Kids of Courage

A DRAMA SERIES ON THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE HOLOCAUST FOR 8- TO 12-YEAR-OLDS

Lene Neckel

The editor of Kids of Courage (Der Krieg und ich) describes the considerations and requirements which influenced the development and realization of the children’s series.

THE IDEA

The Second World War and the Holocaust – are these really suitable subjects for children? 4 years ago we answered this question with “yes”, and since then we have often been shocked by the extent to which current socio-political debates about xenophobia, intolerance, anti-Semitism and discrimination have proved us right on a daily basis. We can learn from history. “The irredeemable memory of the Holocaust also makes us aware of the vulnerability of our freedom and democracy. Civilisation should never be taken for granted. (…) Contempt for other people is never harmless. Underestimating and looking away can be the starting point for a new catastrophe”¹, writes Charlotte Knobloch, former President of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, in an article in the Süddeutsche Zeitung in 2013², demanding that our commemorative culture should not remain in the past. For us, this was the impetus to present the important themes regarding the Second World War to a young target group in an appropriate way. We had already found our ideal partner in this project – LOOKSfilm. This was the beginning of a tightrope walk we had to undertake together. First of all we had to work together to find a method, appropriate to the target group, of capturing the horrors of the Holocaust episodically and without trivialising history.

THE PROGRAMME

The drama series Kids of Courage³ tells the story of the international fates of war-time children in 8 half-hour episodes. Each episode focuses on a particular protagonist and tells his/her story in a typical LOOKSfilm way: the scenic drama is flanked by archive material and reinforced by a model world; authenticity is provided by voices from the period (quotations from letters and diaries). The first important step in our tightrope walk was to find 8 suitable stories, for our protagonists’ stories had to satisfy many requirements. The basis of every story is an effective hero/heroine’s journey and therefore a gripping dramaturgy. In addition, we were giving an account of a “dust-covered” history. However, we never do this for the sake of history itself, rather with the aim of forming a bridge between the past and the present. We want to convey to our target group how current these themes are, how strongly history determines our everyday lives today, our world, and their world too, and how far they themselves can benefit from the experiences of our protagonists.

For a tangible example of this, let’s look at the first of our 8 episodes. We begin our drama series with 10-year-old Anton, who wants to become a member of the Hitler Youth, even though his father is against this (Ill. 1). Group dynamics, vouching for friends – these are issues our protagonist Anton must deal with in a very existential form. They are issues, however, which every child is concerned with on a daily basis.

Children in the center

Our aim is to consider the war years from children’s actual perspectives and...
to place their issues in the foreground. Many children wrote diaries during the Second World War. These notes and authentic stories form the basis for our episodes. Despite concentrating on the children’s perspectives, we also wanted to keep the watershed moments in the history of the war in focus, not only from a German but also from an international perspective.

**Multi-perspectivity**
As well as the experiences of German children, *Kids of Courage* also focuses on the French, Czech and other nationalities’ perspectives on this period. The intention is for viewers to consider the years 1939 to 1945 from several perspectives, not only in terms of nationalities but also in terms of the protagonists’ positions in relation to the events of the war, i.e. as victims, perpetrators or followers. With this transnational, multiperspectival concept of history we have tried to incorporate current history pedagogy and promote understanding and tolerance. Whereas in the case of Anton from Germany we tell the story of what happened on 9.11.1938, the Night of Broken Glass, in Germany, in the second episode we go to Norway and tell the story of what the outbreak of war and the occupation of his country felt like for the fisher boy Fritjof. In the name of resilience, we tried to find a conciliatory ending for our episodes which would be historically tenable and would not downplay history.

**Scientific supervision**
Resilience on the one hand – the danger of historical misrepresentation on the other. The image of the steep ridge never quite left us. And so, just as we have to take our time if we are walking the tightrope – prepare ourselves well and, if necessary, secure the route one more time –, we took our time with the project *Kids of Courage*, and we secured the route. The project was intensively supervised from as early as the treatment (story) phase, so that we could do justice to the subject with a particular sense of responsibility and carefulness. For added security, we also brought in experts in this early phase of the project. The IZI gave the project scientific support in the form of a study series, and even the treatments were discussed with the target group in advance (see also Götz & Holler in this issue). The results in turn informed the project. In addition, we engaged the historian Kathrin Kollmeier as a historical compass and asked her to check the details.

In the course of the treatment phase, all these individual aspects gave rise to the following orientation in our drama series in terms of its content:

1. *Anton from Germany* (Ill. 1)
   - Hitler Youth and family in the Third Reich
2. *Fritjof from Norway*
   - Occupation and resistance
3. *Sandrine from France* (Ill. 2)
   - Humanity and solidarity
4. *Calum from Scotland*
   - Aerial warfare and the home front
5. *Romek from Poland*
   - Life in the ghetto
6. *Vera from the Soviet Union*
   - Flight and war orphans
7. *Justus from Germany*
   - Child soldiers
8. *Eva from Czechoslovakia*
   - Concentration camp and liberation

**Narrative levels**
The narrative structure of the storyline follows the classic dramaturgical hero/heroine’s journey. Our 24-minute episodes, however, are divided into several narrative levels.

**Storyline**
The protagonist is at the centre of the storyline; s/he takes the children with him/her through his/her story, creating much potential for identification. The drama makes the fates of the war-time children subjectively comprehensible and concrete for our young viewers. We try to convert complex social processes into everyday conflicts and situations and thereby represent them.

**Archive material**
The scenic action is interlaced with, and complemented by, archive material. This conveys the authenticity of our story, explains the historical context and directs attention to fascinating historical aspects.

The archive material was carefully and laboriously researched in order to ensure, again, that the children were the focal point. We tried to shoot the scenes, as far as possible, from the perspective of the children and at their eye level. With scientific support, we deliberately explored the limits of visual representation, particularly with regard
to the Holocaust. We refrained from using images which would overwhelm the children (e.g. corpses, disfigured bodies, etc.).

**Model world**

We reinforced the combination of scenic and archive material through a model world (Ill. 3). For this purpose, the protagonists and locations were replicated down to the last detail and lovingly staged by our Polish colleagues at Toto Studio.

This model world has, to some extent, numerous very different functions within individual episodes. On the one hand, it serves to create space. It creates moments of relief and helps the children keep track of their own feelings. At the same time, through the artistic degree of abstraction, it makes it possible to convey difficult information in an emotionally distanced way.

**Authentic voices**

We then added a further element to these 3 levels: authentic voices from the period. These are children’s voices which have been recorded reading out quotations from letters and diaries.

The topic of the Second World War brings with it many horrors, many of which we cannot expect children to be able to confront, for this would result in them closing themselves off to them. We would nevertheless like to help children approach the topic of the Holocaust. On the one hand, because it is part of the Second World War and we have to confront it in our engagement with this period, and on the other, because we agree with Charlotte Knobloch: the atrocities warn us how vulnerable our freedom, humanity and democracy may be. And this warning is particularly important for the younger generation. That is why, in one episode, we decided to deal with the subject of life in a ghetto. To this end, we created Romek, the Polish boy. In our final episode, we present our protagonist, Eva, experiencing the liberation of Auschwitz.

We endowed both protagonists with a great deal of strength and put friends at their side who could offer particular kinds of support. We also granted them a little bit of luck, for the children are supposed to identify with these protagonists too, and engage with them emotionally. Here too, the IZI study gave us a clear point of orientation. A first, undeveloped form of treatment left the children scope for misunderstanding with regard to a concentration camp. When we developed it, we made sure no more misinterpretations could arise.

While we ensured the key historical themes were unambiguous, we left scope for the children’s own interpretations on the level of emotional experience. For example, Romek is only able to save himself from the ghetto; his parents have to go to the assembly point. On the way out, Romek asks his friend Shlomo to look after his parents. Only when Shlomo promises this is Romek willing to leave the ghetto. Outside the ghetto, he is accommodated by friends and hopes to see his parents again after the war. In the historical context this is a hope that will be disappointed, but it is not conveyed as such.

With this openness, we want to give the children an appropriate safe space, depending on how willing each individual child is to confront the reality, and depending on how strong individual children still need the protective cloak around the protagonists to be. We want to take the children and their questions seriously. War, flight and expulsion – these themes are still omnipresent today, and our children pick up on them. We want to give them the opportunity to become active and engage with these themes. We set off on our tightrope walk together with all these and many other considerations and requirements, and we developed 8 screenplays about 8 very special protagonists. We came to be fond of each of these protagonists, and the production team realised these stories with an unbelievable love of detail. Now we hope that lots of children will be rooting for our protagonists.

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**NOTES**

1 Translated from German.

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**THE AUTHOR**

Lene Neckel is Editor at the SWR in Baden-Baden, Germany.