



Searching for Role Models in European Films on Refugees

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“As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has—or ever will have—something inside that is unique to all times. It’s our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression”. (Rogers, 1967)¹

Fred Roger’s words illustrate what we would ultimately like to achieve in our *Erasmus RefugeesIN*, *European Cinema for Refugees’ Social Inclusion* project²; finding and portraying in documentary films refugee role models, refugees that we all might look up forgetting about our stereotypes and fears of changes caused by their massive the arrival.

Having screened several films in our RefugeesIN focus groups, we feel emotionally and intellectually closer to the topic we are dealing with. We have read studies, books, scholarly articles, we have listened to radio programmes, and I have read articles in *Le Monde diplomatique* and the *Guardian* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Delo*, the Slovenian national newspaper as to be able to better introduce the films and thereby the project to the focus groups.

The first film screened was **Das Kind or L’enfant, or Child**. A film on Irma an old Jewish lady, an excellent pianist who with the help of her sons and Sarah her granddaughter undertakes an emotionally risky journey backwards through her life and throughout Europe. What an exceptional life! Irma is a refugee role model, definitely. But she has been a role model all her life starting as a political activist in Romania, then in France, sacrificing her individual life and her husband’s presence to

higher motives and goals, coping with the changing political situation in Europe during the second World War, and co-shaping it. When she was 18 and was sent by the Romanian Communist party to Spain, she was stopped from arriving in Spain and retained *in* Paris where she participated in the resistance movement - she was formed by the Communist party for which she had worked. She had values, but they were instilled in her by her family, her religion and the Communist party. But, step by step, she gained her own experience and thereby her own values. She worked for the community etc., Irma, the main character of this film, is definitely a refugee role model.

What makes a refugee a role model? Beyond what the theories of social learning teach us, I would say his or her entire life, engagement, enthusiasm, resilience, reflected experience. A lot depends on emotional dispositions. A life course approach to refugees should therefore be adopted as to better understand them. *Sometimes urgent situations stimulate refugees to use all their resources and to overcome themselves, but it is important that the resources be already there.*

Nicholas Winton's children is a film about how necessity shapes role models. "When something is not impossible there should be a way to do it." said Sir Nicholas Winton. He was 28 when he used his imagination, created an institution that was not declared legally, did not respect all the laws and imagined (the impact of his business background of a London stockbroker) an efficient system to evacuate from Prague to England and Sweden and to save more than 650 Jewish children from death in gas chambers. He said "this is a lot of responsibility to have now more than 17 000 children, grand children and grand grand-children. His children have become more or less important citizens of the world, all bringing to this world their experience, their own culture. *In this film role models are on both sides. It is not enough not to do bad, one has to do good, on both sides.* No doubt, a role model is Sir Nicholas Winton and all the families who accepted the children rejected by all governments "because their laws did not allow to accept them", "because borders were already closed". *In humanitarian crises institutions and governments do not prove to be the most efficient and the quickest*

What have we learned from screening this film and from our mutual discussion?

It is impossible to think about refugees as role models without connecting them to their environment in the host country, their mentors, rescuers, people who are role models on the side of the host country.

The last film screened was **Winter in Lampedusa**, a film "dedicated to Europe" as the authors wrote at its end. Now, how can different cultures, the one of the host country and the ones of refugees' countries, and how can our and their individual and family cultures meet? What minimal conditions have to be provided for? As one of our focus groups members stressed, *you can be human, caring and helpful facing one person, a couple or a family in need. But the situation in Lampedusa is driving people to burnout.* Whatever they do is not efficient, is not enough. They can get an

emotional reward for what they are doing, no matter how much effort they put in rescuing refugees. *Emotionally and existentially the situation is exhausting.*

The documentary film features this small community of Lampedusians (5000 no more), facing a humanitarian and political calamity. The inhabitants of Lampedusa feel, at least some of them, to have a moral obligation towards all the refugees who fled away from the atrocities of war to survive. Are they role models? Not really! Some of them have become racists, some of them have become exclusively interested in their own survival. No use telling them that the situation is not about being able to continue their work of fishermen etc., it is not about their jobs, it is about survival. But survival on both sides! *It is impossible to be a role model in such massive situation of abandon*, where the regional government says that public institutions have failed and can do no more for the inhabitants of Lampedusa left alone with enormous numbers of refugees drowning or coming every day, with criminality of many profiteers who traffic with human misery. *In deregulated situations there is room for chaos, disorder, lack of values.*

The economy of Lampedusa has changed, The paying tourists do not come, even fishing has become impossible. Public institutions are helpless. How to find role models in this documentary film on Lampedusa in Winter? *Can they be role models simply by being resilient?*

From what we have done so far in the project RefugeesIn, It can be deduced that *in chaotic situations, with massive misery, role models have difficulties remaining role models*. Moreover, searching for role models just on the side of the refugees has proven not to be enough. Shall we search further and shall we search up?

Being a member of a focus group dealing with “les choses de la vie”, real life matters can be an extremely valuable emotional and learning experience for all members.

¹ Fred Rogers was an American TV programme producer known for his defence of public television

¹ RefugeesIn social cinema for refugees' inclusion is an Erasmus+ K2 project. It is co-founded by European Union.