

1946

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Recommended Citation

Curt Bondy, *The Youth Village: A Plan for the Reeducation of the Uprooted*, 37 *J. Crim. L. & Criminology* 49 (1946-1947)

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THE YOUTH VILLAGE

A Plan for the Reeducation of the Uprooted

Curt Bondy

In the May-June number, 1945, we published an article by Dr. Bondy, entitled: "A Psychological Interpretation of Waywardness." In the following article he indicates some of the problems of the uprooted youth in Europe, and suggests a new form of institution, the youth village, for them and normal together.

The author, now Associate Professor at the Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary in Richmond, Virginia, has had ample experience with normal, uprooted, and criminal youth in different European countries.—EDITOR.

I was called into the Provost Marshal's office and asked to interrogate two German boys about fourteen or fifteen years old, who had been caught stealing G.I. equipment.

I left one of them with the M.P., and took the other to my interrogation room. There I said: "Don't you know that this is a very serious offense? Why did you do it?" He was very reticent and for a long time would say only that he needed money. I learned that his father was killed in Russia in 1943, and that his mother was killed in an air raid.

Finally he began to tell his story:

"When my mother got killed I was all alone. My nearest relatives, an uncle and aunt, lived in D. and I did not care to go to them. I was a member of the Hitler Youth,—we had to be, you know,—and they kept me busy for a while running errands, working with air raid squads, etc. But one day, it was last November, they told our *Gruppe* to report the next day with a little handbag full of clothes. We were to go *schanzen*, digging fortifications and trenches behind the front lines. I then decided to take off. I thought I could get along better by myself or with a few friends, and I did not like the idea of working under military supervision and under strict regulations. I just cleared out of K. and hitch-hiked over to this town, which is bigger than K., where they would not find me so easily. In the beginning I was worried about not having any ration cards, but one day after I hit B., I met a boy of my age who was in the same boat as I and he led me to his 'gang.' They lived in the outskirts of B, in a cellar. The rest of the house was destroyed, and hardly anybody cared very much who was living there since the confusion increased every day by constant air raids and the growing numbers of homeless refugees. We were ten boys and seven girls. Gerhard Boettcher was our leader. He was 17, and he had run away from the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* (forced labor). We slept on mattresses and scounged food. We picked out certain stores, and during air raids we just smashed in the windows, stole some bread, and sometimes even ration coupons or money, and took off. It worked very well. We always had enough to eat, and only twice the police chased us for a few minutes. But we worked very skilfully and never got caught. We worked in pairs, or sometimes three or four together. Never more."

He stopped for a second and looked up into my face, most likely to see how I was taking it. I smoked a cigaret and did not show any special concern. So he continued:

"That went on until the beginning of April. By then the front had come very close and many people fled east. We were no Nazis, we had nothing to be afraid of, and therefore decided to stay. One day the fighting got closer and closer. We stayed in the cellar all day and drank wine and *schnapps* which we had snatched during a raid the day before. We had a good time. Susi, my girl, was singing, and we all joined in. We hoped the Americans would be here before nightfall, and we were looking forward to a lot of good food, and cessation of bombings and shellings. It was two more days, though, before the town was taken. We all ran out on the street when the first tanks rolled into the city and to the *Marktplatz*. Infantry soldiers stood on every corner, and machine guns were posted all over town. Then the occupation started. Posters told us to report to the *Rathaus* to register and to get ration cards. We went there and drew our cards. American officers told us to go back home and not to leave the town. We did not tell them that we had no home. We just went back to our cellar and went on celebrating and drinking. After a few weeks, though, we saw that we got less to eat on our ration cards than we had got before by stealing it. We decided to carry on our old system, only a bit differently. The American soldiers left a lot of stuff in houses unguarded, and we just took a blanket here, a box of rations there, and traded or sold them on the black market. But today Franz and I got caught by two soldiers, and they brought us here. I am sorry I got caught."

He broke off and kept staring at his feet. We turned both boys over to the Military Government and left the decision up to it. They were locked up for a while and then released.

"All over Europe, not in Germany alone, a great part of the youth is uprooted, neglected, wayward. What can be done about it? It will be up to America to do something about the situation, and the sooner the better. If we don't prevent the generation now growing up from becoming criminals, how is the coming peace going to look? . . ."

The quotations above are from a letter which I received from a young soldier overseas. It presents a typical case of a youth in Europe, and at the same time clearly points out the problems involved.

The peace of the world will depend to a large extent on the character forming of the growing generation. Not only political and economic reconstruction but strong and determined educational and reeducational efforts will be necessary. The following plan of a youth village should be part of these efforts.

Children and young people have grown up in an abnormal world and under abnormal conditions. They have either lost or never developed a decent human attitude, and are now without the hold and security which a peaceful world could have given them. In short they are *uprooted*.

This problem of the uprooted young people will confront us in many forms, such as indifference, cynicism, crass egoism,

aversion to work, unwillingness to assume responsibility, neurosis, delinquency, and criminality. The causes are hunger, privations of all sorts, broken families, mistreatment, sickness, homelessness, and the disastrous influence of Nazi doctrines.

As yet we do not know just how deeply Nazism has infected German youth and the youth of other European countries. Two factors especially have perverted their minds. First: the Nazi philosophy based on the theory of the master race which demands the persecution and destruction of all those who are considered as inferior, useless, or opposed to its principles. Second: the abolition of all inhibitions by permission to yield completely to the sadistic and sexual drives.

However, not only these Nazi youth but also many who have been used to a completely abnormal way of living as refugees, underground fighters, and slave workers, in and outside of concentration camps, will confront us with many problems. Many latent psychic disturbances will show up only after some time. Every effort to create a new era in Europe will have to take into account this army of uprooted youth as a serious obstacle to any order.

These problems will certainly not be limited to Europe. Even in America, far from the battle grounds, we are faced with this staggering problem, particularly among youth. Here, however, the problem is small compared with that in Europe.

Do we have methods, institutions and trained people to educate and reeducate those youngsters? It is appropriate to ask what the situation was after the last World War. Then, as now, there were many uprooted people in Europe, but only a few compared to those which we must expect to find now. I am thinking of experiments and of several books, written shortly after the first World War, which reported on the work done at that time with uprooted youth; but looking back now it seems to me that we have made very little progress in the last twenty-five years, as far as work with large groups, especially institutional work, is concerned.

And how about this country? As far as I know, the situation here is as follows: A great deal has been accomplished in diagnosis, in procedures, and in methods of case studies. Moreover, much has been done to develop treatment of individuals through interview therapy, psychoanalysis, shock treatment, etc. In institutional work, however, there has been, with a few exceptions, very little progress beyond the timid beginnings which were described in the above mentioned books. The few outstanding institutions in existence prove only that there are possibilities.

All this sounds very pessimistic, but we can't help being pessimistic when we consider what preparations have been made

for reeducation. For in the postwar period it will be necessary to treat not only individuals but groups and masses in order to have peace. What I know of the great amount of literature on reconstruction, and especially on reeducation, leads me to feel that alarmingly little has been done so far. To be sure, it is certainly important to rebuild the schools and universities, to re-write textbooks, to arrange for an exchange of students, etc. But to do these things alone is not by any means enough in the educational field. Reeducation is tremendously important, but as far as I know there is no large organization that is working on any really comprehensive plan to solve these problems. In a conversation several months ago, a high official of the UNRRA showed great interest in the problem of reeducation but said that this is not the province of UNRRA. True, but whose province is it? Has anything been done, except on a very limited scale to prepare a large staff of teachers, group and social workers for this special task, to work out methods, and to establish institutions?

Though I am very pessimistic, I am not hopeless. Before I set forth my ideas of a youth village, I would like to point out the following: I don't make these suggestions for a particular country. But I believe that the initial work should be done here in America.

Furthermore I speak here solely of the organization, and specific methods, not of the ideals and aims of education. We know that the stronger the philosophical basis, and the more concrete and attractive the tasks, the more effective will be the education, particularly in character-forming. In recent decades we have painfully learned that there is no absolute education, no education in a vacuum. Of course, the specific ideas and goals will vary widely in different countries.

There are no absolute differences in personalities of the uprooted and the "normal." The same can be said for the methods of dealing with them. There are differences only in degree. This is not only a theory; it has been demonstrated in my practical experiences. After I had given up my work in a reformatory for boys, I was for several years director of an agricultural school in Germany which enrolled a selected group of about one hundred Jewish boys and girls. The methods of character-forming used for the latter group were basically the same as those used with wayward. We can and must broaden and improve our methods for reeducation by adding a variety of methods used for character-forming of the normal. If we will furthermore examine, appraise, and apply carefully and wisely the experiences of the different countries, we shall enormously widen educational possibilities. To mention only a few institutions from which we can learn: the voluntary labor

camp, as developed in various European countries; in the United States, the CCC camps, the institutions of the NYA, Father Flanagan's Boy's Town; in Germany the *Landerziehungsheime*; and the Borstal Institutions in England. In all these organizations and institutions is a considerable amount of positive experience that can be evaluated and adapted for the purposes of education and reeducation.

One thing must be entirely clear: the old forms of reeducation, which in all countries are used almost exclusively in prisons, reform schools, and similar institutions, have proved to be ineffective and indeed very dangerous. In general it can be said that these institutions are "universities of crime," from which people usually emerge more corrupt than they were when they went in. The strong opposition of social workers in this country to the use of such institutions for reeducation is based on these experiences, and is fully understandable. As things stand today, a foster home, even though mediocre, is generally preferable to one of the traditional institutions.

We should constantly remember, however, that post-war re-educational tasks will be of such tremendous proportions, and that so many families will be broken up, that there will simply not be enough foster homes. We *must* adopt new kinds of institutions whether we want to or not. Such an innovation is our *youth village*.

There are unlimited possibilities for its organization. It can develop into a combination of industrial school, boarding school, training farm, work camp, summer camp, school for social workers, teachers' college, etc.

It will be *an institution for the normal as well as for the uprooted*. We have learned that it is not possible to provide a pedagogical atmosphere, a basic condition for every kind of positive educational work, in an institution for problem children alone. The suggestion that the normal and the uprooted will live together is our most important new idea, and I am sure that this is at the same time the most debatable part of the plan.

There may be at first some difficulties in recruiting normal children for the various departments of this youth village. I believe however, that there will be enough progressively-minded parents who will be glad to send their children to a good boarding school or a summer camp in such a village. I am sure that there will be many young people of college age who will be very eager to enter a work camp, a teacher's college or a school of social work in the village. I even suppose that especially bright and valuable children and young people will come.

One serious objection will be raised at once: namely, that

often the influence of one or two problem children may thwart all educational efforts with the others. It is true that the youth village can absorb only a certain number of especially difficult people. Selection is necessary. It is probable that in the youth village not so many children of the type generally found in institutions can be tolerated. I think of those children whose waywardness is largely accounted for by inherited conditions such as psychopathy and feeble-mindedness. We will find in the future many more children whose difficulties are caused by environmental influences.

How many problem children, and up to what degree of waywardness can be tolerated, depends on the particular conditions under which the village will be operated. Thus also the decisions as to whether special departments for difficult children should exist in the village, how long they have to stay in them, etc., have to wait. It may even be necessary that some children be expelled from the community temporarily or entirely because they constitute a danger to the rest.

From these considerations it will become clear that our youth village will not solve directly the problems of industrial schools, reformatories and similar institutions. We will have in our village another type of youngsters. We can, however, assume that if this experiment is successful, a great deal will be learned from it for these institutions. New methods will be worked out which will be used, and above all, institutional workers, so badly needed, will be trained.

There is no sense in haggling over the question whether normal and uprooted young people can be educated together. It *must* be tried, not in one, but in many places; and if this idea should turn out to be impracticable, it may mean that re-education on a large scale will not be possible at all.

The important general principles of character-formation cannot be described here in detail; only a few of them will be mentioned briefly. Though we will have to work in such a village with great numbers of children, we cannot and will not renounce *individualization*. A large institution constitutes nothing but a real danger if it means a renunciation of individualization. The smaller the group, the more intensive an influence is possible; but the larger the number of children the greater the possibilities of forming different kinds of congenial groups. In connection with individualization and the forming of small groups stands the principle of personal relationship between the educator and the individual child, which has proven an indispensable necessity in all education.

Authority and freedom, the polar opposites, as Herman Nohl calls them, must be essential elements of all education. Education towards conscious living will be especially stressed. The

more conscious the life of the individual, the greater are the possibilities of successful character-forming and the smaller are the frictions in community life. Education for the community through the community and, in particular, through service and work at common tasks, is of great importance. Everyone must seriously consider himself a responsible part of the community, and must be proud to be a member of it. Every one must have the feeling of "belonging," of security which is so necessary, especially for the uprooted.

The inhabitants of the youth village must be led to develop a definite moral attitude. This will determine how the relationships among the adults, children, children and adults, various age levels, and between the two sexes will develop, and whether ugly talk, dishonesty, shirking, meanness, etc., will prevail. The dominant attitude in the village will itself have a character-building influence.

Everything depends on a sufficient number of leaders who exemplify this attitude in such a way that the others can accept it naturally. We know how positive the influence of a small group, or even of single individuals can be on a larger group which under different influences could develop absolutely negatively. We also know how many irresolute people there are who are not independent enough to stand alone, but who will gladly submit to superior leaders and adopt their basic attitudes.

A high cultural life must prevail in the village. The theater, literature, and especially music must have a very deciding influence on life in the village. Work will play a very great role. Everyone of the inhabitants must be occupied with constructive work and in accordance with his greatest abilities. All work will either serve the purposes of training or must be regularly paid for. The money could be used to pay for room and board, clothing, etc., as has been tried out, apparently with much success, in the George Junior Republics.

The geographical location of such a village will determine the extent to which it can be integrated with the outside. There would be numerous possibilities to influence rural life, agricultural methods, etc.

An important aim in the village will be scientific research and experimentation. I am thinking of systematic analysis of the international literature concerned with these problems, the evaluation and adaptation of new methods in the character-forming of the individual, of groups, and of masses.

From this part of the program it clearly follows that various professional people must cooperate in such a village: psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, physicians, and social workers. But the fundamental difference between our village and so

many former institutions will be the strong emphasis on character-forming, along with diagnostic and research work. The staff must live with the young people. The more devoted workers with families there are the better, because in a community consisting so largely of youth there is always the danger that the young people will not become sufficiently acquainted with good family life, which is extremely necessary for their own development.

A highly important part of the work in the youth village will be the training of institutional workers. In all countries, one of the most fundamental mistakes and handicaps of all institutional education is that it is undertaken by people who are mostly insufficiently trained, or not trained at all. Frequently they do not have an abiding interest in their work, and have accepted positions in institutions because they have failed at something else. It is really astonishing that even though years of specialized training are required for all other educational work, this is not a prerequisite for the especially difficult task of this kind of reeducation. When better trained people have gone into institutions, they have seldom really lived with their charges. It must be conceded that work in the traditional institution has not been very attractive. It is hard to spend all of one's time with wayward and defective people, usually on a farm away from the city, and without cultural stimulation. Another reason why better trained people have not gone into this work has been the relatively low pay which institutional workers receive. All this must be changed in our youth village.

A very significant feature of the youth village will be the extensive use of young people as leaders. We know of the astonishing success frequently attained by young individuals who are only a few years older than those whom they are leading. This has been observed time after time in the Boy Scouts, among junior counselors in summer camps, and in similar situations. It must be systematically utilized and expanded in the youth village. In the desirable collaboration of young people lies one of the reasons why the village shall have a college for the training of teachers and a school for social workers. They will obviously have distinct value for the training of institutional workers. The students shall combine practical and theoretical work; they shall learn and teach at the same time. In this phase of the plan for the youth village we can find great opportunities to influence educational and character-building work throughout the country. For the older workers the combination of teaching and educating in the broadest sense, while actually living with the young people, will be a continuing source of strength, and it will prevent them from becoming

cynical, hopeless, and ineffectual, as such people often do in institutional work.

Let us designate international understanding as the final essential task of the youth village. To arouse and to advance such understanding will be a challenging job in the post-war period, with all its hate, resentment between the nations, and misunderstanding. Young people from various countries will meet each other in this village, will live and work together, as also young people from various social levels will do.

In the work of reconstruction after the war such a youth village could become an important place for genuine educational effort, and it could have a far-reaching influence on the whole educational movement. I am convinced that one prerequisite for a lasting peace must be sound education and, above all else, a profound character-forming.

To some people the whole plan for this youth village may seem fantastic, visionary, and therefore impracticable. I believe, however, that in these days of vast material and moral destruction, we can effect a genuine reconstruction only with very far-sighted and daring plans. Our time is fantastic, and it demands fantastic plans.