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## CHILDREN'S VILLAGES AS COMPENSATION FOR NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF ORPHANHOOD

**A b s t r a c t.** Recently many scholars have been interested in the problem of orphanhood. New publications are being issued which are devoted to new types of this negative – for the whole society – phenomenon. The statistics concerning orphanhood are becoming each year more and more alarming; they present an increasing nature of this phenomenon. SOS Children's Villages, alongside adoptive and foster families, provide the best conditions of bringing up orphaned children. This is due to their family character and the fact they function like natural families. The idea of SOS Children's Villages, based on the four main principles – the mother, siblings, the house and home, the village – guarantees that a whole new world is created for a child. It is a world in which the child gains a real home, a loving mum (or both parents) and siblings. SOS families who follow the foremost principles of love, respect and trust create an environment which can fully compensate for orphanhood and guarantee a proper child development.

**Key words:** orphanhood, children's villages, compensation.

### INTRODUCTION

The socio-political changes of the last twenty years have created a new attitude towards institutional care for orphaned and abandoned children in Poland. The changes culminated in the works on the reform of the children

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and family care system. On the one hand, there is decentralisation of decisions and delegating the responsibility for their implementation, on the other hand, we observe individualisation of care in its various forms. As a result, there is greater freedom in searching for effective solutions and, what is more, the newly established multifunctional care centres are a genuine attempt to remedy the weaknesses of the institutional system that was prevalent in Poland until recently.

The paper presents the problem of orphanhood, its causes and consequences. It also covers an important issue of the foundation of SOS Children's Villages, which are still quite a rare form of care for abandoned children in Poland.

### 1. ORPHANHOOD – TERMINOLOGY

In social pedagogy orphanhood is defined as: "a situation when a child is permanently or temporarily deprived of the chances to be brought up in his own family because the family is not able to ensure proper conditions and support for the child's care and education"<sup>1</sup>. In common use, the terms 'natural orphanhood' and 'social orphanhood' are probably most frequently applied. W. Okoń claims that natural orphanhood is a situation when a child has lost his parents; when both parents are dead, the child is an orphan, when one parent is dead, the child is a half (or single) orphan. In the case when a child is deprived of proper parental care, we can also speak of: unnatural orphanhood, seeming orphanhood ('sieroctwo pozorne'), spiritual orphanhood, psychological orphanhood, emotional orphanhood, temporary orphanhood, permanent orphanhood, repeated orphanhood ('sieroctwo wtórne'), legal orphanhood, familylessness. Some authors suggest that social orphans should be referred to as 'children with social needs', by analogy with the term 'children with special needs' and thus relating these children to the area of special pedagogy<sup>2</sup>.

Social orphanhood is difficult to define because it covers a very broad area of various incomparable situations. According to A. Szyborska it

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<sup>1</sup> D. L a l a k & T. Pilch (Eds.), *Elementarne pojęcia pedagogiki społecznej i pracy socjalnej*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak” 1999, p. 268. (All quotations in this paper are translated from the Polish by the author.)

<sup>2</sup> W. O k o ń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Akademickie „Żak” 2001, p. 354.

means “an objective situation when living parents do not provide their child with care, upbringing and educational assistance; but it can also take place when a child stays away from home for a long time and has insufficient contact with his parents or no contact at all”<sup>3</sup>. A. Łuczyński, on the other hand, reminds that originally the term ‘orphanhood’ was unambiguous and referred to natural (biological) orphanhood, that is the loss of one or both parents (half orphanhood and orphanhood respectively). Whereas, those cases when parents abandoned their children, were referred to as ‘abandonment’<sup>4</sup>.

Nowadays, the term ‘orphan’ is used with the reference to many groups of children who have both or at least one parent. J. Maciaszkowa proposes using the term ‘natural orphanhood’ with the reference to the original, traditional understanding of orphanhood whereas all other cases of orphanhood should be called ‘social orphanhood’<sup>5</sup>.

A. Szymborska coined one of the earliest definitions of orphanhood. According to her it is primarily the absence of proper parental care. Szymborska proposes two definitions of social orphanhood – in its broader and narrower sense. In the broader sense, orphanhood refers to a situation when a child staying with parents receives insufficient care. In the narrower sense, social orphanhood refers to a situation when a child has been abandoned. In other words, the child is not only deprived of proper care, but also deprived of any contact with his parents; alternatively, contact with parents may be so weak that it becomes meaningless for the child<sup>6</sup>. Szymborska distinguishes three degrees of orphanhood: the highest, medium and lowest. We are dealing with the highest degree of orphanhood when a child has been completely abandoned by his parents and has no contact with them – he never sees them, they do not visit him, do not invite him home, they do not write letters and all the care and responsibilities are taken over by other people. The medium degree of orphanhood consists in a partial and unstable contact with the parents – a child sees his parents rarely and irregularly, in fact he never knows if and when he is going to see the parents. This type of relationship

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<sup>3</sup> A. Szymborska, *Sieroctwo społeczne*, Warszawa: Wiedza Powszechna 1969, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> A. Łuczyński, *Dzieci w rodzinach zastępczych i dysfunkcjonalnych*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL 2008, p. 87.

<sup>5</sup> J. Maciaszkowa, *Z teorii i praktyki pedagogiki opiekuńczej*, Warszawa: WSiP 1991, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> S. Badora, *Uczucia i profesjonalizm. O formach opieki zastępczej*, Częstochowa: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Pedagogicznej 1998, p. 23.

may last for years, but, as a rule, it is unstable and very often it finally comes to an end, although in some cases it may increase and strengthen. The third type, the lowest degree of orphanhood takes place when the child's contact with his parents is fairly frequent, but not daily and not necessarily regular. The parents – although with changing frequency – visit their child, invite him home, are interested in his health, behaviour and education<sup>7</sup>.

S. Kozak proposes a different terminology: social orphanhood “sensu stricto” and “sensu largo”. The former refers to children in orphanages, while the latter refers to those staying in families which however do not provide them with sufficient and proper care<sup>8</sup>. W. Okoń proposes his own definitions. For him, orphanhood means a condition in which the child's parents (or one of them) are dead. That means natural orphanhood. When a child has lost his parents due to family breakdown or its moral degeneration, the author speaks of social orphanhood. In both cases the result is the same: the child is deprived of normal family environment<sup>9</sup>.

## 2. THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF ORPHANHOOD

As many authors indicate, there are numerous causes of social orphanhood, but macro- and micro-social causes are the most frequently mentioned. According to J. Maciaszkowa the former comprise various forms of social mobility and urbanisation of culture, which in turn may activate social mechanisms that lead to crime. The author mentions three causes of social orphanhood which have roots in the conditions of social life: “families spending a very limited time together (as a consequence of women-mothers being professionally active), the difficulties of everyday life, lack of sufficient and constructive cooperation between the family and care-and-education institutions, particularly nurseries, day care centres and youth centres supporting the family in fulfilling its role”<sup>10</sup>. Micro-social causes of orphanhood lie in the family, especially in its malfunctioning. Among these cause there is inadequate preparation for a role of a parent; individualistic evaluation of family life; early

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<sup>7</sup> M a c i a s z k o w a, *Z teorii i praktyki*, p. 89.

<sup>8</sup> B a d o r a, *Uczucia i profesjonalizm*, p. 23.

<sup>9</sup> O k o ń, *Nowy słownik pedagogiczny*, p. 354.

<sup>10</sup> M a c i a s z k o w a, *Z teorii i praktyki pedagogiki*, p. 91.

and accidental sex initiation coupled with the lack of reflexion on the choice of partners who can be parents as well as spouses; personality disorders which frequently result from defective socialisation and are subsequently brought into marriage; insufficient awareness of parental responsibilities and lack of responsibility for the stability of the family; pathological behaviours in the family, such as alcoholism, criminal parents, drug addiction; chronic diseases – both somatic and mental”<sup>11</sup>.

Other authors make a distinction between objective and subjective causes of orphanhood. The former comprise difficult material and housing circumstances and parents' health problems. The latter, on the other hand, include: lack of life skills and parents' intellectual disabilities, low moral standards of the family, a negative attitude towards children, child abuse by one or both parents, forcing children to immoral and criminal behaviour, and not attending to the child's needs<sup>12</sup>.

Orphanhood leads to many negative consequences, for instance physical, psychological and behavioural disorders among orphans. The symptoms combine both somatic and mental areas of the child's functioning, as well as social disorders. If this condition lasts long, it may develop into serious mental, emotional and personal disorders<sup>13</sup>.

Numerous factors determine what consequences an orphan will suffer from. J. Maciaszkowa claims that the age when the child was abandoned is a very important factor. The author distinguishes two groups of abandoned children: those abandoned by the family in early childhood and those rejected and abandoned later<sup>14</sup>. Other factors, as mentioned by Z. Węgiński, include psychological traumas the child has experienced, the nature of the detachment process, the quality of the contact between the child and the family, and the quality of care of the new environment the child is going to live in after he has left his family<sup>15</sup>. Children who have been brought up without a family since early childhood show numerous disorders, for example physiological disorders, changes in blood morphology, low abstract and reflective thinking

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>12</sup> Ł u c z y ń s k i, *Dzieci w rodzinach zastępczych*, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> M. J o a c h i m o w s k a, *Rodzicielstwo zastępcze. Idea – problemy – analizy – kompetencje*, Bydgoszcz: Wyd. Uniwersytet Kazimierza Wielkiego 2008, p. 48.

<sup>14</sup> M a c i a s z k o w a, *Z teorii i praktyki pedagogiki*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> Z. W ę g i ę r s k i, *Opieka nad dzieckiem osieroconym. Teoria i praktyka*, Toruń: Wyd. Edukacyjne „AKAPIT” 2006, p. 50.

ability, apathy, emotional immaturity, poor adjustment skills to conscious acting. Similar conclusions were drawn by H. Olechnowicz. According to her research, common disorders among orphans between 0 and 3 years of age include; “emotional disorders (the presence of inhibitions hindering the child from making and keeping up new emotional ties), motor development delays, low mental activity, anxiety and personality disorders”<sup>16</sup>.

In conclusion, children who have been brought up without a family since early childhood will show, in the majority of cases, physical, psychological and mental disabilities. However, current research proves that orphanhood need not automatically lead to permanent and irreversible personality disorders or irreversible negative processes<sup>17</sup>.

### 3. POSSIBLE WAYS OF COMPENSATION FOR ORPHANHOOD – CHILDREN’S VILLAGES

SOS Children’s Villages are part of the SOS Children’s Villages Association in Poland, which in turn is part of the SOS Children’s Villages World Organisation. It is the biggest charity organisation in the world, operating in 133 countries.

The SOS Children’s Villages Association in Poland was founded on 14 December 1990 as a result of the agreement between the Ministry of National Education and the SOS Kinderdorf International<sup>18</sup>. The first village in Poland was founded in Biłgoraj in 1983, the next one in Kraśnik in 1991, and the following ones in Rajsak in 1994, in Siedlce in 2000 and in Karlin in 2005.

SOS Children’s Villages are a form of foster care, a type of a foster family arrangement, as it is stated in the agreement signed on 12 December 2000 between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and the Board of Directors of the SOS Children’s Villages Association. The agreement states the following: “The SOS Children’s Villages Association in Poland is a non-governmental organisation which attempts to develop forms of foster family care

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<sup>16</sup> M a c i a s z k o w a, *Z teorii i praktyki pedagogiki*, p. 93.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

<sup>18</sup> J. L e z i a k, W. C z e p c z y ń s k i, D. W o s i k - K a w a ł a, *Wioski Dziecięce w Polsce*, in D. W o s i k - K a w a ł a (Ed.), *Rodzinne i instytucjonalne środowiska opiekuńczo-wychowawcze*, Lublin: UMCS 2011, p. 248.

intended for children deprived of parental care. It also actively participates in the reform of the child care system in Poland.” Another legal basis was produced by the Department of Social Assistance and Integration of Ministry of Labour and Social Policy on 16 February 2007. It states that the type of services the SOS Children’s Villages provide, make them a form of foster care. Secondly, it has also been noticed that in various statistics SOS Children’s Villages are presented as a type of foster care arrangement<sup>19</sup>. Therefore SOS Children’s Villages are referred to as “private care-and-education centres of foster family type; alternatively: a type of complex foster family care for orphaned and abandoned children.” The founder of SOS Children’s Villages, H. Gmeiner, considered them to be “institutions which help abandoned children to move on and to regain a normal life (as far as it is possible) by means of replacing the missing natural family.”

The main objective of Children’s Villages could be expressed by the following statement: “Children feel well in the village and develop their skills and abilities in order to become responsible adults prepared to social life”<sup>20</sup>. This objective is achieved through a number of secondary goals, such as: “for every child the SOS Children’s Village is a place of care that attends to his needs; each child in the SOS Children’s Village receives love, protection, security, and can develop relationships based on trust; each child is treated as an individual and according to his abilities and potentials, and he is supported until he can manage on his own; each child lives in his natural environment which corresponds to his age; each child has a right to be in touch with his biological family; each child has a right to live according to his culture; each child has access to medical care; a child with intellectual disabilities or a highly sensitive child has access to relevant pedagogical and therapeutic assistance; each child is integrated with the social environment of the SOS Children’s Village; each child attends a school which corresponds to his abilities and interests and which answers the needs of the local market; the history of the child’s development can be traced at any moment of the child’s life in the village”<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> W. K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS w systemie opieki zastępczej w Polsce*, Lublin: Wyższa Szkoła Ekonomii i Innowacji 2011, pp. 58-60.

<sup>20</sup> L e z i a k, C z e p c z y Ń s k i, & W o s i k - K a w a l a, *Wioski dziecięce w Polsce*, p. 247.

<sup>21</sup> K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS*, pp. 199-200.

The mission of the Association boils down to building families for children in need, helping them shape their own futures and share in the development of local communities. According to the Association this vision could be summarised in the following statement: “each child belongs to a family, grows up surrounded by love, respect and a sense of safety.” The members of the Association live according to the four following values: courage, commitment, trust and responsibility”<sup>22</sup>.

The idea of SOS Children’s Villages is based on four bases, known as pedagogical principles. They can be described by means of the following words: the mother, siblings, the house and home and the village. These principles ensure that the child’s life conditions are similar to that of his natural environment.

The village mother. This principle refers to a woman who looks after children and becomes their mother. The mother “builds close relationships with each child she looks after. She provides them with security, love and stability which are indispensable needs of every child. As someone who professionally knows how to bring up a child she lives with her children, she takes care of their development and runs the household properly. She knows and respects the roots, the history and religion of each child”<sup>23</sup>. According to Gmeiner’s idea a foster mother must be a single woman between 25 and 40. She must show pedagogical skills and be ready to sacrifice. She must not have her own children. She must give all her love to orphaned children under her care. Gmeiner argues that it is the mother who is the most important element of an adequate care of orphaned children. Gmeiner emphasised on several occasions that proper upbringing was not possible without love. Therefore the first and foremost role of the village mother is to accept the children she is supposed to look after and to give them love. Later Gmeiner broadened the principle of the mother by introducing the position of ‘an auntie’ as an assistant in running the household and looking after the children. “An auntie” is an employee of a SOS Children’s Village. She must be single and available at all times. Her role involves helping “the mother” in her daily duties, as well as replacing her if the mother goes on holiday or falls ill. The auntie also connects the children with the environment, and thus contributes to their social development<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> SOS Wioski Dziecięce, Retrieved from <http://www.sos-wd.org> (accessed 12.04.2014).

<sup>23</sup> *Statut Stowarzyszenia SOS Wioski Dziecięce w Polsce*, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS*, pp. 114-116.



The second principle concerns siblings and describes them as “a group of children of varied age, both girls and boys, who are looked after by the same mother”<sup>25</sup>. The principle of siblings emphasises that family ties are created naturally. One SOS family consists of 6-8 children and there is a strong insistence on allowing biological siblings to be brought up together in the same family. In fact, they are never separated<sup>26</sup>. The fact that the children brought up by the same mother are considered to be siblings is conducive to their psychological development. The children staying together acquire interpersonal skills, the younger ones learn from the older siblings through observation and imitation, while the older ones assume a protective attitude towards the younger ones. What is more, boys and girls grow up together learning how to develop a positive attitude towards the opposite sex<sup>27</sup>. Another advantage is the fact that “having siblings allows to create a sense of community in a natural way, to create solidarity, a sense of belonging and identification, together with a chance of feeling distinct from other families”<sup>28</sup>.

The third principle defines the family house and home. Each family in the village “makes its own home”<sup>29</sup>, which integrates not only the children among each other, but also the children with the SOS mother. Each family lives in a detached house which most of time is a two-floor house. On the ground floor there is a living-room, kitchen and the mother’s bedroom. Upstairs there are children’s bedrooms, sometimes also a study room and a bedroom for a family assistant. The village houses are equipped in a similar way as the houses of local neighbours. The living room is the centre of the family life. The kitchen is also a very important place in the house, where the mothers prepares meals together with the children<sup>30</sup>. The principle refers both to the house and home. The loving family makes home. Therefore, “each house in the village is a family home, it has its unique character and its unique rhythm of life. At home the children can feel safe and have a sense of belonging. There they grow up and learn together, they share in their duties and responsibilities, they also share

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 116.

<sup>26</sup> M. Ł o b o c k i, *O SOS Wioskach Dziecięcych*, Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza „Impuls” 2011, p. 36.

<sup>27</sup> K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 117.

<sup>29</sup> *Statut Stowarzyszenia SOS Wioski Dziecięce w Polsce*, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Ł o b o c k i, *O SOS Wioskach Dziecięcych*, p. 37.

their joys and sorrows of everyday life”<sup>31</sup>. The home gives security and support to the children. It is where they can always come back. It is also defined by a special atmosphere which is created by all the members of the family and their interpersonal relationships.

The fourth and the last principle defines the village as a community which is made up of all the families living in the village. The village is commonly made of 14-20 houses inhabited by SOS families. The village has also an administrative building with offices, day-care room and club-room, pedagogues’ offices and other buildings (e.g. a garden shed, a tool shed)<sup>32</sup>. It is emphasised that “SOS families live together creating thus a children-friendly environment which guarantees a happy childhood. The families share their experience and help each other. They are also active members of the local community. It is through the family that the child learns how to actively participate in social life”<sup>33</sup>. The standard of life in the village corresponds to that of the local community, so that the village children can grow up in the environment similar to that of their local peers. Most often, the village is situated on the outskirts of a small town, in order to provide the children with an easy access to schools, cultural events and, at the same time, natural environment. The village is open to the outside influence and the children frequently take part in social and cultural life of the local community”<sup>34</sup>.

Currently, there is a tendency to introduce modifications to the traditional formula of the villages. They are intended to “improve the integration of village families with the local community. That often takes a form of the so-called families outside the village. Formally, they are village families which are part of the village system, however they are based outside the village. Yet, they usually live in the vicinity of the village in order to ensure a standard quality of their functioning and a possible support from the village team. Another interesting modification of the village formula are the so-called dispersed villages. In practice, it is a group of foster families who live not very far from each other in a housing estate of detached houses or blocks of flats. They have at their disposal the same kind of support as families in a traditional village”<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> *Statut Stowarzyszenia SOS Wioski Dziecięce w Polsce*, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS*, p. 118.

<sup>33</sup> *Statut Stowarzyszenia SOS Wioski Dziecięce w Polsce*, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> K o w a l s k i, *Wioski Dziecięce SOS*, p. 119.

<sup>35</sup> J. Z a b o r o w s k i, *Działalność pedagogiczna SOS Wiosek Dziecięcych – podstawy*

The above pedagogical principles: the mother, siblings, the house and home, the village form a kind of life environment that is similar to that of a natural family.

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WIOSKI DZIECIĘCE  
JAKO KOMPENSACJA  
NEGATYWNYCH SKUTKÓW SIEROCTWA

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W ostatnim czasie wielu badaczy interesuje się problemem sieroctwa. Ukazały się nowe publikacje poświęcone nowym rodzajom tego negatywnego – dla całego społeczeństwa – zjawiska. Statystyki dotyczące sieroctwa z roku na rok są coraz bardziej alarmujące; ukazują narastający charakter zjawiska. Wioski Dziecięce SOS, obok rodzin adopcyjnych i zastępczych, zapewniają najlepsze warunki wychowywania dla osieroconych dzieci. Wynika to z ich rodzinnego charakteru i faktu funkcjonowania na wzór rodziny naturalnej. Idea Wiosek Dziecięcych SOS, zbudowana na czterech głównych pryncypach – matka, rodzeństwo, dom i wioska, gwarantuje, że cały nowy dom stworzony jest dla dziecka. Jest to dom, w którym dziecko zyskuje prawdziwy dom, kochającą matkę (lub oboje rodziców) i rodzeństwo. Rodziny SOS, które kierują się podstawowymi zasadami miłości, szacunku i zaufania, tworzą środowisko, które może w pełni zrekompensować osierocenie i zagwarantować dziecku prawidłowy rozwój.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sieroctwo, wioska dziecięca, kompensacja.