qualitatively listed below:

- A common, universally accepted basis as reference point for the resolution of possible conflicts is important for a positive development. In the community, this basis is the belief in God, essentially derived from a Christian perspective and spirit.
- B.R.O.T. has chosen not to define one single point as the standard between such extremes as individuality and obligation but to grant margins instead. These margins vary at least temporarily, and partly as well in their leeway for the individual members. The point is how much tension is admissible and conducive. So far, this openness has proved beneficial for all members and for the community as a whole.
- The children of community members adopt elderly women as “new” grandmothers. In general, the children’s circle of friends has expanded. The potential limitations of the downsized nuclear family may be overcome. One example is support through child care (babysitting) on a mutual basis, which particularly eases the burden of mothers, opening up their life, giving them more freedom, and reducing the usual constraints.
- Even though it is not possible to overcome every type of loneliness, contacts among members and with guests show that nobody is left to his or her fate. The experience of benevolence also creates a protected space that promotes freedom.
- The home has succeeded in serving as a passage for most of the guests who came to the home in an attempt to move from being cared for to an independent life.
- The accommodation, the several years of caring for and integrating the Bosnian refugees would have been impossible without the community.
- So far, only one member has left, while several have applied for membership.

Even if several people have been positively motivated to carry out an idea or a project and do receive support from their social environment, there is always the problem of the first step. If it is not taken, all that will remain are “we want to”, “we should”, “we ought to”, etc. In the case of the B.R.O.T. community, the research project on integrative housing as a social service offer (S. Klar, H. Schattovits) decisively contributed to this fundamental first step. The project was supported by the residential building research scheme.

Literature

Klar, S., Schattovits, H. (1987 u. 1992) *Integratives Wohnen als soziales Dienstangebot und integratives Wohnen – Umsetzung einer sozialen Innovation, Forschungsbericht Band 1 und 2, Bundesministerium für Bauten und Technik (ehemals – jetzt Wirtschaft und Arbeit), Wien*

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