

The Children of Blankenese

An Interview with Friedemann Hellwig

History
Project

תודלות סקירופ

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It is the 4th of March 2012, a wonderful morning, which lifts our Israeli and German spirits even more. We are in Blankenese, a beautiful part of Hamburg, standing in front of a big white building, embracing the calm and peaceful atmosphere around, not yet aware of the burdensome history, which had taken place right around us. A man steps ahead of us. He welcomes us affectionately, speaks to us with a lot of joy and patience. He asks us to come in and we sit down in a bright, light-flooded room.

The man, now sitting in front of us, is Professor Friedemann Hellwig, who in the past worked as a conservator of art objects and who taught the conservation of wooden objects at the University of Applied Sciences in Cologne. He is very attached to the history of the Jews, who suffered from the Holocaust, because back in 1993 he helped to preserve „material witnesses of the Holocaust“ together with a group of students in the former concentration camp Auschwitz.

In 2004 Mr. Hellwig by accident found out about the „Children of Blankenese“. Until then he was preparing an exhibition outlining the lives of four Jews, who had been deported from Blankenese. After finding out about the „Warburg Childrens Health Home“, which took care of young Jewish survivors, who were all alone due to their parents being killed by the Nazis, Mr. Hellwig initiated a meeting with about fifty former „Children of Blankenese“ in 2005. One essential step in order to realise the meeting, was the change of people's attitude in Hamburg, since „those, who knew [about the „Children of Blankenese“] tried to forget - that is my impression“, as Mr. Hellwig explains. But the exhibition from 2004 was a great success and „many people [...], who formerly were desinterested [...] finally became interested, began to acknowledge that Jewish life did happen here.“ But Friedemann Hellwig also explains that „Jewish life in Blankenese was not really Jewish life: no synagogue, there was no cemetery. [...] there was no Jewish life as in a Jewish community“. Altona, which hadn't been a part of Hamburg yet, used to be much more open to Jews, because it appreciated them and their qualities more.

But now, that Hamburg had changed, the way was given to finally invite people from Israel, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Russia and all over the world to come back to an

important place of their lives and a Germany, „that is not the Germany, that they had remembered“.

The first group of fifty coming over in 2005 weren't just looking forward to this experience. Mr. Hellwig points out: „We did not deal, in that respect, with dead people, but with alive people and many of them had great anxieties to come back to refresh their own history, their own memories of what they had gone through.“ They were saved and brought to Blankenese from concentration camps like Bergen-Belsen, many of them didn't have any relatives left. All together there were 300 to 400 children coming over the baltic sea to recover and prepare for emigration to Palestine. It was not easy for them to „adapt to a new way of life, to an orderly life, instead of strolling around“, we are told by Mr. Hellwig. They were taught to speak Hebrew in a school they had in Blankenese, which was not an easy task at all. Besides the cruelty the children had gone through and the struggle to start a new live without any relatives, they experienced tenderness again, love and care by the educators and other members¹, after a long period of time, which meant a lot. Still many of the children were in conflict with what they had gone through. Mr. Hellwig tells us, that just a few had told their wives and their children about what they had gone through. „It took quiet a few years before most of them were able to speak about what they had gone through and I think the visit [...] was kind of an experience of unlocking the history.“ A former child of Blankenese, who brought his daughter, for the first time told her about his story at the visit.

This house, where the children had lived in, was owned by a successful merchant called Julius Asch, who – under the pressure of Nazi-organisations in 1939 – committed suicide in the Elbe. After this incident the red house was turned into a dental clinic, which was under British control. Mr. Hellwig goes on: „the red house was the centre of the Warburg-family. They are famous bankers, still today. [...] So Eric Warburg fought with the British to get the British houses back to open them for children needing care.“ He succeeded- and three houses, the red one, a white one and another one, now formed the ‚Warburg Childrens Health Home‘.

¹ <http://www.viermalleben.de/4xleben/children.htm>, Zugriff am 5.9.2012, 14:03 Uhr

When the former children came to visit in 2005, Max Warburg opened the red house, his private house, to them and hosted a nice meal. But Mr. Hellwig points out, that Max Warburg was even more open to the second group of another fifty, coming in 2006. He showed them every single room and due to that „many stories came back to them“.

For each group an amount of about 50.000 euro was being collected from generous people like Max Warburg to pay for accommodations, transport and to offer the guests a wonderful program. In the end everybody enjoyed the visit and „many of them, who had hesitated to come here, finally thought, that they had done very well to undertake this trip“.

A lot of friendships were formed in 2005 and the year after in Blankenese and the former children living in Israel even invited the group to their country, where they spent a great week. Friedemann Hellwig tells us, that he still is in contact with many of them and also with the Warburg family.

The red house is now used as the Warburg-family residence and the white house was dedicated to Elsa Brändström, who had been a nurse in the First Worldwar, and given to the red cross. It is now used for seminars and courses.

Mr. Hellwig didn't tell us everything in pure facts. He came up with lovely and exciting stories with many names, details and emotions attached to them, so talking to him was a very lively experience, which ended right in front of the white house, where also the meetings with the former ‚Children of Blankenese‘ ended - by taking a picture.

And so our journey back in time also ends with a photo.

Special thanks to Friedemann Hellwig.

Neele Schröder, 2012

