

# Role models for empathy and openness – *Berlin and us!*

A CONVERSATION WITH MARGRIT LENSSEN\*

*In the German documentary series **Berlin und wir!** (Berlin and us!, ZDF), young refugees meet with teenagers from Berlin. Why did you decide to do this project?*

**Lenssen:** We worked intensively on the refugee topic, and in this context we questioned our role as editors of children's television: What are our duties when it comes to information and awareness-raising? And what constructive contribution can we make? That was the starting point. In our research, we then found that adolescent refugees often spent time with each other and didn't have many German friends. That was why we came up with the idea of bringing together refugee teenagers with German teenagers. The goal was to see whether and how they grew together when they made an effort to meet. We also wanted to show that of course empathy is the most important point in light of the teenagers' dramatic fates. But we didn't want to reduce them to a "victim role" – instead, we

wanted to emphasise that they have talents and strengths. That they can contribute something to society and, like all other teenagers, want to have fun and be creative.

*How did you continue?*

**Lenssen:** In the programme, one teenager from Berlin and one teenage refugee do something together. That's why we looked for 4 teenagers from Berlin and 4 teenage refugees before starting who in part had similar passions and talents. It was supposed to be something they could share with one another. It was important to us that the teenagers didn't have a problem speaking in front of the camera. They were supposed to be courageous enough to say how they felt in various situations. Besides that, we didn't want the group as a whole to be too homogenous. That is why we took care that the teenagers' characters were different enough so that, for example, not each of them was dominant in the group.

After we found the teenagers, we accompanied the 11- to 15-year-olds for 3 months with a camera. The 8 girls and boys met regularly in their "home base", a creative room in a school. From there, 2 of them would go off to have an experience in Berlin. They spent their free time together and met the other's family. The focus was as much on fun and action as on discussions of topics such as home, flight, or tolerance. At the end, the 8 developed a music video together (Ill. 1). There is a blog online that also offers exclusive videos and background information. The adolescents also filmed themselves with mobile phones we provided them and these clips are also posted on the website.

*Was it hard to find adolescent refugees who wanted to be filmed?*

**Lenssen:** It certainly wasn't easy because the families were very careful, and rightfully so. For example, during the casting, a bus with refugees was attacked in Saxony, Eastern Germany, and it was hard for us to find girls who wanted to participate. Parents even took back their consent for their children to participate in the project because they were worried about their children in light of the xenophobic atmosphere. Some families didn't want to be filmed because they are still persecuted. For example, the father of one of our protagonists was murdered by ISIS. The boy told us in front of the camera about the circumstances. When all the episodes were finished, we then decided to go back and edit out parts in which the boy had talked about his home country. We



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Ill. 1: The music-loving adolescents from *Berlin and us!* want to start a band



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Ill. 2: Malina watches Rashad praying for the first time. The clothing and prayer ritual are still unfamiliar to her

didn't want anyone to be able to draw conclusions about where he had lived and what exactly happened.

In general, all the adolescents we filmed have had difficult fates. We tell part of their stories of flight, but even they themselves didn't want to bring up everything again because these stories could – understandably – continue to bring them down. At home they're already confronted with the fact that some of their parents are traumatised. All of these life situations and encounters made this project the most moving, most challenging, and most unusual I've ever supervised.

### **Was it also their fates that moved you most?**

**Lenssen:** What I found especially touching was this incredible curiosity about each other and how they absorbed everything new like a sponge. The development we could see particularly in the adolescent refugees was also moving. In the course of the project, they spoke up more and more, stood by their positions, and grew. It was amazing to see how the whole group grew together, how everyone relaxed and became cheekier. I have a lot of respect for the openness and empa-

thy they all showed each other. In this sense, these teenagers were well-suited as role models for our viewers. They could offer orientation and show how to approach one another.

### **Were there also disagreements among the protagonists?**

**Lenssen:** Certainly there were conflicts and differing opinions. The 11-year-old Rashad from Syria, for example, told the Berlin girl Malina in one episode that she wants to wear a head scarf as soon as she turns 12. Malina is very interested in this but can't understand it at all. She thinks that Muslim girls are forced to wear head scarves. Rashad tries to explain to her that she'll still be the same girl even if she decides to wear a head scarf. And that it therefore doesn't matter whether she decides to do it or not. We allowed these different opinions to co-exist without commenting on them because we want everyone to form their own opinions on it (Ill. 2).

### **Do you also touch on clichés?**

**Lenssen:** We don't ourselves, but the adolescents bring up prejudices on their own. For example, when 2 protagonists talk about their different belief systems. In the discussion, one girl says that Muslim kids are often disrespected and all lumped together just because of their religion. Later they talk about the topic more in the group. In another example, a refugee boy unintentionally disproves the common stereotype that all refugees have to be poor. Someone can have experienced something awful and still own expensive things. It was something that happened by chance, and we also do not explain it in the programme. It was more important to us to show how the group grew together.

### **In the project, the protagonists act within a set framework. Do you think that they are still behaving authentically?**

**Lenssen:** Of course we create the framework "leisure time". But when

adolescents go to a summer camp, that is also constructed and they still behave authentically, just like our protagonists. They aren't actors, we didn't cast them through an agency but in schools, refugee homes, or other institutions. That means they aren't acting because they haven't learned it as a profession. Besides that, we show them in various, typical everyday situations that are a part of their regular lives. For example, 2 girls ride in a soapbox car because it's one of the girl's hobby, and they just have fun doing it. A lot of things just arose naturally in the situations. And while filming we also experienced surprises. For example, that a Syrian girl's parents are separated. These are perfectly normal topics that children here are also familiar with. And the protagonists talked about them in the same way as they would in other documentaries.

### **With your experience now, how can you educate young viewers on the topic of refugees in an age-appropriate way?**

**Lenssen:** It is important that you make the perspectives of the people who live in Germany understandable but also those of the people who had to leave their country. And that you create points on which they are equal and can experience something together. That is a good starting point because when you do something together then you also start to understand each other. ■

The interview was led by Genia Baranowski.

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