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**CHILDREN OF LABOR-EDUCATIONAL SCHOOL. (A DEFENSE ATTEMPT STORY)**

**NIÑOS Y LA EDUCACIÓN LABORAL (UNA HISTORIA Y UNA DEFENSA)**

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**Resumen**

En este artículo veremos la defensa y el derecho clásico de los niños a ser lo que son (El niño no es un adulto pequeño, ni una vela encendida ni apagada. Es "otro" - Jean-Ovide Decroly) ya que se están autorealizando en sus vidas y educando ambiente ofrecido en las llamadas "Escuelas Laborales-Educativas" (ahora se llama "Escuela de Internado Educativo"). La experiencia de Angel Uzunov, reflejada de manera artística y documental en "La vida sin intersecciones". Registros de una pedagogía "demuestra la eficiencia pedagógica de esa forma del" juntos "hoy en día (con otros niños), es decir, la vida onerosa, activa y socialmente significativa del internado que impulsa a los niños a definirla como "su hogar", "su escuela".

**Palabras Claves**

Niño – Escuela Laboral-Educativa – Desinstitucionalización

**Abstract**

The author defends the classical right of children to be what they are (The child is not a small adult, neither new, unlit candle. It is "another" - Jean-Ovide Decroly) as they are self-realizing in their life and educational environment offered in the so-called "Labor-educational Schools" (now is called "Educational Boarding School"). The experience of Angel Uzunov, reflected in an artistic-documentary way in "Life without Intersections. Records of a Pedagogue" proves the pedagogical efficiency of such form of the nowadays-modern "together" (with other children) – namely the burdensome, active and socially meaningful life of the boarding school that prompts children to define it as "their home-school": the author's assumption that deinstitutionalization will take away that feeling of a father's home and this security from the protection of my school.

**Key Words**

Child – Labor-educational school – Deinstitutionalization

## Introduction

Deinstitutionalization nowadays is a legitimate process for modern humanization of social education of underprivileged children but it is not only a reason for nostalgia to times past. Is it possible that there is a lesson in the social and pedagogical experience of Labor-educational School<sup>1</sup> of Bulgaria? This short story of a Labor-educational School in town of Rakitovo with principal Angel Uzunov (38 years of experience in a Labor-educational School) aims to build a portrait of students calling themselves “nobody’s”, “self-bred”, “rapidly developing”.

In scientific and theoretic plan acceptable is the thesis of Angel Uzunov for the birth purity of a child while in the adulthood most commonly the closest family environment besmirches it. The child, however, has the energy and capabilities to overcome the defeat and achieve its happiness by itself. “The boys – Uzunov says – that came in this world with pure souls and somebody took a lot of effort into making them miserable. They managed to replace the unhappiness with happiness...”<sup>2</sup>. According to him the nature of childhood itself requires the change, constantly seeking the good, beautiful and if it meets understanding and cooperation from adults – the celebration of purity and love will be complete.

The essential, main thing when educating the difficult children Angel Uzunov defines as follows: “Our task is to do it in a way that each boy would see the tragedy of what is going on around him, to constantly understand that he is not following the necessary moral values so he can feel his right of joy and be thankful for the help for bringing him to this joy”<sup>3</sup>. Respectively the leading approach to them: “I have always considered that difficult boys like to be talked to as equals, to do everything with them as equals, to do things with them as if they are older, because it increased their self-esteem. They enjoyed the mystery, especially during nighttime”<sup>4</sup>.

## About the Children and their “Home-School”

For the children accommodated at Bulgarian labor-educational schools are used various definitions: morally impaired, abandoned, bandits, shag, etc. Angel Uzunov in “Life without Intersections. *Records of a Pedagogue*” with love defines them as “problematic children having temporary difficulties”<sup>5</sup>, as “small ships stranded in the shallow waters”<sup>6</sup>. Nowadays the pedagogues (and media) speak and talk without any emotions – just for underprivileged children. Often children accommodated in Labor-educational Schools are defined as “children in risk”<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Labor-educational school is a term used to describe educational boarding schools in Bulgaria until the year 1996.

<sup>2</sup> A. Uzunov, “Life without Intersections. Records of a Pedagogue”. S., 1993, 331.

<sup>3</sup> A. Uzunov, “Life without Intersections. Records of a Pedagogue. Part two – Self-bred-Our Children”, S., 1994, 52.

<sup>4</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays, 1993, 92.

<sup>5</sup> Again... 303.

<sup>6</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 34.

<sup>7</sup> N. Krusteva, Deviant Child Behavior: a Child as a Victim or an Offender. Collection of papers (Faculty of Law, Nis, 2015), 464.

In the second half of XX century in the system of Bulgarian labor-educational schools are covered children, adolescents and girls with complicated destiny – orphans, semi-orphans, divorced parents or drunken parents, having lived only with their grandparents, freely wandering around Bulgaria (for adventure or for food). As Angel Uzunov shares (1993) many of those children are abandoned by their own parents: left in “Mother and Child” care facility, directly thrown into the streets or chased away by their families because they have no money to raise them. In the facility accommodated are also children who leave their homes by their initiative, to give into frivolous life – among them there are also overly-satisfied children of prominent families, insulted adopted children and desperate children of single mothers. According to their ethnicity the children in the Labor-educational Schools are various – most of them are gypsies, then Bulgarians, Turkish are about 10%, there are also Jews, Hungarians, Germans, Russian and other nationalities.

The misconduct of the children being accommodated in Labor-educational School are various: theft; wandering; organizing small gangs for theft; systematic running away from school; use of narcotic substances; begging<sup>8</sup>. In the Labor-educational Schools there are children with more serious misconduct - murder of negligence, robbery, fornication, prostitution, participation in adult gangs, systematic beatings over parents, etc. Angel Uzunov finds many contradictions in the characteristics of boys who are sent in his Labor-educational School “in an official manner”.

“But in all characteristics evident was the apparent strive – Uzunov writes – in any way to get rid of the boys because they were troublesome... Later I discovered how many false things there are in a characteristic, how in some of them it is all black due to understandable reasons but then it appears most of them are made-up, despite having some olive-black dots which the writers did not know or wanted to see, or vice versa – very much worsened and covered in black, turned into an African when it is pure as spring water, every act of whom, being human, caused by the situation, has always been interpreted only in his harm”<sup>9</sup>.

According to Angel Uzunov the Labor-educational School students are deliberately sent to boarding houses which are as far away as possible from the birth places or the places where they have acted deviantly. The purpose of this action is in three directions:

1. The minor to be extracted from the environment having stimulated his antisocial behavior and to be isolated from entities and objects that support it with criminogenic influence and interaction.
2. The child to be placed in new (“pure”) educational environment which to cooperate for the change of his habits, passions and moral traits of character.
3. The child to be protected from the undisputedly negative impact of family and other close ones so he could reassess his values and the contacts to be used for encouragement and sanctions.

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<sup>8</sup> For begging as alternative of forced labor see Krasteva, N. & V. Krastev, Criminal Child Protection from Human Trafficking during Contemporary Migration, Revista Inclusiones, Vol. 4, N 1, (2017) 62-63.

<sup>9</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 23.

Angel Uzunov describes the Labor-educational School students as “the most various people” – big and small, unattractive and cute, shabby and elegant, fed and skinny, smart and stupid, ferocious and calm, talkative and silent, stealing small and big, dirty or very clean, barefoot, clumsy, hardworking or lazy:

“an innumerable conglomerate of clothing, faces, characters, habits. Children like all the rest. However, A. Uzunov states, their faces have raw expression resulting of the cruel life. “If you look at their faces you will think they are the faces of adults whom life has taken back and forth and due to non-understandable for themselves reason have attracted to alien dimensions of personality for their imagination. This way reaching the slope, they quickly get dragged down like a child’s slide and they didn’t feel something childish in them disappearing and something human substituted with something else”.

Children are forced to the Labor-educational School and arrive led by the police, inspector of children’s pedagogic services or by a parent or a grandparent. In certain cases the child comes to the Labor-educational School alone, according to his will. Most of those arriving are well-dressed but come with torn up clothes – depending on their attitude towards other’s property. Usually they all don’t have money but some of them have a lot of money hidden in different places of the clothing.

During their school life boys need their own money but few are the parents assuring minimal allowance to their child. The principal may direct some of the school budget to be used for pocket money to orphans and semi-orphans which stops the theft among students. Years after, when they graduate the school and have to leave the Labor-educational School, the boys return their official uniforms and underwear in the storage and their own clothes are either too small or torn up. This is why most students are forced to leave for their hometowns barefoot and shabby, without money or property – and they are facing misery and scarcity, if the parents don’t accept them home, they literally remain on the street without shelter and food.

Angel Uzunov shares:

“Incredibly hard days, months and years where we felt in the children a new thing returns, something that hasn’t been felt so far, something beautiful and we saw how they gradually take it with each fiber of their soul, how we left in our boys part of ourselves and they gave us something that we would need for those coming after them...”<sup>10</sup>.

The Labor-educational School in Rakitovo (now Educational Boarding School “Angel Uzunov”) defined by the children as their home – school “Maxim Gorki”, offers a stormy life - joyful communication, learning, work, games, i.e. everything that is characteristic of a student's normal life (only mother and father cannot be replaced). A major educational tool here is goodness, friendship, comradeship, interesting life, social protection. The life together offers the child dynamic goals and joyful dreams – the most typical of human existence. And the children do not run away from school because it becomes their home, “because they really were interested in us and did not want the diversity in which they lived to be replaced by the insecurity, the wandering, the dangers

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<sup>10</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 9.

and the deprivations that always accompanied them before their arrival here”<sup>11</sup>. The most intimate for a child is given by his director, Angel Uzunov, giving the young children the warmth of the paternal kindness:

“The little ones were around me, they tried to be close to me, to take my hand, to place their heads in a way that I can pamper them. And I tried to do it. Only those working with abandoned children, as ours were, not having felt parental kindness, only they know how persistently they seek closeness to a person they feel close to them, how gentle they get when their hand is in yours or when your coarse man palm has covered their small head... In the evening, in the bedrooms, the little ones were always competing who will take the place next to me the quickest, to stand beside me, to take me by the hand...”<sup>12</sup>.

## Conclusion

For the care and results of work with children in the Rakitovo Labor-educational School speak also the data of their realization. For

“the period 1953-1990, 1260 of the Labor-educational School’s students are workers with various majors: 320 are drivers, 24 – athletes, 18 – artists, 85 are animal breeders, 30 woodsman, 9 are in the army and police, 9 have higher education, 120 have secondary education, 40 are traders, 110 have worked abroad”<sup>13</sup>.

“The life alive” of the children together with their understanding teachers and educators at the labor-educational schools lavishly creates various and unusual social and education empirics of which Angel Uzunov artistically synthesizes its own original pedagogical ideas:

1. Angel Uzunov, first among the pedagogical thinkers reviews *education as a process of mutual handover of energy, as energy exchange* (his predecessors leave the energy to God or nature). For example he writes:

“I already knew – the child is like a spring – the more you press downwards, the more it pushes upwards and resists... And if you push the spring you have to do it firmly and carefully for if you let it go, all the energy you have input may go straight to you”<sup>14</sup>.

2. According to Angel Uzunov *education is shown as necessity of the child and its educator* – this way the education turns into a common faith. He shares:

“I had to be namely with the children in need, to teach them and learn from them, lead them to the many life paths and show them the most correct ones... Then I only subconsciously sensed and now I know that a teacher that doesn’t learn from his students, doesn’t enrich from the contact with

<sup>11</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 93.

<sup>12</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 133.

<sup>13</sup> See “50 years of Rakitovo Reformatory (1953-2003). Anniversary issue (Velingrad, 2003), 14.

<sup>14</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 37 and 79.

them, doesn't see the variety in their faiths and doesn't deny them during his educative work, is not a real teacher..."<sup>15</sup>.

3. Only Angel Uzunov introduces the *golden pedagogical rule* – patience is the best educator: if there is patience, there is a good teacher<sup>16</sup>. In this sense are his most important requirements to the pedagogue:

a) "In life you have to hear bitter reproach and good words... Try to use them both as way to move forward..."<sup>17</sup>;

b) "... you want to be a true educator, do not forget that when difficult children give you trouble, the good ones wait for attention and you should find time, strictness, trust, respect and love for ones as well as for the others... So you can educate them correctly... So you can benefit from them what you have given... Otherwise you will find something but you will love more..."<sup>18</sup>.

4. Angel Uzunov *refuses repeating as an approach when educating children*: "if for the knowledge it is a mother, then it is a step-mother for education"<sup>19</sup>. According to him developing is only education which creates beauty, movement and joy in the life of the child; only education making the child dream.

5. Angel Uzunov first sees *the social pedagogue as alive torpedo (kamikaze)* – choosing his occupation he undertakes the risk of his own destruction – personal and even physical: this is how great and consuming is the work on upbringing a child and especially a difficult child – Father Pestalozzi, Dobri Voynikov, Anton S. Makarenko, Janusz Korczak, Alexander Neal...

*The lesson?* Maybe it entirely depends on the alternatives of deinstitutionalization before the life for socially underprivileged children, on the possibilities of the new environment. And what if this "institutional deinstitutionalization" deprives the child from the warmth of joyful communication (and learning) with peers and teachers, if it takes away the magical "together" in the children's dreams? Still, school remains a place for life and communication of the child during the most important years of its social maturity! Only it is able to somehow compensate the child for the abandonment by the parents, family...

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<sup>15</sup> There again... 38.

<sup>16</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 303 and A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 91.

<sup>17</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 69.

<sup>18</sup> A. Uzunov, quoted essays... 268.

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