

# Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds

## A sociocultural community arts project about migration: Travelling exhibition, book publication and video documentation

### Final Report, March 2004

Heinz Nigg<sup>1</sup>

*Migration confronts natives with foreigners and immigrants with being foreign. But how does one give these abstract processes a human face? The sociocultural community arts project "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" brought together people directly and indirectly affected by migration in many ways - through collective recollection in oral history workshops and the exhibition of video portraits.*

In 1998 seventy migrants from various countries discussed their life stories in oral history workshops in Zurich. Their experiences of migration were turned into a book (Nigg 1999), a video documentation (Nigg 2002), and into an exhibition at the Design Museum (*Museum für Gestaltung*) in Zurich. For over two years a travelling exhibition of video portraits of migrants toured German-speaking Switzerland.<sup>2</sup> The oral history workshops and exhibition were conceived from the beginning as a sociocultural community arts project with the goal of encouraging understanding between natives and foreigners in Switzerland.

#### Culture in movement

Sociocultural community arts<sup>3</sup> deal with the concerns and problems of societal groups using participatory, creative and media methods, makes them available for public discussion and so contributes to sustainable community development. Sociocultural community arts have been in use in community and youth work, and also in alternative media and in politically engaged art projects, since the 1970s. What the specific quality of a 'culture in movement' constitutes is clearly expressed in a book about the "Kulturmobil" sociocultural community arts project of the Swiss cultural foundation Pro Helvetia, specifically "the implementation of contents in a plenitude of forms of creative expression, which are placed on an even footing with each other and applied in various lifestyles". (c.f. Bürer in Pro Helvetia 2001: 10). The "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" project connects with such a participative-creative understanding of sociocultural community arts. Video was used in this not simply as a tool of oral history research but as an audiovisual communications medium to ease public engagement.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Heinz Nigg, cultural anthropologist, was the initiator and project head of "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds". Today he is a lecturer in sociocultural community arts at the School of Social and Community Work in Luzern.

<sup>2</sup> The research and exhibition project was supported by the Social Department of the City of Zurich, which arranged the oral history workshops with the migrants and financed them. Additionally the Fachstelle für Interkulturelle Fragen (FiF) of the president's department of the City of Zurich contributed financially and with personnel resources. Other financial aid was given by: Bundesamt für Kultur, Pro Helvetia, Volkart Stiftung, Cassinelli-Vogel Stiftung, Grütli-Stiftung und Zürcher Kantonalbank. Major contributions were made to the financing of the travelling exhibition by: die Eidgenössische Ausländerkommission (EKA) des Bundesamtes für Ausländerfragen, der Kanton Zürich und die Sophie und Karl Binding Stiftung. Unterstützt haben auch: Pro Helvetia, Stiftung Bildung und Entwicklung, Caritas Schweiz, Kantone Appenzell IR, Appenzell AR, Basel-Landschaft, Bern, Graubünden, Thurgau, Zug und die Firma cablecom. Patronat: Nationale Schweizerische UNESCO-Kommission, Eidgenössische Kommission gegen Rassismus, Schweizerisches Forum für Migrationsstudien, Schweizerische Konferenz der kantonalen Erziehungsdirektoren und Pro Juventute.

<sup>3</sup> English: community work und community arts; French: *animation socioculturelle*. In Germany and Austria the term *Freizeitpädagogik* is commonly used.

### **Working with living memories**

The differing realities of migration were investigated from the start of the "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" project through collaboration with the directly affected. The migrants taking part in the oral history workshops discussed their life stories for over half a year. They came from Italy, Germany, Hungary, Turkey, and former Yugoslavia to Switzerland. Swiss people who moved from remote mountainous regions in central Switzerland, Wallis and Graubunden in the 1940s and 1950s were also involved. The seven workshops, organised by language community, offered the participants a platform for them to express their experiences with migration and, in the mirror of others' experiences, to group and interpret them anew. In the Swiss group the awareness developed that the flight from the land of the 1940s and 1950s can also be understood as a process of migration and can be readily compared to the experiences of many foreign immigrants.

All the participants contributed their own competences to the illumination of the migration process from various perspectives. They approached this with great openness. The narration of stories of migration brought many forgotten things back within recall; joy, rage and sorrow were all relived. In some workshops disputes arose, for instance about men and women's different experiences of migration, or about the difficulties of foreigners and natives living together. It sometimes required great skill on the part of the workshop moderators to focus the discussions again and again on the experiences of migration. Guiding topics helped to structure the workshop evenings, and to make the materials of the migrants, such as personal items, documents, interview records and videos available for migration research. The interest in intercultural exchange was as important for participation in the workshops as the readiness to make the results of working with memories public through the exhibition. Several workshop groups met up after the end of the project, and the Serb-speaking group under the leadership of Erika Sommer and Dejan Mikic published a further anthology of autobiographical texts (Mikic/Sommer 2003).

### **Video portraits on tour**

The results of the workshops were presented in the "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" exhibition at the Design Museum (*Museum für Gestaltung*) in Zurich. This was the first time that the world of migration had been shown in Switzerland from the point of view of migrants. A selection of the video portraits presented in the museum went on tour in a further phase of the project and went on display in the following places in German-speaking Switzerland and abroad: Rheinfelden, Luzern (2x), Zofingen, Zürich (3x), Bern, Zug, Kloten, Langenthal, Romanshorn, St. Gallen, Liestal, Pratteln, Wien, Basel, Frauenfeld, Luxemburg, Maienfeld, Altdorf, Hölstein, Emmen und Schlieren<sup>4</sup>.

On nine screens seven portraits of migrants were shown which told of leaving home, arriving, and of life in the new place. On one screen, migrants' articles, documents and photos which recalled the leaving and arriving were to be seen. On the ninth screen, ten children, who have come to Switzerland from Sri Lanka, Angola, India, Vietnam, Iraq und Macedonia, answered the question: "what would you like to be when you grow up?"

The travelling exhibition was complemented with a programme at the various display locations, which included social and cultural institutions, as well as secondary schools, vocational schools and universities of applied science. In addition, there were readings, public discussions, information sessions, artistic presentations, and events. In Bern and Zurich school classes were actively included in producing and obtaining locally researched contents on the topics of migration and integration. In Rheinfelden, Zofingen, St. Gallen und Frauenfeld other parts of the project were developed which were integrated into the exhibition. All the project leaders contributed through their engagement to deepening the sociocultural community arts process and anchoring the project regionally. The exhibits which were collected and presented in Rheinfelden, Zofingen, St. Gallen und Frauenfeld attest to the traces that migration has left in the lives of the affected people: objects which have become dear, which recall a close person, an important moment, or a tradition, but also photos and everyday objects, songs and recipes, which serve to document other, often antithetical, worlds.

---

<sup>4</sup> for route and display locations, see appendix

### **The courage to address prejudices**

"The various people in the video portraits have experienced very impressive things."

"I was impressed that the interviewees spoke without inhibitions and quite openly about their lives."

"It was nothing new for me, because I know the opinions and attitudes of immigrants (I'm an Italian Swiss)."

"I accept the foreigners if they try to integrate into our people."

These are just a few of the impressions that were left by the exhibition on over 20,000 visitors, including 730 school classes and other groups. All the specialists who worked with the exhibition, whether teachers, youth workers or adult educators, were challenged to moderate the process of understanding about migration and integration. This was not always an easy undertaking, as a vocational school teacher's survey of his students indicated. One young apprentice said about foreigners: "In my opinion, there are too many. And a great many of them have themselves a great life at our expense." But youths who knew of migration at close hand also expressed criticisms of foreigners: "the foreigners know everything that they can have and they always want more! They should help themselves somehow. There are so many foreigners who have been here for decades and could also help themselves." This is what one Swiss-born school student, whose mother is from Sweden and whose father is from Italy, said. According to the teacher, his challenge lay in not simply passing by extreme generalisations but in turning them to discussions. A lecturer of the Lucerne School of Social and Community Work approved of this strategy of involvement. She could observe, she said, youths with swastikas on their clothing visiting the exhibition with a school class. At first they hung around the book table, but then went to the video portraits, sat and listened.

The echos from the travelling exhibition show that there is a need to learn more about the background of xenophobia and about covert and open racism in Switzerland. One reservation expressed by student teachers in Zurich was that so much is reported in the media about war and refugees that nothing really penetrates any more. Human feelings cease, and it is in precisely such conditions that xenophobia flourishes. The other side of the problem is connected with everyday life in school: "where are the concrete integration strategies? As future teachers we're going to be working in classes with 30 to 50% foreigners. Encounters with migrants are part of our everyday life. But how can I be sensitive and avoid pitfalls? How can I solve or avoid difficult situations?" asked the student teachers. But experienced teachers were also sometimes challenged when dealing with social and cultural differences, as a cantonal school teacher from Oerlikon reported: the exhibition gave him the opportunity to become aware, over a period of two hours, that he deals with people at school who are from various ethnic, religious, and social backgrounds. They must all become familiar with the gerund, the subjunctive, or with Swiss history. Finally, however, the issue is not about dealing with the material, but simply about listening and, in the best case, understanding somewhat better.

### **Critical approach to difference**

Does a travelling exhibition such as "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" succeed in encouraging a critical approach to the self-perception and perception of others on the part of natives and foreigners? One speaker at the opening in Zofingen emphasised how important it is, in a country like Switzerland with a strongly ethnocentric world view to assert the existence of other, contrasting worlds again and again: "one's engagement with the world of one's own culture, origin, the world of the familiar, of mother- and father-tongue, of belief and hopes, is omnipresent. With ever-increasing mobility, one's connection to one's roots remains, and above all, the longing, as soon as one is away from it, for the familiar. Living in a new world means, especially, dealing with the unknown, finding one's bearings in an environment which has often been previously idealised. It means, too, fitting one's dreams, which have often been one's only baggage, into the reality of the everyday."

However, such a view of culture as a contrasting view of the world carries the intrinsic danger of essentialisation, i.e., of making cultural difference absolute. Migration and integration are then perceived as largely cultural problems and less as problems of Swiss society in economic and social change. Terms such as migration and integration are constructs which serve self-perception and the ascription of the foreign. In the final analysis, every approach to these terms is to do with the negotiation of identities between different social groups. All intercultural projects are faced with the danger of essentialisation. It is all the more important, therefore, to direct constant attention to this problem. The exhibition coordinator in Bern recommends the practice of critical self-reflection, rather than simply informing oneself about foreign cultures and religions. Migration should also be dealt with as the normal case rather than the exception, since migration affects us all.

### **Sociocultural projects as a modern form of communication**

From the experience of the "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" travelling exhibition, the author draws the following points:

Firstly, abstract themes such as migration and integration excite interest when they are attractively presented - as events, exhibitions, or as teaching materials. The "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" travelling exhibition fulfilled this requirement according to feedback from teachers: the exhibition offered a "modern form of encounter" with the phenomenon of migration, and the time needed for a visit to the exhibition corresponded with the emotional and intellectual engagement with the theme." The living basis of the exhibition enabled the migrants to speak directly. For instance, the exhibition coordinator in St Gallen confirmed that migrants in employment programmes or German courses valued visiting an exhibition which showed not just the problems of migration but also success stories too.

Secondly, the feedback from visitors to "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" clearly shows that the combination of migration research, sociocultural community arts and educational work is a necessary precondition to assisting the plurality of voices and participation in the migration and integration discourse to a breakthrough. Practically oriented everyday research involving various social groups enabled a critical approach to images of self-perception and the perception of foreigners.

Thirdly, for a travelling exhibition such as "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" to achieve resonance in every location, knowledgeable action and communication plans are needed. These not only involve reaching the target groups through professional publicity. What is as important is networking with other projects and centres which deal with migration and integration in that region.

And fourthly, in intercultural exchange projects such as "Here and Away. Living in Two Worlds" must combat the essentialisation of cultural terms, so that prejudices about migrants are removed rather than reinforced.

-----

### **Publications**

- Mikic, Dejan; Sommer, Erika (Hrsg.) (2003): "Als Serbe warst du plötzlich nichts mehr wert". Serben und Serbinnen in der Schweiz. Zürich.
- Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (1999): "Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten". Immigration und Binnenwanderung in der Schweiz. Mit Beiträgen von Anita Dahinden, Musa Dursun, Andrea Eugster, Sabine Fischer, Susanne Gisel-Pfankuch, Therese Halfhide, Raphaela Hettlage, Elisabeth Joris, Erika Keil, Dejan Mikic, Heinz Nigg, Rosanna Raths-Cappai, Susanne Rudolf, Sandrine Schilling, Nadine Schneider, Olga Serafimovski Milenkovic, Hava Shala Gerguri, Kaatje Sprenger, Nicole Tellenbach und Viktoria Toth. Limmat Verlag, Zürich.

- Nigg, Heinz (Hrsg.) (2002): "Da und fort. Leben in zwei Welten". Videodokumentation auf DVD und VHS. Limmat Verlag, Zürich.
- Pro Helvetia (Hrsg.) (2001): Kultur in Bewegung. Das Projekt Kulturmobil der Stiftung Pro Helvetia. Grundsätze, Methoden, Bedingungen und Erfahrungen. Mit Beiträgen von Ingrid Ballenthin Hermann, Margrit Bürer, Jean-Marc Genier, Pio Gonzato, Rolf Keller, Orazio Martinetti, Rita Rudaz, Marcel Sonderegger, Reto Stäheli, U. Werner Winterberger und Rachele Zurini. Chronos Verlag, Zürich.

### **Borrowing from the Swiss Social Archive in Zurich**

All original video portraits, video transcripts, brochures from the oral history workshops and pictures of objects are deposited at the Swiss Social Archive. The video portraits can be borrowed without charge. Public access to these comprehensive materials is thus guaranteed.

### **Appendix: display locations of the travelling exhibition**

Zürich: November 1999 - Januar 2000 (Museum für Gestaltung)  
 Rheinfelden: 07. - 22. 06. 2001 (Quartierzentrum Augarten)  
 Luzern: 14. 07 - 04. 08. 2001 (Kulturraum Hotel Löwengraben)  
 Zofingen: 22. 08. - 09. 09. 2001 (Altes Bezirksgebäude)  
 Zürich-Oerlikon: 10. 11. - 29. 11. 2001 (Kantonsschule)  
 Bern: 03. - 21. 12. 2001 (Sekundarlehreramt - Universität Bern)  
 Zürich: 08. - 31. 01. 2002 (Baugewerbliche Berufsschule und Berufsmittelschule)  
 Zug: 20. 02. - 13. 03. 2002 (Kantonsschule)  
 Kloten: 15. 03 - 03. 04. 2002 (Stadtbibliothek)  
 Langenthal: 29. 04. - 16. 05. 2002 (Gymnasium)  
 Romanshorn: 18. 05. - 08. 06. 2002 (Kantonsschule)  
 St. Gallen: 11. 06. - 23. 06. 2002 (Migrosklubschule)  
 Liestal: 9. 09. - 29. 09. 2002 (Jugendhaus)  
 Pratteln: 14. 10. - 31. 10. 2002 (Jugendhaus)  
 Luzern: 04. - 30. 11. 2002 (Hochschule für Soziale Arbeit)  
 Wien: 13. - 17. 01. 2003 Projektpräsentation und Kulturaustausch (Institut für Ethnologie, Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie der Universität Wien)  
 Basel: 27. 01. - 07. 02. 2003 (Allgemeine Gewerbeschule)  
 Frauenfeld: 18. 03. - 03. 04. 2003 (Verwaltungsgebäude des Kantons Thurgau)  
 Dudelange/Luxembourg: 15. 05 - 01. 06. 2003 (Le Centre de documentation sur les Migrations Humaines)  
 Maienfeld: 19. 05. - 01. 06. 2003 (Kultur- und Museumsverein Herrschaft)  
 Altdorf: 24. 06. - 01. 07. 2003 (Tellspielhaus Altdorf)  
 Zürich-Enge: 01. - 12. 09. 2003 (Kantonsschule Freudenberg)  
 Hölstein: 13. 10. - 09. 11. 2003 (Leuenberg - Tagungsort der ref. Kirchen Basel-Landschaft)  
 Emmen: 11. 11. - 21. 11. 2003 (Berufsbildungszentrum)  
 Schlieren: 24. 11. - 30. 11. 2003 (Schulhaus Kalktarren)

Nigg, Heinz (1999) Here and away. Living in two worlds. Zurich: www.migrant.ch  
 Translation: Simon Milligan



Except where otherwise noted, this site is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 2.5 License: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>