

MOTHER CENTERS

AS A NEW PHENOMENON OF CIVIC SOCIETY IN EUROPE

Grassroots women in Mother Centers have adopted responsibility for life in their communities. Politicians and policy makers should share this responsibility at all levels and together we will become the architects of the new and accountable economic system.



Project
Parenthood as motivation
for lifelong learning in Mother Centers



MAIN CHAPTERS

I. INTRODUCTION

II. THE “BIRTH” AND SPREADING THE IDEA OF MOTHER CENTERS

III. KNOW-HOW OF MOTHER CENTERS

IV. EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES

V. CRISIS AS A CHALLENGE FOR MOTHER CENTERS

TEAM

INTRODUCTION

The first one to raise the idea of Mother Centers was Hildegard Schooss at the end of 1970s so these institutions originated and took root in Germany, and shortly after the Velvet Revolution, they spread to Czechoslovakia thanks to Alena Wagnerová.

Both of them have done so much in terms of spreading the idea of Mother Centers, so instead of an introduction to the **Mother Centers as a new phenomenon of civic society in Europe** publication, we offer their insights on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the first Mother Center in the Czech Republic – the anniversary of the beginning of the spread of the centers beyond the German borders.

Hildegard Schooss said:



When we last saw each other, I again felt very close to you, and recalled my first visit to Prague. The beauty of the city, the splendid old buildings – but above all, I remember the politically conscious women – their brains and their warm hearts. I hadn't often encountered this combination before. I remember the meeting you arranged with the women who signed the Charter 77, and my wide red corduroy trousers, which I'd bought specially for Prague so as not to appear posh among revolutionaries.

It was delightful that we did not meet in a dry seminar room but in a kindergarten to work out our guiding principles, which

have since been reformulated and elaborated, without losing any of their relevance:

- 1. Our House is always open;*
- 2. We follow the principle of laypeople for laypeople;*
- 3. Children are always present;*
- 4. Everyone gets paid the same.*

It's true that these days, the last principle is no longer followed in most of the Mother Centers, but it still says much about our attitude. Even if professionalization and digitalization have led to great changes in our everyday practice, this attitude must be preserved. That was what I saw as my mission when I retired from day-to-day business: to uphold the conception of the Mother Centers – their cross-generational solidarity and their active neighborliness – and to spread it across political, scientific and international boundaries.

I know, Rut, that we have much in common here. We have always stood up for the same cause in different places.

Alena Wagnerová summarized her belief in the need for Mother Centers as follows:



Mother Center play an important and irreplaceable role in the Czech civil society. And I believe that you need to repeat it often and reflect that in your actions. It is crucial and specific for them that they create not only a solidarity community of groups



of parents and children in municipalities and small and large cities, but above all, they see social problems and their possible solutions from the perspective of the needs of children and families, and through their activities and involvement in the Network for the family, they represent the voices of those who are often not heard.

Thirty years ago, at the beginning of the 1990s, when the first Mother Centers were being established in the Czech Republic and later in Slovakia as well, it was a time of hope for a democratic, free and humane society, which encouraged people to take part in social activities and their co-creation in civic groups. I was lucky enough to meet such a potential activist on the Three Kings Day in 1990 – Rut Kolínská. And within two years, she and a group of women, some of whom experienced their political baptism earlier while being a part of the Prague Mothers group, managed to establish the first Mother Center in Czechoslovakia at the Prague YMCA.

As is often the case, many of the Velvet Revolution hopes did not materialize. Even though we celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the existence of Mother Centers feeling of joy and satisfaction, the current situation in the world we live today makes us worried and sometimes even angry. The pandemic, climate crisis, expanding gap between the rich and the poor, horrors and brutality of the Ukraine war, in which even children are dying and suffering; all of this makes us deeply insecure and it feels like our world is beginning to crumble. And we anxiously want to know what the future holds for our children and grandchildren, playing on the floor near us. What world will they live in and what the world will look like when they are older? I have one granddaughter, Melina, and I am worried about her future as well. It seems to me that we, who look at the world from the perspective of the needs of children and family, should be included among those who are beginning to strive for the social and ecological transformation of Czech society and Europe; and thus create hope for life for those who they are growing up around us today. Space as an active part of civil society we already have.

EDITOR'S NOTE

When agreeing on the content of individual chapters, we determined only the content without specifying the exact outline and length. The texts are therefore not completely uniform in terms of content or length, and you are presented with their original version without editorial changes. In my opinion, diversity illustrates the approach of individual authors. In addition, many of the examples of good practice that are described here were implemented by other centers with some modifications. To keep the text concise, not all of them are mentioned.

THE “BIRTH” AND SPREADING THE IDEA OF MOTHER CENTERS

HISTORY OF THE GERMAN MOTHER CENTERS

The establishment of the first German Mother Centers (MC) must be perceived as part of the feminist movement in the late seventies. At that time, mothers of small children had almost no opportunity to speak up for their rights or to express their opinion in public places. Mothers were largely confined to the walls of their homes. Even by law. Married women were legally required to stay at home and take care of children and the household. If a wife wanted to earn money for herself, she needed to ask her husband for permission. The First Matrimonial Law Reform Act of 1977 did away with the legally prescribed division of responsibilities in marriage. But even when the legislation changes, it takes time for social norms to change. Family, neighbors and society still expected and expect women to bear the brunt of childcare and household work.



MC Salzgitter

In 1977, Hildegard Schooss, wife of an entrepreneur and mother of three children, organized a space in a former laundromat for women and children to meet. Her motivation was the fact that she had moved with her family to Salzgitter, a working-class city where she knew no one and felt isolated. As soon as the invitations were sent out, the news spread rapidly and the small room was crowded with women and children cooking and eating together, sharing household tasks, selling secondhand children's clothes, discussing personal and political matters and empowering each other.

The following year, Schooss contacted social scientists Monika Jäckel and Greta Thüllmann from the German Youth Institute (Deutsches Jugend Institut) in Munich, who studied the lives of families and the role of mothers. They combined their expertise with Schooss's practical experience and, in 1980, they developed the concept for three Model-Mother Centers, for which the federal government offered financial support. The Mother Centers in Salzgitter, Darmstadt and Munich followed a self-help principle that remains in effect today: “look, participate, do it yourself”. In 1983, a review of practical experiences and scientific observations were published in the handbook “Mothers in the Center of Mother Centers”. It became a guidebook for founders of new Mother Centers, which started to spread all over Germany. The German Youth Institute and the Ministry of Family Affairs promoted the new movement strongly. Mother Center topics like the compatibility of family and work life were in line with the spirit of the times.

In November 1986, the Green Party invited 500 mothers and 200 children to a congress with the motto “Life with children: Mothers speak up”. For the first time, mothers could bring their kids to a political event. They did not have to choose between their needs and those of their children. Women demanded other events like this and even more; they aimed for a whole society with structures that would enable their political participation and wrote it down in the “Mothers Manifesto”.

Two years later, at the Mother Congress in Langen near Frankfurt am Main, the way of realizing this vision became clearer: Mother Centers needed a public space organized as a registered



First Mother Congress, Langen 1988

association, a welcoming atmosphere and the ability to offer unrestricted access to all activities developed by participants themselves, as well as a culture of participation within the Mother Centers promoting self-empowerment and the development of civil society.

Meanwhile, some changes were taking place in German society. In 1991, the Federal Constitutional Court of the reunified Germany allowed women to keep their maiden name after marriage; and in 1997, marital rape became a criminal offense.

Today, more than 400 Mother Centers have been founded in Germany. Each one is unique. Their size and what they focus on depend on the needs and input of the users, the neighborhood and the support from local and federal decision makers. For example, the focus of Mother Centers in East Germany, founded in the early 1990s, was on finding a new way of child caring without the state interventionism of the last forty years. East German women were

used to participating full time in the paid labor force but faced the same unequal division of unpaid labor at home as their West German counterparts.

In 2005, Angela Merkel became the first female Chancellor of Germany and Ursula von der Leyen, at that time minister of family affairs, visited the Mother Center in Salzgitter. The concept convinced and inspired her to use it as a role model for the so-called Multigenerational Houses program. Today, this type of house can be found nearly in every major German city.

Federal Association of Mother Centers

With the growth of the Mother Centers Movement, it became clear that an organization was needed to represent their interests on the federal level. In 1985, the Federal Association of Mother Centers was founded to advise and support founders of Mother Centers, and to take care of the press work and political work to make the movement more visible and powerful. Nationwide campaigns were launched – for example, to draw attention to single mothers, who did not receive child support, or to the pension gap that condemns elderly women to life of poverty. Annual symposiums on current topics continue to take place to this day.

In 1995, the Federal Association of Mother Centers took part in the World Conference on Women in Peking. Five years later, the Mother Center in Salzgitter was chosen as an example of best practice for the 2000 World Expo in Hannover; and Monika Jäckel hosted the Grassroots Women's International Academy (GWIA). That year, the Mother Centers were also represented at the United Nations Millennium Summit in New York.

The organizational structure of the Mother Centers emphasizes participatory democracy. The Board has three elected members. Our office is in Limburg, near Frankfurt am Main. Decisions are made within our steering committee, which is open to all active women in Mother Centers who are willing to participate in regular meetings and work voluntarily in committees or attend meetings with our partner associations. The hierarchy is flat and the atmosphere appreciative. Everyone is heard and can, for example, suggest with whom we should cooperate and for which

political causes we want to fight and how we spend our money. The financial support of the Apfelbaum-Foundation enables the Federal Association every year to award three Mother Centers a total of €10,000 for excellent work on the annual theme.

Because much of the Mother Centers' contribution takes the form of forestalling problems that would otherwise arise, its full impact is not always easy to appreciate. In 2021, however, the economist Uta Meier-Gräwe conducted a cost benefit analysis for the Mother Centers which will be published this year. This will help all Mother Centers to emphasize the importance of our preventive work. It shows how much money the state is saving, because our programs help people to lead better and healthier lives as taxpayers instead of becoming dependent on social welfare.

Concern for the interests of mothers and children is often associated with conservatism and resistance to social reform. Our campaign titled "Motherliness has no Gender" seeks to shed some modern light on this traditionalist image. The Federal Association has cooperated with university students enrolled in the design program to draft a modern image campaign for the Mother Centers. The results will be distributed to all Mother Centers to support their public relations.

Participation in the National Council of German Women's Organizations

In 1994, the principle of equality in the Basic Law was supplemented with a new provision: "The state shall promote the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and take steps to eliminate disadvantages that now exist." Nevertheless, according to the World Economic Forum, Germany remains far from gender equality. Every year, the WEF releases its report on the global gender gap that examines four main metrics of gender parity: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. The WEF notes that at the 2019 rate of progress, it will take almost 100 years to attain gender parity in Germany. We need faster progress and structural change. For this reason, the Federal Association of Mother Centers is an engaged member of the



Quilt made for EXPO 2000, Mother Center Salzgitter

strongest German women's lobby, the National Council of German Women's Organizations. We are active in committees that fight for parity in political representation at the national and state levels and a fairer distribution of paid and unpaid care work, and in CEDAW, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

The sense of self-efficacy that women experience in the Mother Centers often leads to greater participation in local politics, which we find extremely important. That is where important decisions

regarding families are made. Mainly by men. Only 10 percent of Germany's mayors are female. And although Angela Merkel became our first female chancellor sixteen years ago, in 2021, only 30.9 percent of the members of parliament are women.

The history and role of the Federal Organization of Mother Centers in Germany

The more the Mother Centers movement grew, the more it became necessary to establish an umbrella organization to articulate and focus on common goals and to become a contact partner for the media and decision makers. In 1985, "Friends of the Mother Centers" was founded in Salzgitter, chaired by Hildegard Schooss. Later the name changed to the Federal Organization of Mother Centers, a registered association. Since 1991, the Federal Association has received financial support from the German federal government.

For more than two decades, the organization was overseen by Dagmar Engels and Susanne Meyer and housed under the roof of the well-known Mother Center Nachbarschatz in Hamburg. Among the important activities in these years was advising founders of new Mother Centers on legal and practical matters.

In 2015, Christiane Liebendörfer and Kerstin Tempel took over the leadership and the office moved to Limburg an der Lahn. As a press officer, Beatrice Schilling has been part of the team since 2010. Kerstin Tempel has IT skills, which helped a lot during the pandemic, because she switched with ease from analogue to digital and hybrid meetings and intensified networking through social media. Furthermore, the team collaborates on publications and cooperates with research institutions studying the impact of Mother Centers. Another focus is the implementation of training for the employees and volunteers of Mother Centers.

Of 350 Mother Centers, 135 are members of The Federal Association of Mother Centers. Many others belong to it indirectly, because they are affiliated with the three umbrella organizations of the states of Bavaria, North Rhine Westphalia and Baden-Württemberg, which are members of our organization.

Decision-making

Decisions are made by a steering group which consists of about 12 members representing different Mother Centers. Anyone who is seriously interested in being part of the group is welcome. The steering group meets three times a year in different Mother Centers and holds monthly video conferences to plan events, joint actions and publications. Every voice is heard and counts in the process of decision making. As within Mother Centers, we have a flat organizational structure. The members come from different federal German states, and have different backgrounds and expertise. It is time-consuming but rewarding volunteer work. Travel, hotel costs and food are covered by the Federal Organization of Mother Centers.

Practissima Award

The steering group organizes the annual Federal Meeting of Mother Centers. It covers different topics ranging from inclusion in Mother Centers to volunteering and integration of refugees.



Practissima Award 2019



Our theme for 2022 is “Mothers. Power. Money.” To address the topics, the steering group organizes symposiums, invites experts and holds workshops, often introducing methods that participants can subsequently use in their centers. At the annual meetings, three “Practissima Awards” are given for best practice in Mother Centers. The A total of €10,000 – generously endowed by the Stiftung Apfelbaum – is awarded each year and divided among the winning entrants. The topics of calls usually relate to the annual theme or political situation. In 2021, the topic was survival strategies of Mother Centers during the pandemic. The annual

meetings are usually held at the Mother Center that came first the previous year. In this manner, participants get to know many different Mother Centers and learn from each other. The exchange of experience is a strong feature of the meetings.

Networking and Lobbying

To connect Mother Centers and to spread ideas and information, we publish a newsletter and are active on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. We share press releases upon request.



Current campaign (from 2021) of the Federal Association of Mother Centers in Germany

We organize campaigns to draw attention to our concerns. One campaign, for example, focused on the absence of child support payments, which results in single mothers being the demographic that is most likely to be impoverished. A poster campaign drew attention to the fact that child rearing in general is costly, but especially for women, due to the fact that they often stay at home to take care of the household and the family, or take part-time jobs. The pay- and pension-gap is an ongoing theme. Currently, the Federal Association of Mother Centers is running a campaign called “Motherliness has no gender” to demand a fair distribution of care work and the mental load of child rearing. Instead of a solution in the form of a system that privileges families in which one person, usually the man, works full-time and the partner part-time, we support a 32-hour week for all.

The Federal Association of Mother Centers is an active member of a several family Berlin-based organizations and therefore able to do direct lobbying. Topics include the need for fundamental rights for children in our constitution and affordable housing for families. We also belong to the National Council of German Women’s Organizations (the Deutscher Frauenrat, DF), the biggest women’s lobby in Germany. Within this advocacy organization, we usually apply to take part in committees that have direct access to decision makers such as ministers of the federal government and parliament. The aim is to make gender mainstreaming a consistent feature of public policy. Each year, at least one member of our steering group is active in one of the DF committees. This increases the visibility of the Mother Centers on the federal level and strengthens our network.

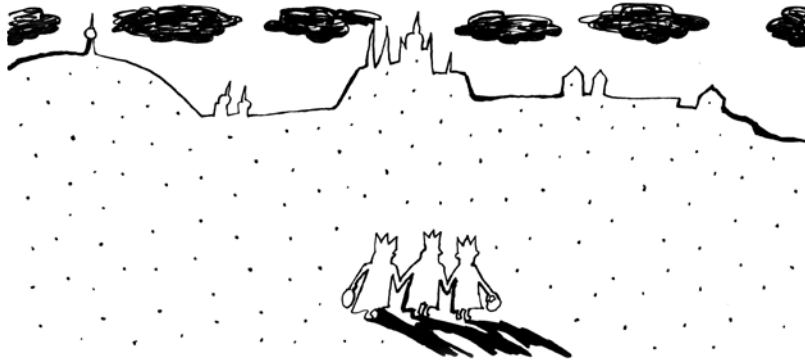
“In addition to the knowledge gained, it was enriching to see how people work in Mother Centers and their umbrella organizations in other countries. I appreciated the great cohesion of the roof organization, the enthusiasm about work and volunteering in Slovakia; the ease of working and the emphasis on creating a community around a family center in Slovenia and the opportunity to see how a Mother Center can work within a multi-generational house in Germany. On another level, the pandemic also enriched us – we learned to use online tools for webinars and meetings, took streaming courses and learned to organize video calls for those who could not attend, and to be flexible in general. Amazing experience!”

Jitka Genest, project manager, Network for Family



Multigenerational haus Salzgitter

HISTORY OF THE CZECH MOTHER CENTERS



Every time I think about the initialization of Mother Centers in Czechoslovakia, a biblical quote comes to my mind: “the wind blows wherever it pleases”. This quote was used in a memoir written by Alena Wagnerová, who, with the aim of passing the idea of Mother Centers to someone, came to Prague shortly after the revolution in January 1990. On the Three Kings Day (January 6) my husband, our children (four at the time) and I went carol-singing and raised money for the Jedlička Institute (a home for children with disabilities). When Alena saw us, she realized we might not be a completely normal family (her words), so she approached us and asked if we knew the Prague Mothers (an informal ecological movement which was established before the revolution in 1988). I was one of them, so we arranged to meet at our home.

Alena then introduced me to the idea of Mother Centers, which had been operating in Germany for almost ten years. She was convinced that similar centers should be established in Czechoslovakia as well. I was very interested in her story and thought they would be great for families living in anonymous

housing estates, for example. However, I myself did not suffer from the so-called “four wall syndrome”. I grew up in an evangelical parish where the door was always open to everyone. Our family continued to live a similar life.

Alena suggested that the Prague Mothers take up the idea. At that time, however, our focus was only the environment, which was in a sorry state in Prague. Alena was sad, but she continued to send me various articles about the centers in Germany. After a year, she visited us again. I greeted her with my fifth child in my arms and she said: “With five children, there’s nothing left for you to do, so get started.” And in March 1991, she organized a study trip to Munich for us. Among the attendees were three Prague Mothers, our little daughter and my husband, mainly as a babysitter. At the Deutsche Jugend Institute we received theoretical training from Monika Jaeckel, who had supported the establishment of centers in Germany as a sociologist. During



Demonstration of the Prague Mothers, May 1989



Seminar on Mother Centers, Prague 1991

my visits to five centers in Munich, which were very diverse (alternative childcare, creative, intellectual, integration of foreigners), I – as I like to call it – got infected with a beneficial Mother Center virus. And the rest is history.

In fall, I organized a seminar on Mother Centers, which was attended not only by Monika Jaekel, but also by Hildegard Schooss – the founder of the first Mother Center in Germany. Her story and the sharing of her experience played a crucial role. Marie Nováková, a participant of the seminar, found out that the YMCA building located on the Na Poříčí street in Prague had some free space. In March 1992, we opened the first Mother Center in Czechoslovakia there. Friends invited friends, the circle of female – and sometimes even male – visitors gradually expanded and the center began to teem with rich community life.

I felt that I had done my part, but I realized that for Czechoslovakia, a fairly big country when measured from west to east, one center was simply not enough. I didn't give up and started organizing "How to get started" seminars, trying to attract media attention...

Gradually, new centers began to appear, I kept a list of them, our communication took place via traditional mail – the Internet and emails were in their infancy and unavailable to us. In 1997, there were 27 centers on the list, which was enough for me to organize the first congress. I was once again inspired by Germany.

We published the so-called "green book" of Mother Centers – a translation of the German publication *Mütter im Zentrum* with chapters about Czech centers. My phone number was accidentally left in the project we used as an illustration. I must say it was an invaluable accident, because it made it easier to access the counseling I was providing.

The number of centers kept growing and I could not have done it without Jitka Hermannová and Lucie Slauková. Both of them played a big role in the spreading of the Mother Centers idea not only in the Czech Republic but also in Slovakia. To give you an example: I led the seminar "How to get started" at the Czech center in Bratislava and after that, Lucie and I went to the great "Enter with a Child" conference in Poprad and we established cooperation between the divided republics, at least within the framework of Mother Centers.



Informal general assembly 1999

The Mother Centers Network

Our volunteer work grew so rapidly that we decided to formalize it. In 1999, we convened an informal general assembly where I presented my vision of a network that would operate regionally as well as nationwide. My presentation didn't come across the way I intended, but we were nevertheless tasked with drawing up a statutes and registering the Mother Centers network. At the inaugural meeting in March 2002, out of the 127 centers we had registered and worked with up to then, only 69 centers had joined the network. Distrust of the meaningfulness of having a common voice prevailed.

Life went on and the Mother Centers network gradually gained trust: nowadays, we organize around 260 centers. There were more of them, but the COVID-19 pandemic took its toll.

The Network for Family

Since its establishment in 2002, the range of activities of The Network for Family (Sít pro rodinu in Czech) has gradually become more varied and has begun to extend into the social sphere as well as into cooperation with political leaders. For this reason, we decided to change our name to The Network for Family and started working on a new strategy (2016). Our mission today is simple: we strengthen the value of family and our task is to strengthen the value of family not only in our Mother Centers, but also in society and in companies.

Three basic pillars of The Network for Family activities

1. We strengthen the value of the family in the Mother Centers:

- we handle over the know how;
- we provide support to emerging as well as already existing Mother Centers;
- we connect the individual Mother Centers;
- we share and award good practice examples.



2. We strengthen the value of the family in the Czech society:

- we enforce family-friendly legislation;
- we connect experts and organizations on local, regional, national and international level;
- we encourage the involvement of Mother Centers in local governments.



3. We strengthen the value of the family in the labor market:

- we promote the competitiveness of companies;
- we award family friendly companies;
- we promote good practice examples.



The main Tasks of advocacy of The Network for Family:

- coordination of activities, campaigns and projects;
- support and methodological guidance for newly established MCs;
- promotion the common interests of the MC and families;
- cooperation with governing bodies;
- cooperation with partner organizations abroad;
- cooperation with the with the international partners;
- fundraising.

Václav Havel, the first president of the Czech Republic wrote to us on the 15th anniversary of the opening of the first Mother Center and the 5th anniversary of the founding of The Network of Mothers Centers:

"I am thinking of all of you – the care givers, who help to create better life conditions for families, of all, who contribute to parental and community responsibilities, of all, who prevent social deracination, of all, who bring hope to the people around you.

An individualized and commercialized society promotes more dehumanization and isolation. While this is not an exclusively Czech feature, we are lagging behind the countries with a functioning and developed civil society in fixing it. From what I can tell, you've done a great job. You should really take pride in the work you put in the Mothers Centers.

I wish The Network of Mothers Centers all the best for the future."

International cooperation and joint promotion of better living conditions for families

Not only did I take the model of Mother Centers from Germany and adapted the know-how to the Czech environment and Czech conditions, but in Germany, I was also inspired by other activities, such as education of founders and active women from the centers, organization of congresses, campaigns and finally the founding of The Network of Mother Centers (today The Network for Family). Cooperation with the German network brought both inspiration and the opportunity to share and find common interests. Thanks to my connection to the German network, in 1999, I was invited to a conference in Bombay organized by the Huairou Commission and Groot International. In 2000, we hosted a similar meeting here in Prague. Back then, before the Network of Mother Centers was founded, we became members of Groot International. At that time, centers were being established in Slovakia which motivated me to initiate the creation of a European network of Mother Centers. The main reason was to get the topic of the family on the European Union agenda, because until now,



Huairou Commission, Prague 2000

it was discussed only on a national level. The cooperation was particularly successful thanks to lifelong learning projects supported by the Grundtvig and Erasmus+ programs.

At the global level, I tried from the very beginning to present the situation of Mother Centers and the living conditions of families in the Czech Republic at many events organized especially by the UN-Habitat, World Urban Forum or right away in 2000 at the GWIA in Saltzgitter. I shared my international experience with Mother Centers and put them in use in programs such as Local to Local Dialog or Leadership Support Process. In 2016, we organized the activities of the Huairou Commission at the European Habitat III in Prague. When the Huairou Commission and Groot International became one, I was elected to the board of directors.

It is a pity that being overwhelmed by one's own concerns prevents the centers from becoming more involved in international activities, because every meeting with people from other countries and continents brings benefits, such as the



Hildegard Schooss and Rut Kolínská

opportunity to share experiences, mutual inspiration and support, to everyone involved. Motherhood and parenthood unite us. Mothers all over the world see the future through the eyes of their children, so I believe our strength lies in our connection.

“One of the most touching moments for me was the reunion of Hildegard Schooss and Rut Kolínská, two strong and enthusiastic pioneers who embody the spirit of Mother Centers in Germany and Czechia.”

Beatrice Schilling, The Federal Association of Mother Centers

HISTORY OF THE SLOVAK MOTHER CENTERS

In 1989, the **Velvet Revolution** peacefully **ended the Communist rule in Czechoslovakia**. Slovakia became an independent state on January 1, 1993 after the **peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia**, sometimes known as the Velvet Divorce.

Slovakia's post-1989 history has been marked with serious political conflicts over the course of transformation. Transformation in Slovakia has included a large degree of unpredictability in all three areas: from autocracy to democracy; from a centrally-planned economy to a market economy; and a redefinition of statehood.

With the changes in the economic and social policy of the state after 1989, there are also changes in the structure of the family in Slovakia, which must be understood as a logical and completely natural result of the overall development of society. The end of the 80s and the beginning of the 90s can be considered as a certain milestone in the development of the family and family behavior in Slovakia.

As a basic social “collectivity”, the family continued to fulfill its biological, educational, social and economic function. However, in the light of the new circumstances, it was forced to adapt its behavior more and more to the new political, economic and social situation. Conditions for business have been created, pressure on intensity and responsibility in employment has increased, and unemployment started to rise. The emerging income differences deepened the social differentiation in society, which significantly affected mainly families with children. They had to deal with the loss of former social security as well as a decline in their standard of living.

In 2001, for the first time ever, the number of both complete families and complete families with children decreased. Economic pressure (rising cost of living, inflation, unemployment, housing restrictions) on the one hand, the possibility of entrepreneurship, travel, study, personal realization on the other hand have caused young people to change their attitudes towards starting a family.

Demands for the care and upbringing of children are constantly growing. For this reason, children find themselves competing against other goals of the spouses – childlessness or just one child means an increase in the life chances of both spouses (career in employment, standard of living, etc.). Family is moved to the background and other forms of cohabitation become more attractive.

The story of the idea of founding the Mother Centers

Let's start with the words of the founder of the first MC in Slovakia – Eva Fiedlerova: I personally learned about Mother Centers from an article entitled “Another Mother Center in the Czech Republic”, published in the Betynka magazine during my first maternity leave (approximately 1995). I remember the deep impression that the article made on me. It came to my mind again a few years later, when I moved with my husband and son 350 miles from my birthplace, my family, and my friends. My second son was born and I changed my decision to take up three years of maternity leave. I felt isolated, overwhelmed and worried about my future employment. The vision of a Mother Center with a community of women in a similar situation and mood was indeed an ideal solution.

The BAMBINO Mother Center was registered in 1998 as a civic association. Eva Fiedlerová was a very important person in this plan together with her friend Danica Hámorová and seven other mothers on maternity leave, they opened the first MC in Slovakia on October 1, 1999.

An inspiring and safe space for children, mutual assistance in childcare, organization of tailor-made programs, education, the opportunity to develop citizenship and own projects (including preparation for business or retraining) were all extremely powerful motivations that quickly became a reality. There is no doubt that at that time, there were certainly many similar initiatives in Slovakia, but rather on an informal basis. In the beginnings of the formal establishment of Bambino, the Fenestra Women's Interest Association from Košice helped the center a lot, with a priority focus on helping women, victims of domestic violence, and the Mother Center was a part of it.

Short interview with Eva

How long did you work in Bambino and how did it affect your next career, or volunteering in the non-profit field, or your children?

I worked in Bambino for about 10 years and then for about two more years I was working for the Union of Mother Centers (UMC) as part of campaign called “How we want to raise our children” which is very close to my heart. The decision to leave was quite natural. Working in MC was one of my greatest life experiences in terms of human, professional and parental growth. I summarize them as a healthier approach to life, in all its diversity and movement. The influence on my sons is undeniable (UMC has conducted an impact study) and I perceive community education of children in today's world as one of the most valuable step on their path to the future. I have not left the non-profit sector, I am helping my sister with activities for people with mental disabilities and my life research continues.

Do you maintain contact with Bambino and its current leadership? Do you monitor its activities or the activities of the UMC?

A lot has changed in Bambino since I left. I maintained contact for some time, but it was interrupted by my departure from Poprad and its generational exchange. However, we are still in contact with the “old Bambino moms”. I have reports on the activities of the UMC directly from the source, Daniela Konečná. She is part of a group of women whom the UMC united in the past and their friendship continues. I believe it will continue. We meet regularly and it looks like a long-planned campaign with a touch of humor “Let me enter with a gavel”, we will start really soon.

How would you describe the periods of your life in MC, UMC and what do you consider the greatest success?

As a gift. It was a gift that taught me a lot, helped me immensely in my personal life and that awakened creativity, courage, knowledge in me. I am extremely pleased that this idea has survived and continues to develop. Good luck to it!



Spread of Mother Centers

Thanks to great interest from parents, Mother Centers began to be established in 2000 in many towns and villages in Slovakia. The Mother Centers teams began to meet, get to know each other and exchange experiences. There is a story behind every single Mother Center. The story of the mothers who associate with the intention to avoid social isolation during maternity, or rather parental leave. The story of mothers who are motivated to create a safe and stimulating environment for themselves and their children.

Eva Fiedlerová: "MC is everything I lacked in today's world, whether it is a safe playground, a sense of confidence or an opportunity to talk. MCs are an inspiring place of the child's first confrontation, but unlike other institutions for children, here, the children are in safe and loving proximity of their mother (father). I remember children to whom Bambino initiated verbal communication with the world or friendships with other peers they had previously avoided.



Rut Kolínská + Eva Fiedlerová + Lucie Slauková, Poprad 2001

For children, as well as for adults, MCs are an incubator of the first social contacts with other social rules outside home, an environment for perception and tolerance for differences.

In the first and crucial years of their lives, children have such a unique opportunity to watch their mother in a different role than at home, how she communicates, helps others, cooperates with them, learns from them and lives socially. They may be disturbed at first by their mother's attention being given to other things, but later they adopt this pattern and may use it later in their lives."

The first conference of Mother Centers in Slovakia was organized in MC Bambino Poprad in 2001. Its main idea "Help us to help" was presented with the participation of the Minister of Labor and Social Affairs, representatives of state administration, local governments, non-governmental organizations and Mother Centers.

Mother centers have proven that the world can be moved when people are guided and united by a common agenda and a sincere effort for change. MCs can interpret their protest from below, but also design solutions through campaigns. All the successes of MC so far would not have been possible if it had not been nurtured by the joy of mutual encounters, the effort to understand each other despite some differences, mutual learning and a sense of belonging.

Mother centers are most beautifully expressed by the word "third space", which is a symbol of the union of different worlds: family or work, academic or lay, private or civic, or worlds of different religions or ethnicities.

Umbrella organization

The growing number of newly established Mother Centers, the need for effective exchange of information, interconnection and organization in order to be a relevant voice in society resulted in the establishment of the civic association of the Union of Mother Centers in 2003. This was done in Tajov with the participation of all 22 member Mother Centers, in the same year the first General Assembly of the "Union of Mother Centers" was held and received the first grant from the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Core milestones of UMC



Mile for Mom Slovakia

In 2004, the UMC set a Guinness World Record for the number of people pushing a stroller on a 1-mile route. The foundations of the campaign “How we want to raise our children” were laid and the first issue of the Mother Centers magazine was published.

In 2005, the interest in the Union of Mother Centers increased significantly, the number of its members increased to 47 Mother Centers. This year, the event “Drive the stroller, move the world” was organized in the capital Bratislava. The foundations for a new “Enter with a Child” campaign have also been laid.

In 2006, the first international conference was organized in Bratislava with the participation of the Mother Centers International Network for Empowerment (MINE) and 170 members from 24 countries – the USA, Switzerland, Hungary, Poland, Ukraine,

Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, Brazil and other. The Mother’s Day event was renamed “A Mile for Mom”.

In 2007, for the first time, UMC organized a public collection “Thank you for being a mother” to support the mother and family centers of Slovakia.

In 2009, a second international conference was organized entitled “Mother Centers as the Academies of Practical Parenting” in Štrbské Pleso with the participation of Mother Centers from Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Austria, Russia, Italy and Uganda.

In 2012, the first catalog for the “Enter with a Child” campaign was published. The International Day of Mother Centers was organized jointly. UMC received significant institutional support from the Štefan Batory Foundation, became a partner in the international Grundtvig project, and the “Step to Independence” project was launched.

In 2014, UMC became the leader of the International Day of Mother Centers and the mother and family centers of Slovakia were introduced to the world.



Conference, Bratislava 2006

HISTORY OF THE SLOVENIAN MOTHER CENTERS

In the past ten years, family and family life has changed drastically. This is a result of number of factors such as the fact that nowadays, women have their first-born later in life. A reduced number of children being born and longer life expectancy, which shortens active life with children at the expense of a narrowed period of family (the joint life with a partner before children, the so-called period of “empty nest”) as they spend more time alone before having children. On the other hand, the importance of parenting and their responsibility towards children has significantly intensified. Parents carefully consider whether to have children or not, and they often decide to have them only if they are convinced that they can provide optimal living conditions for their child. This has a considerable impact on the number of children being born.

Working conditions have also changed tremendously. Career obligations such as long working hours and work during weekends and holidays, precarious work, the need to commute and be mobile are often incompatible with family life. Looking at EU statistics, Slovenia ranks among the group of countries with the worst compatibility motherhood and employment possibilities. This is self-evident and simultaneously, there is an economic need to employ women. The rigid employment policy (it is difficult to re-enter the job market after time off) and the few possibilities to find a job with flexible or shorter working hours make it almost impossible for the two to be compatible (family life and employment of mothers). It is legally possible to work for half or less than 8 hours per day but in reality, it is difficult to achieve this and most employers don't entertain this idea.

In Slovenia, 42% of employees face difficulties in reconciling work and family obligations various times a month (EuroFound, 2010). It is interesting that Slovenia ranks first in the EU in terms of the number of parents in the 35–49 age group (men 62% and women 82%). The research “Needs of preadolescent children's parents in Slovenia” (Kuhar and Razpotnik, 2010) shows that the biggest

problem for parents is the coordination of work obligations with time for children, followed by finding time for their relationship with a partner and time with children. There is also an uncertainty issue regarding raising their children as well as ability to offer them the perfect material living conditions.

“Responsible parenting” has become a norm, which has been dictated by a flood of magazines on parenting, literature for parents, the society, and manufacturers of baby food, toys and equipment, educational counseling organizations, internet counseling or social networks. Due to a change in perception of parenthood by the new generation of parents who don't trust the advice of their parents but rather prefer counselors, peers and literature on parenting. The media and society expect young mothers to be perfect parents with a successful career as well as being “interesting women” with their own unique style, image and hobbies. As a primary parental role, motherhood places a great deal of social responsibility on women. Although it is correct to speak of parenthood, it is of course quite gender specific referring to the mother in most cases. Despite the obvious increasingly important roles of fathers in parenting, women are still considered as the principal parent. Even though today's generation of fathers are more involved in working with children, they still have a more supportive role rather than main one meaning that they carry less of the burden when it comes to raising children compared to mothers. Fathers are also more engaged in the fun activities of care such as spending free time and playing whereas mothers have the primary role as caregivers and establishing a routine. Motherhood is less private and more publicly regulated. The well-being and care of the child is much more important and socially demanding. The more the requirements of optimal care for the child are needed, the more emotionally, financially and organizationally complex the parenting becomes.

The story of the idea of founding the Mother Centers

In a time where everything is very individualistic, parents are mostly left to fend for themselves in the upbringing and care of their children. The child's future is the parents' responsibility





Eva Strmljan, founder of Family Center Mala Ulica

regardless of their living conditions, material possibilities, and financial, social, emotional and other circumstances. On the other hand, the cult of Responsible parenting is omnipresent and places even more demands on parents. In addition to kindergartens, which are in principle accessible to all parents and a multitude of support or above standard activities that can only be afforded by parents that are well off (babysitters, educational workshops, cultural and sports activities). Parents are often, regardless of their social status, left to manage parenting and parental decisions on their own. Young mothers on maternity leave are a particularly vulnerable group.

The family center as a place offering support that is working in parallel to existing networks of public and private kindergartens is primarily an area for non-formal meetings. Some authors refer to them as “public living rooms” (Humer, Švab, Žakelj). The decline in

social cohesion and community values faced by western society calls for a renewal of civil society movements and volunteer associations, which according to multiple authors, is necessary to maintain modern democracy (Edwards et al., 2001).

Family centers are trying to replace or to revive the field once represented by the extended family and local neighborhood or village community. These centers also help strengthen mutual ties and relationships. Parents in nuclear families are even more isolated and excluded from social networks when they first have a child due to all of their physical needs and care. Because of time constraints, new values, focus on new interests, the circle of friends of parents are narrowed down to those who find themselves in a similar situation. Mothers are also excluded from work environment and other networks in which they were active before the arrival of the child. The family center functions as a meeting spot for mothers to socialize and make new friends with people in similar situations, people who have identical interests, occupation and problems.

Family centers are in some way similar to a kindergarten or day care center, although not all family centers necessarily offer childcare or babysitting services as a complementary service. In the case of family centers in the MNE network, childcare is one of the key support activities that allows women greater autonomy and freedom, while some centers, for example Baboes in Brussels, require a strict parental presence. Despite that, these family centers as well have the tools to offer mothers a lot of support so that their children can play on their own while being kept an eye on from distance. It could be argued that the child can also be passively looked after at home, but there is a major difference between a family center and a home: children, especially very young ones below the age of 1, spend most of their time at home which is a place they are familiar with, unlike a family center.

In general, apartments of young families are usually smaller and don't offer as many opportunities for the child to explore and run around. When a child enters a new space that is interesting and adapted to their interests, they are distracted and can spend more time on their own compared to being at home. This means that the family center itself offers mothers the opportunity to sort of relax

and rest. The educational aspect of a family center also plays an important role because unlike at kindergartens, parents are also involved, offering the chance to compare different educational approaches and practices. The extended environment that a child masters is not only limited to other toys and space, but also to other people, new customs, views on life, etc. In this sense, family centers have significant potential to build mixed communities that cross the cultural and socio-economic border. Children have no prejudices and are more dynamic, quickly making contact with people regardless of gender, social class or ethical connections.

Parents also have an opportunity to meet new people through their children. This results in new networks being created which are necessary for a pleasant co-existence when building mixed communities in urban environments. Comparing different lifestyles and upbringing methods is also extremely important for parents. The family centers represent a space that is somewhere

between the private and public sphere of life. It isn't the same as a school or kindergarten where the curriculum has a major determining role in behavior and presence but at the same time, it isn't entirely a private space. Parents are being observed as well as their different parenting styles, among other things. According to some authors (Van den Broeck and Geens, 2007), they are well aware of being observed. Family centers undoubtedly play an important role in bridging social inequalities and increasing social cohesion.

According to a survey done in 2010 called "Needs of preadolescent children's parents in Slovenia", among all the problems that parents face, 1/3 of parents primarily want more contact with people in similar situations, namely other parents.

Mala ulica Family center as the first such center in Slovenia for families with preschool children was established by The Municipality of Ljubljana in 2013. Initially, it operated as an organizational unit of the Young Dragons, the public institute that enable young



Mala ulica



Mala ulica – interior

people and adolescents to enjoy quality leisure time. In 2014, Mala ulica became an independent public institution.

In Slovenia, we didn't establish concept of family centers, which would, as in some places abroad, be grouped at the regional level in a network under an "umbrella".

The vision of Mala ulica is to remain the central informational-educational point and a meeting place for young families in Ljubljana, and to establish in the territory of the former five Ljubljana city municipalities with the support of the City of Ljubljana at least three or five family centers by 2030. Plans and spatial designs are currently being prepared for the family center in Jarše, which is expected to open in 2024. In addition to the needs of the clients of the Mala ulica Family center, the construction of the Jarše District Community Center also includes the following: Ljubljana Health Center, Ljubljana Pharmacy, Local Self-Government Service, and Day Care Center for the Elderly.

In larger city facilities, where there will be other institutions and services for citizens (library, neighborhood center for young people, day center for the elderly, health center), we also plan to build the remaining family centers. The current family center is located in the downtown, which makes it still inaccessible to many families from the suburbs because it is too far from their homes.

When establishing new family centers, we want to strengthen their accessibility and place them in those parts of the city where the need for services and programs to support the family is. This will make the new centers accessible to more vulnerable and deprived families with young children.



Mala ulica – open space

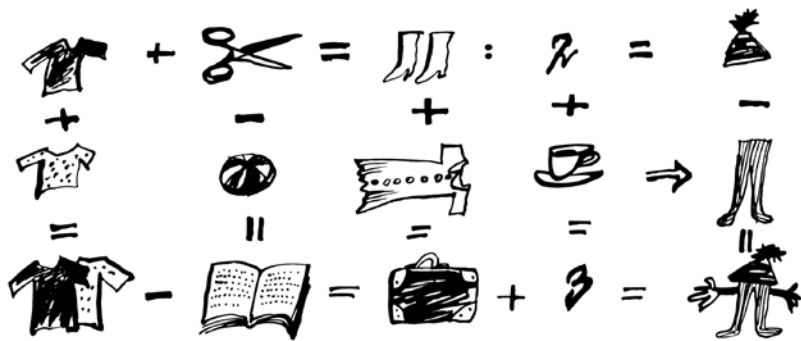
“I got many new ideas when I saw the child-centered architecture and furniture of Mala Ulica in Ljubljana. And I was impressed with the strength of the Czech Umbrella Organization of Mother Centers.”

Kerstin Tempel, Mütterzentrum Siegen

KNOW-HOW OF MOTHER CENTERS

Mother Centers have established themselves as a completely new phenomenon of civil society in West Germany, which is a political and civic environment based on democratic principles. The spread of the idea of Mother Centers to post-communist countries would have not succeed if we had copied the German model without reflecting on local conditions after the Velvet Revolution. Nevertheless, in searching for an answer to the question of how Mother Centers differ from other organizations that work with families, we have found that they have a lot in common. We dare to say that the basic operational principles of the Mother Centers today are the same in all countries and centers, regardless of their size, program and geographic location.

What makes Mother Center a Mother Center



Mother Center creates a **community focused on whole family** where everyone of every age:

- is welcome;
- is respected and respects others;
- shares, gives and receives something;
- contributes to understanding the environment;

- interacts and communicates with individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, thus overcoming social and economic barriers.

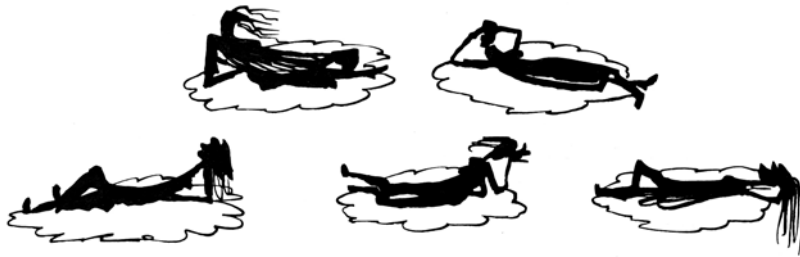
Mother Center act in an **open public space** where:

- everyone is greeted by a hostess ("service mother" in Czech Republic);
- we do not waste resources;
- people are motivated to work because it makes sense to them (between love and self-exploitation);
- volunteers are appreciated and without them the center cannot operate;
- parents and children can socialize and play;
- families get overall support in terms of occasional childcare, counselling and education;
- families have access to preventive, socially integrative, cultural and educational activities;
- families have opportunities to spend good-quality time and be active;
- vulnerable and deprived families with young children are welcomed.

Mother Center sets **milestones for future**:

- its fundamental benefit lies in preventing risky situations in the family and society;
- strengthens parenting skills and competencies;
- promotes intergenerational cooperation and solidarity;
- teaches conscious handling of resources;
- opens the way for quick and targeted crisis relief;
- makes an important contribution to the well-being of children, adolescents, families and society in general by carrying out prevention activities for children and their parents;
- represents a unique solution to loosen socio-economic differences by providing a variety of services/activities aimed at supporting children, parents and families in general;
- became a "place" of the future and their role needs to be highlighted and brought closer to families and individuals, as well as to political decision-makers.

What a Mother Center means to me



The benefit and meaning of a Mother Center can be different for each of us because we are not the same and everyone has different expectations. Yet, we managed to find a **couple of shared reasons why we and our families like the centers so much:**

1. Open space for everybody

- I feel welcome, sense of togetherness.
- Diversity is perceived by all as normality.
- There are no barriers for visitors.
- Parents and children can play and socialize.

2. Community

Mother Center offers me:

- well-being of family;
- “nourishing” place;
- (female) empowerment;
- transfer of day-to-day knowledge;
- friendship, harbor...

3. Self help

Nonprofessional social workers, who do the professional social work for all members of family: offer safety space and possibility for looking for solutions, provide programs with preventive activities.

4. Increasing skills of mothers/fathers/grandparents and kids

They all find opportunities for personal development through creative collaboration, common experiences and free playing, connecting generations and coexistence.

5. Schools of civic life

Active involvement in the activities of the centers offers mothers an opportunity to navigate the municipal decision-making process and leads to civic engagement. The municipality's leadership receives social capital, which is particularly evident in crisis situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the ongoing Russian war in Ukraine.

6. Networking and international cooperation

Each of us considers the opportunity to get to know other centers and other active women nationally and internationally as a great benefit and a great inspiration for personal life and work in the center.



SWOT analysis

The nearly fifty-year existence of Mother Centers is still not a guarantee of sustainability. That is why we also performed a comparative SWOT analysis and it seems that the situation of

Mother Centers in Germany, the Czech Republic and Slovakia is very similar. The starting point of centers in Slovenia is different, but we still find some similarities.

STRENGTHS			
DE	CZ	SK	SI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We respond fast to crises. ■ We empower and politicize women and disadvantaged people ■ We value informal education and everyday knowledge ■ Mother Centers were the blueprint for multigenerational houses in Germany 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strong network of MC ■ A longstanding tradition: MC – an established phenomenon at municipal level ■ Ability to respond operationally to the current needs of families and communities ■ Support from a spectrum of professionals ■ Joint public relations ■ We promote and support lifelong learning and self-help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Vital network nationally coordinated by the UMC ■ Concentration of various professional backgrounds/skills of MC/RC leaders and members ■ NGOs that follow a bottom-up approach can better react to local needs, issues and problems ■ Ability to respond operationally to the current needs of families and communities ■ Open space for anyone without any limitation due to age, sex, race, religion, political opinion ■ Sharing experiences via counseling, education, support groups, lectures and courses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Central informational-educational point and a meeting place for young families in Ljubljana, which offers a place to socialize and play, as well as overall support for families in terms of occasional childcare, counseling and education. ■ We implement both sets of family support programs, as envisaged by the Resolution on Family Policy 2018–2028: “Family-friendly society” (ReDP18-28): 1) family center programs and 2) psycho-social support programs for children and parents. ■ To this end, we have strengthened the program of street activities, thus approaching not only vulnerable groups of children who are not involved in organized afternoon (paid) activities, but all children who have not been part of outdoor play, but would like to. ■ Through street activities we fill the gap in the community in caring for the youngest children and families ■ We are comprehensively addressing needs of families and are maximally flexible in work and set programs. ■ We are sharing experiences and programs through study visits and attending international conferences.



WEAKNESSES			
DE	CZ	SK	SI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of visibility among other family centers ■ The name Mother Center is an obstacle, because it calls for associations with conservatism and traditional role models. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Handing over management of MC ■ Consumers versus participants ■ Unstable funding ■ Inequalities between paid and unpaid services ■ Lack of volunteers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Handing over management of MC ■ Consumers versus participants ■ Unstable funding ■ Inequalities between paid and unpaid services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Strong network of MC in Slovenia is not established. ■ In Slovenia we do not have an established concept of family centers, which would, as in some places abroad, be grouped at the regional level in a network. ■ The status of a family center (or intergenerational center) has not yet been defined or regulated on a national level, nor is completely clear the competence of the ministry of this interdisciplinary activity. ■ Consumers versus participants ■ The needs of families (parents and children) who are looking for psycho-social support are growing. ■ Demand for parenting training program called the Incredible Years is high, so the waiting period for participation is long, up to 9 months ■ During the summer holidays, it is necessary to provide a large number of students to help with the implementation of the summer childcare program. ■ MC in the downtown is less accessible to more vulnerable and deprived families with young children from the suburbs.



OPPORTUNITIES			
DE	CZ	SK	SI
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We stand up for fair division of care work, greater compatibility of paid work and child care. ■ We promote and support lifelong learning and self-help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Subsidy program at the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs ■ Advocacy activities at local, regional and national level ■ Project options – Czech and European ■ Joint public relations – Family Festival ■ Support for local candidates from Mother Centers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Funding schemes on municipal and national level ■ Advocacy activities at local, regional and national level ■ Partnerships in international projects ■ Mile for Mum, International Mother Center Day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Ministry of Labor, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities finances the following contents of the Mala ulica Family center for the years (2021–2025): implementation of parenting training program called the Incredible Years, the implementation of the Dino school (the Incredible Years program, intended for children from 4 to 8 years of age) and the possibility of free childcare during the summer holidays. ■ As project holder, we are successful at participating in tender from the Ministry of Health and obtaining funds for the implementation of the Incredible Years program in Slovenia for a certain period. We promote and support well-being of parents and their children. ■ Mala ulica is the only one in Slovenia that runs the Dino School, a program within the Incredible Years, intended for a small group of children (6) aged 4–8 years. ■ Like Parenting Training, Dino School is highly structured and based on free and guided play, strengthening the emotional, social and cognitive development of children and preventing and reducing children’s behavioral problems. ■ Project options – Slovenia and European ■ Family picnic gathering for “Incredible parents”, organization of Incredible Years conferences.



THREATS			
DE	CZ	SK	SI
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Not enough money and volunteers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Lack of moneyBurnout of active people in centersCommercialization of MCCrisis – economic, pandemic, war	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Lack of money and volunteersCrisis – economic, pandemic, warCommercialization of MC	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Establishing new family centers is time consuming process.Burnout of active people in centers.Crisis – economic, pandemic, war

“The concept of the founders of Mother Centers is still alive in all Mother Centers all over Europe. It was a mind blowing experience for me to see that there are save and open spaces for women and families to meet, learn and support each other in countries I have never visited before.”

Christiane Liebendörfer, Managing Director of the Federal Association of Mother Centers

EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICES

EXAMPLES FROM GERMANY

Women and family friendly working conditions

The Mother Centers were founded by women and are run by women. The federal steering committee is all female. This is unique. In Germany, women occupy only 22.5% of leading positions. In the Mother Centers, boys and girls see women in these roles from early age.

The working conditions are family-friendly. Parents are allowed to bring their children to their workplace. Often the kids attend the kindergarten or day care center under the same roof. For entire families, the Mother Center becomes a second home, especially when they have lunch together in our open living rooms. This possibility takes a lot of pressure from the family's shoulders,



MC Siegen – hostess principle

because it reduces the stress of buying groceries, cooking and cleaning the household. Furthermore, children see their parents actually working and not just coming home from work.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, we made it possible for staff to work from home when it was desired and feasible. Work shifts are flexible, if necessary.

We facilitate the return to work for women who paused their careers to take care of children. They find role models in other women, encouragement and opportunities. If people want to try something new, they find possibilities like one former banker who became a nanny or a secretary who became a press officer.

We create an atmosphere where employees and volunteers can see themselves as a team, not as competing individuals. All voices are heard. The atmosphere is relationship-oriented and regular meetings are held to reflect on the work and to solve problems together before they become chronic. The efforts and successes of employees and volunteers are seen and praised daily, not just at anniversary celebrations.

Integration of Migrants

“My first step into the Mother Center was my first step into public in Germany”. (A Turkish woman describing the Mother Center EkiZ in Stuttgart)

One of the many Mother Centers that is successful in integrating migrants and refugees is the *Nachbarschatz* (Treasury of the Neighborhood) in Hamburg. Manager Dagmar Engels remembers how Hamburg was lacking childcare for the children of refugees who stayed in camps. With donated funds, the *Nachbarschatz* established from 2015 to 2019 a kindergarten for refugees. a cooperative arrangement with the camp allowed the parents to participate as much as possible. Since the Mother Center offered German classes, many migrants stayed for a cup of coffee in the Mother Center, received help with paperwork, or started volunteering. Thanks to the open architecture, it is possible in the restaurant to observe the employees in the kitchen speaking in many languages. Some migrants began as volunteers in the kitchen. Although many of the refugees left the camp



MC Langen – sewing together



MC Langen – young and old people playing together

and live in other parts of the town, Engels emphasizes that they left empowered to live better lives. They passed the German proficiency tests and began their training or started working.

A high percentage of people in the *Nachbarschatz* are originally from other countries. Information is written in several languages. The food has the whiff of Arab and Asian spices. You can see several women with headscarves, which provokes constant debates in Germany. It is legally allowed to reject an applicant because of a headscarf on the grounds that this would scare off visitors. In childcare and schools, non-Muslim parents fear that a woman with a headscarf sends the wrong signal to girls. In Mother Centers, we avoided that so-called headscarf discussion. This changes in some kindergarten groups. In the *Nachbarschatz*, the employees decided against religious symbols at work. They also try to mix German children and

children with another mother tongue as much as possible. If groups are too homogeneous, integration is difficult.

The *Nachbarschatz* has an emergency apartment to host women who confront difficult times or violence. At present, an Afghan family of six has found a shelter here.

Sustainability in Mother Centers

Since the very beginning of the Mother Centers Movement, second hand shops are part of the concept. They help families to save money or even generate a small income and they promote the idea of recycling and reusing clothes instead of throwing them away. It also helps, that sewing courses are regularly offered. In some Mother Centers, other previously used and loved objects are sold, for example household items, toys or furniture. You can find there bookshelves with used books to take or borrow. Some

Mother Centers established food pantries or even a fridge with leftover foods and drinks, which have to be regularly checked for freshness.

We have repair cafés where people can bring broken equipment and learn how to make them work again.

In the Mother Center Zenja in Langen near Frankfurt, Sarah Schöche works as sustainability officer. She adopted a radically environmentally friendly life along with her family and decided to bring her new way of living to her workplace, the local Mother Center. Sarah Schöche founded the “fair change group” that meets monthly to discuss how to improve the sustainability within the Mother Center. So far, they produce their own washing liquid, soap, window-cleaner and universal cleaner. They use self-made beeswax foil instead of plastic wrap. Currently, they are experimenting with reusable cotton coffee filters.

Examples of other projects:

- Reducing packaging waste through a cooperation with a bulk food store where the Mother Center buys almost all durable food to store it in their own containers.
- Use of bokashi buckets for composting kitchen leftovers which are mixed with bran, pressed into the bucket, and tightly covered. When the bucket is full, it is sealed and set aside for ten to twelve days. Every other day during that time, the leachate that is an inevitable byproduct of anaerobic composting needs to be drawn off. When the bucket is opened, the contents, can be buried in the Mother Center’s garden.
- Gardens with lettuce, tomatoes, carrots and herbs are tended by employees, volunteers and children who learn where our food comes from and what we need to plant.
- An old upcycled “Second-hand shepherds hut”, where donated clothes are given away for donations.
- Cooperation with the fundraising organization “shuuz”, which works globally and takes donated shoes to people in need. This simultaneously reduces waste.
- Holiday program for kids who want to become environmental heroes: they collect and separate garbage, upcycle some of

the garbage, bake their own pizza in the Mother Centers wood oven, learn all about water.

- The Mother Center owns an electric car that is used for transporting people who are not mobile and for delivering food to people’s homes.
- Job-bikes: employees can sign up to a financial plan for buying a bike as an incentive to leave cars at home.

EXAMPLES FROM CZECH REPUBLIC

Festival of Family



In order to draw attention to the value of family for each of us, we organized a number of campaigns, such as: How to live with the pram, City for children, Come and stay, Cherishing the family, Daddy rocks today, Healthy life in a healthy environment, Children’s playgrounds today and tomorrow, Local to Local Dialog. These campaigns drew attention to partial problems of family life.

In the end, we decided to link the spring days that have something to do with the theme of family: Mother’s Day (second Sunday in May), International Day of Families proclaimed by the United Nations (May 15), Children’s Day (June 1) and Father’s Day (the third Sunday in June) and we established a new tradition of the **Festival of Family**.

Ninety eight member centers of our network participated in the pilot year of the project in 2019 and organized more than 140 events





Festival of Family 2019

for the general public across the Czech Republic. That's why we boldly launched the first regular Festival of Family.

We have determined that the Festival of Family will take the format of a garden festival or other events for the general public to spend time together, outside of virtual reality. How the individual centers conceive their program is up to them. We published an inspirational "Guide", but we did not set a uniform format as because the conditions are different in each center. However, we ended up choosing a uniform motto "With us, every family flourishes". We also selected flowers to become the connecting element.

Our plans were interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, 57 centers from 13 regions registered 118 events, some involving multiple programs, bringing the total estimate close to 200 events. The centers proved that they are not afraid to improvise and get creative. We did not want to lose continuity, so we announced a 2nd year, which eventually took place under even more demanding conditions than in 2020. Despite all the complications caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, 93 centers prepared 235 mostly offline

festival programs across all regions of the Czech Republic. Only 47 (mostly educational) programs were held online, including 4 network-wide Festival of Family online evenings.

It is worth mentioning that it was the difficult conditions that led to the search for a diverse approach so that the events could be open for the general public but at the same time not gather more people than allowed. In fact, there has been an enrichment in the future as well. Many centers have already incorporated into their plans their experience in organizing various "trailing or orienteering trails", "fairy tale forests", "treasure hunts" and similar programs for individual families so that everyone can participate without forming crowds above the head limit. The basic theme of these events is always a flower or a plant, in whatever shape or form. Similarly, flower workshops of various technique have become a regular feature of the festival programs. Gradually, other ideas for incorporating flowers into the festivals are coming up, such as seed and plant swaps, flower arranging, plant-based food tasting and recipe swaps, or perhaps a fence gallery – an exhibition on a garden fence.

This year, we hope that the Festival of Family will not be limited by the pandemic, even though the war in Ukraine is raising all sorts of concerns. However, the Festival of Family can provide an opportunity to engage with Ukrainian refugees. In any case, our great wish is to connect more through the Festival of Family – for example with the *Míla pre mamu (A Mile for Mom)* event. Personally, I would really like to be able to remind the whole of Europe every spring that family is the most precious thing we have!

www.festivalrodiny.cz



Family-friendly society



We have launched the Family-friendly society campaign in honor of the 10th anniversary of the UN's International Year of the Family. We wanted to draw attention to the conditions of family life in society and promote pro-family policies. After the Velvet Revolution, the focus on performance and success pushed families, especially those with young children, to vulnerable places on the margins of society. We began to reward those who supported families by offering barrier-free environment, family discounts, efforts to maintain a healthy environment and other pro-family activities.

We are proud that this activity has led to the introduction of the Family Friendly Municipality competition, which has been announced by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs since 2008. It recognizes municipalities that put pro-family policies into practice. Network for Family is a member of the evaluation committee.

Over time – thanks to the implementation of ESF-supported projects – we developed a corporate audit, which we continuously update, revising the evaluation indicators as the corporate culture gradually improves. What used to be an exception has become a new norm.

The current audit “Family Support Strategy as a Competitive Advantage” covers the following areas:

1. employment conditions: family-friendly corporate culture, flexible forms of work, maternal / paternal leave management, informal care, equal opportunities, diversity, equal pay, discrimination
2. Family-friendly work climate and activities: benefits, family-friendly work environment and activities
3. Corporate Social Responsibility: implementation of the Sustainable Development strategy that is based on 3 pillars: economic (CSR strategy), social and environmental

The audit takes place in several phases:

1. Questionnaire survey
2. Analysis of questionnaires and documents
3. Personal visit of the audit team – verification of the state of the company's culture, including interviews with employees
4. Decision of the external jury

The company receives our Family-friendly company certificate for 3 years while committing to the conditions for which it receives the certificate. After three years, it can be audited again. In addition to the certificate, the company also receives a set of recommendations on what to do next.

www.familyfriendly.cz

EXAMPLES FROM SLOVAKIA

A Mile for Mom



The largest Mother's Day celebration in Slovakia

A Mile for Mom is a nationwide campaign, which the Union of Mother Centers has been organizing continuously since 2004. The campaign is known as the largest Mother's Day celebration in Slovakia. Every year, new organizers are added to participate in the preparation of the campaign in their towns and villages. With the participation of the public in the campaign, in individual cities of Slovakia and abroad, registered participants of A Mile for Mom are added.

The message: Celebrate motherhood and at least one day a year to raise motherhood to the highest value in society.

The goal: On the same day, at the same time, but in many places in Slovakia and abroad, to celebrate motherhood and show respect and gratitude to all the mothers of the world. Thanks to mothers, grandmothers, godmothers and adoptive mothers for

their dedication, understanding, upbringing and boundless love. This unique idea unites thousands of people in different places during A Mile for Mom, regardless of age, race or religion. Thanks to that, this celebration is called the biggest Mother's Day celebration in Slovakia.

Who can organize A Mile for Mom: The main organizer of A Mile for Mom is the Union of Mother Centers. It owns the trademark and allows its members and supporters to organize A Mile for Mom in their towns and villages. The organizers are mostly women-mothers and they are preparing the campaign in the form of volunteer work. IMC coordinates all organizers in Slovakia and abroad. The aim is that the message of A Mile for Mom campaign and the main idea of each year should be presented by all organizers in the same way. A Mile for Mom can be organized by member Mother Centers, but also by civic associations from Slovakia and abroad, which support the model of Mother Centers and become sympathizers of the Union of Mother Centers.

A Mile for Mom campaign program:

An integral part of A Mile for Mom is a symbolic mile walk (1 mile–1.6 km). Children with their parents and grandparents can walk a mile on foot, by bicycle, on a scooter, on skates, in a wheelchair or in their arms, or on the shoulders of their parents. During the mile walk, families will enjoy a lot of fun and competitions.

A Mile for Mom is a family event where we celebrate motherhood, but also women's volunteering in mother and family centers. Accompanying A Mile for Mom program are performances by both professional and amateur artists.

Every organizer of A Mile for Mom needs to meet the following conditions:

Date: second Saturday in May, on the eve of Mother's Day.

Time: A Mile for Mom has set its time. It takes place throughout Slovakia from 15 pm to 18 pm.

Rules: The organization of A Mile for Mom has its usual rules arising from the contract.

Thank you mom



The public collection entitled “Thank you mom” is announced annually by the Union of Mother Centers. The public purpose of the collection is to support social and volunteer work in Mother Centers in Slovakia, which are dedicated to mothers on maternity and parental leave, their children and families.

You can contribute to the nationwide collection “Thank you mom” by purchasing a collection item. You can buy collection items at a price of €1 in mother and family centers, almost all over Slovakia as well as during public events that mother and family centers organize in their towns and villages. By purchasing a collection item, you will directly support your Mother Center.

The Mother Center, which you support by purchasing a collection item, can use the proceeds from the collection to increase its space, purchase sports equipment, toys, books, creative workshop material, organize educational courses for mothers, or pay rent and energy. Each mother and family center determines its own purpose, for which the proceeds of the collection “Thank you for being a mother” will be used.

The Union of Mother Centers has been organizing a public collection “Thank you Mom” since 2007. The purpose of the collection has remained unchanged for years, but we have changed the collection items to be constantly attractive to the public. Designs of collection items were based on the needs and recommendations

of Mother Centers. The first item in the collection was a round yellow magnet in the shape of a smiling sun. Since 2013, there have been magnets in six colors on offer. In 2016, we changed the collection item to a tasty honeysuckle, decorated in the shape of a sun, and since 2017, the collection item has become a sticker with the words “Thank you Mom”.

Enter with a Child



The nationwide “Enter with a Child” campaign is a long-term campaign of the Union of Mother Centers.

Since 2005, the campaign has made a significant contribution to ensuring that the slogan “Enter with a Child” is not only a request and a desire, but a natural right of each of us. In order for parents with small children to feel accepted in public and the presence of children in the pram was accepted in each facility without reservations.

Goals:

- Monitor the state of accommodation and catering facilities in Slovakia.
- Reach out to facilities that meet the criteria with the Enter with a Child campaign.
- To motivate the public to look for barrier-free and friendly facilities, which can directly contribute to improving the quality of life of families.
- Motivate facilities to meet certification.

- Create a catalog of certified facilities and distribute it to the public.
- Introduce a discount system called the “Family Passport” for families with children attending certified facilities.

The pram has become an apt symbol. The campaign originated at a time when parents with young children had very limited rights and opportunities to enter a facility. Shops, offices, cafes, restaurants, many publicly accessible places where mothers can freely come with their children today, were not allowed to be entered. The ban on entering with a pram was often indicated by a sticker on the front door.

The Enter with a Child campaign has literally started a **revolution in our society**. It made great sense to find friendly facilities, organize support events in public, and explain that even parents with young children and mothers on maternity leave want to be part of society. Merchants, owners of hotel and restaurant facilities began to be more welcoming and society began to change.

Today, a high chair is located in almost every restaurant. Menus were supplemented with children’s menus, toilets in shopping centers were supplemented with changing tables or children’s toilets and children’s corners have been added to many publicly accessible places and institutions.

Benefits for certificate-winning facilities

- Certificate marked “Family and child friendly facility”.
- A sticker with the appropriate number of stars, which informs the public that you have been committed to providing quality services for families with children.
- Inclusion in the list of certified facilities on the website of the Union of Mother Centers www.materskecentra.sk.
- Inclusion in the list of certified facilities in the catalog “Child- and family-friendly facilities”.
- Promotion in the Mother Centers magazine, distributed to the public and to all members and sympathizers of the Union of Mother Centers.
- Favorable advertising space on the website of the Union of Mother Centers, under the conditions set for these purposes.

- Media coverage through partner print and online media www.sdetmi.com, www.minitabory.sk, selected regional and local media.
- Promotion in the Mother Centers of the region, with the possibility of creating closer cooperation with Mother Centers and improving the position of certified facilities on the market.
- Possibility to use the logo and certificate of the “Enter with a Child” campaign for your own marketing purposes.

Degrees of friendliness: Each facility proposed for the “Enter with a Child” campaign is approved by the Union of Mother Centers on the basis of established criteria and a degree of friendliness.

Academy of Practical Parenting

Practical parenting academies are mother and family centers that have met the criteria set by the Union of Mother Centers.



Learning for Life with disadvantaged families

They provide various types and forms of education for parents focused on the development of parental competencies and skills. A unique activity of the Academies of Practical Parenting is a course called “How to understand your children and yourself”.

Campaign goal: Provide education for parents focused on the development of parental competencies and skills.

Educational activities build primarily on the uniqueness of the environment. Mother Centers provide informal and non-commercial space, which significantly supports the process of parental education and natural learning.

Areas of parental education in the Academies of Practical Parenting

- Education of children – parental skills, solving problematic situations in education and other fields.
- Health and child care – healthy nutrition, vaccinations, first aid, children’s diseases and more.
- Antenatal classes – psychoprophylaxis, exercise for pregnant women, newborn care.
- Breastfeeding support – nutrition and lifestyle of a breastfeeding mother, support groups, breastfeeding counseling and more.
- Stimulation and development of abilities and skills of the child – massage of infants, development of communication skills, ways of carrying a baby, learning to use baby sign language, physical, mental and emotional development of the child.
- Supportive prevention groups for specific categories of parents such as surrogate parents, parents of twins, parents of children with chronic illness, disability, socially or culturally marginalized families.

EXAMPLES FROM SLOVENIA – MALA ULICA FAMILY CENTER

Garden in Rakova Jelša – an open meeting space for kids and families

At the beginning of 2020, we received a free garden to rent in the vicinity of the city center and the highway from the City Municipality of Ljubljana (Department for the conservation of the environment). This 2000m² garden is not fully equipped. The part of the city Ljubljana, where our garden is located, is called “Rakova Jelša” and is known as an urban but socially stigmatized area where illegal constructions took place in the past. The rules there have always been different than elsewhere



The Garden in Rakova Jelša

in the city, in the urban as well as social-economic sphere. Step by step, this part of the capital is being integrated into the city, the stigmatization is slowly disappearing and “Rakova Jelša” is no longer a synonym for an urban and social problem. Our program is also contributing to the destigmatisation of this area.

The area offers excellent opportunities for mindful games and creativity, it is a great starting point for trips, it is surrounded by a meadow and an orchard. The garden was passed on to us on the day the pandemic appeared in Slovenia. Considering all the protection measures that the pandemic requires of us, we offer a regular program in which we adapt the space to our program so that it fulfills the wishes and the needs of our clients (families).

Ambition and goals – what is the intended outcome and impact:

- Working by the “learning by doing” principle and the principles of forest pedagogy.
- Kids from different social backgrounds can participate in different workshops.
- Inclusion of children with special needs in the program.
- Integration of children and empowering them.
- Destigmatisation of this area.
- Our ambition is to provide the program in all seasons of the year with different workshops (gardening, cooking, building a tree house, repairing, etc.)

Target group: Families with different social backgrounds and kids of age 1–12 years.

Our project now: The project is very well received by all kinds of families and children. All the workshops are very well attended.

Holiday camps in summer and winter are fully booked. There have been very positive responses to our questionnaires.

Strengths:

- Open space accessible to families from different social backgrounds.
- Learning by doing principle.
- Kids from different social backgrounds can participate in different workshops.
- Integration of children and empowering them.

- Stimulating children to participate in different kinds of work activities that are prevalent in modern urban lifestyle of Ljubljana (building, gardening, knitting, cooking with vegetables from the garden, etc.)
- Our garden is a unique space in the city of Ljubljana.

Empowering CHATS

From entering motherhood to a child's first stubbornness, gentle weaning, and preparing for a joint family vacation... We are shedding light on each topic from all angles, sharing experiences, empowering mothers, and we help them to make new friendships.

CHATS are moderated by a marriage and family therapist who deals mainly with individual and partner therapies on the topic of parenthood and partnership. She also works as a breastfeeding consultant and is the author of the book *Breastfeeding after the First Year*.

Chats have taken place in Mala ulica since March 2019, once or twice a week. Now we host online meetings.

Ambition and goals – what is the intended outcome and impact:

- Supporting and empowering mothers on maternity leave;
- Helping mothers with different issues (breast feeding, health, how to introduce solid food, etc.)
- Social networking of mothers of different social background;
- Emotional support;
- Providing safe environment where mothers meet and babies can play.

Target group: Mothers on maternity leave and parents with toddlers

Feedback: Chats are very well accepted. The need for the activity even grew during quarantine. Topics are very well chosen. We also found out that it is important to choose new topics in cooperation with the mothers.

As we recognized the importance of chats, we also started Evening Chats. They are targeted on both mothers and fathers, and topics are tailored to problems related to the toddler years as well.





Mala ulica – self-help group

Strengths: There are many books, articles, and websites with advice on parenting and health issues but mothers often do not have much time to read them as they feel tired, low on energy, etc. For this reason, we find this form of counseling great. On the other hand, we also give them emotional support and help them forge new bond with mother, as well as providing children a safe space to play.

“We were surprised how enriching and inspiring can personal visit be in all aspects of personal and professional life, being part of vital and helping network on all levels, sharing various experiences in the same field. We want to remain active, passionate, patient, persistent and energetic to keep fighting for women/mother rights for the next decade.”

Daniela Konečná and Andrea Dobošová, Union of Mother Centers Slovakia

CRISIS AS A CHALLENGE FOR MOTHER CENTERS

When implementing the project, it was confirmed how important the Mother Centers are for the family and the community in times of crisis. First, the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit Europe in 2020, and the ongoing war in Ukraine that started on 24 February, 2022. The reaction of Mother Centers was very timely and targeted. The form of help in the centers in all countries was very similar, although each author presents it differently. They rather complement each other.

GERMAN MOTHER CENTERS AND THE PANDEMIC

The pandemic revealed two aspects of the Mother Centers. Due to our longstanding emphasis on solution-oriented thinking and flexibility, we reacted quickly to the new situation in a practical, sustainable and passionate manner, as can be seen from the many examples listed below.

Nevertheless, as COVID-19 remains part of our daily lives, our mission as inclusive institutions is challenged. Mother Centers are barrier-free. The rules the government imposes on family centers require us to act against all we believe in. We must monitor whether our visitors are recovered, vaccinated or tested. We get into arguments with visitors and volunteers who do not want to get tested because they feel healthy, or do not want to get vaccinated because of potential side-effects. We cannot offer preventive care to women who are pregnant or breastfeeding because they were advised not to get vaccinated. We cannot meet their desire to come together with families in the same situation, start friendships and get advice.

Some old people feel overwhelmed with mobile phone apps or are reluctant to install them because they fear data theft. If they have no smartphone, they must provide a document. If they forget to bring it, we get into arguments because we cannot let them in.

Online learning

One consequence of the pandemic was that we all gained digital skills by participating in video conferences or organizing them. We received donations and state money to train our employees, volunteers and visitors. But we also feel that there are physical, cognitive and emotional limits to online learning. Especially older people often have arthritis, weak eyesight, poor hearing or technophobia. They struggle with technical terms, feel excluded and demand the right to a life without digital technology.

The first months of the pandemic

When our Mother Centers closed for the public and most employees and volunteers stayed home, we cleaned up and cleared out our centers, painted walls and made repairs. We sewed thousands of masks, held Zoom conferences and tried to discover what was needed to empower families and the elderly in this stressful situation. We had mixed reactions, from existential fear to “keep calm and carry on”. Most Mother Centers offered emergency care for children of key workers. Some offered tutoring for children who had online lessons only. Others gave one-to-one lessons



MC Osterholz-Tenever – sharing food



in German instead of group teaching. To make the life of families who live in small apartments easier, we allowed one or two families to visit our facilities and play with our games and toys, which we sanitized afterwards.

Other activities: We maintained contact with volunteers and employees through phone calls, video calls, motivational letters and social media. Online we tried new recipes, read books aloud to children and organized a digital book club. We decorated windows and had chats with visitors and passers-by, leaning out of a window.

Children and their families were grateful for DIY kits we prepared, often with topics related to holidays or seasons.



MC MuM Münster – Open window

We cooperated with other institutions to organize food donations and reach vulnerable or low-income people. We cooked soups or meals that were delivered to people who could not leave their homes.

A Mother Center in Bremen set up an information desk about COVID-19 and vaccination in several languages.

Our Mother Center in Reinheim responded to the growing violence against women and children during the pandemic by highlighting the problem through exhibitions, posters, articles in traditional media and on the social ones as well. The aim is to ensure that the Istanbul Convention is observed in Reinheim.

CZECH MOTHER CENTERS AND THE PANDEMIC

The basic mission of Mother Centers is to prevent risk phenomena in families and in the society. The centers create a safe space for families in the community to share and support each other. Therefore, it is only natural for most of them to get involved in helping people around them. Some of the centers have even directly initiated self-help in their communities.

The Mother Centers carried out a wide range of volunteering activities for the benefit of families and others in need in local communities. It is also admirable how many centers have been able to adapt to the world of online communication.

Masks and protective shields

Firstly, the centers responded to the shortage of masks and sewed them quite spontaneously and on a voluntary basis. And they sewed them free of charge, using their own materials, for their neighbors (people from their communities), for hospitals, homes for the elderly, children of first line workers and others in need. Some masks were even sent abroad.

The centers within our network gave away at least 130,000 masks – the total number is not final; it is an educated guess as of April 2020. Some centers even started to make **protective shields**.





MC Krumlík, Český Krumlov

Other services for those in need

The strength of the communities around the centers lies in the ability to act whenever it is needed. Among the most common activities were assistance to the elderly (not only shopping but also taking care of their household) and care for the children of paramedics and other employed people (especially in the health sector). Other services included involvement in organizing food collections, distributing protective equipment, lending child care equipment or cooking breakfast for border guards.

Online communication with families

The pandemic brought anxiety, uncertainty and fear to families, so they appreciated the support of the centers. Parents who were “stuck” at home with their children welcomed the opportunity to share inspiration for creative and physical activities with their youngest children, the range of programs for school children or motivational activities for spending time with children, as well as educational offerings through social media and modern technology.

Regular agenda

Restrictions concerning the centers' activities threatened their existence, so they immediately started to plan and prepare programs so that they could get back to normal as quick as possible. Some centers took advantage of the closure to the public to undertake general cleaning, repairs, refurbishment and maintenance – things for which there is no time during normal operation.

In addition to all the extraordinary activities, all the centers had to take care of their day-to-day administration and coordination of all the activities, as well as their staffing issues. It should be noted that these are mostly mothers of young children who had to change their lifestyles overnight.

It's also necessary to mention that the centers have been struggling with existential insecurity for a long time, because neither the government, nor the regions or the municipalities have found the systemic support for prevention programs necessary.

SLOVAK MOTHER CENTERS AND THE PANDEMIC

The Union of Mother Centers is a platform that brings together Mother Centers dedicated to all families with small children.

At the same time, we run a counseling center for women at risk of violence in the “Women to women” Advisory Center. The provision of this social service cannot be interrupted even



at these times. Financially we have tried to cover the costs through the project grant from Implementing Agency, which suspended payments in February to all organizations that were successful in the call. We run out of our finances.

However, we have the energy to keep helping. These times bring new challenges. Statistics on the national hotline have been reduced, but **not the amount of domestic violence**, because those in a weaker position, those living in the same space with the aggressors (by far not only women but also children, elderly and disadvantaged people) **have no access to means of communication**, telephone, e-mail, Facebook. These people are either not at all, or no longer safe. Mother Centers are closed and women have no one to share their problem with. We are looking for new ways of communicating and supporting these women. At the same time, we are raising awareness among the public (other people from our communities) and encourage women not be afraid to reach out to our experts and ask for help.

The second big challenge is our project called Learning for Life, which has been running for the second year in a row. Its goal is to support the learning of parents with young children **from socially disadvantaged backgrounds**. These families are even more affected by all the measures currently being imposed by the state. In some municipalities, the “food aid package” was suspended by the Labor Offices. **Educating the hungry is almost impossible.**

We mobilize visitors to the centers to help socially disadvantaged families, we sew and distribute masks, and with the help of field workers, we give out worksheets to parents so that they can get creative with their children. We also help with collections of necessary goods (most recently for example mobile phones so we can be connected with families). Not to mention that internet connection is not cheap or unlimited in Slovakia so our vulnerable families have to pay large sums to stay online.

There are problems with **paying rent and energy** to our civic associations (Mother Centers) nationwide. Since they are not proper businesses, they cannot claim foregone earnings, but it is up to statutory representatives – usually mothers on parental leave – to pay for these rentals.



Help for families Slovakia

Similarly, Labor Offices are not able to respond flexibly to the suspension of employment of activation workers (long term unemployed activation scheme) under § 52 of the Labor Code and legal justification is required as to why the suspension took place. Equally similar is the administration with a sheltered workshop.

In spite of the current situation, we do not stop doing activities for families who need us even more in these times. The aim is to maintain good mental health and make available a selection of educational programs. As they wrote to us in mapping our activities – **we are spreading positive mood and maintaining the community, we promote coherence and volunteering.**

Here are some of the activities of the mother / family centers during the lockdown due to corona virus:

Field activities:

- We supply and network volunteers
- We actively cooperate with higher regional offices, local crisis staffs, municipalities, cities, volunteer organizations, we deliver material assistance to the excluded community



- We sew and distribute face masks and material for face masks to elderly people and lonely mothers as well as to segregated sites
- We distribute soaps and hygiene products to families from marginalized Roma communities
- We organize food shopping for socially disadvantaged families from the “Learning for Life” program
- We distribute so-called “Activity-Packages“. These are materials for simple activities with instructions given to families that do not have the possibility to print them out or pay for them
- We are exploring the possibilities of setting up reliable Internet connection for children from marginalized communities (of course they do not have prepaid cellular data, a computer, other digital devices, etc.) so that they can actively connect with the community for e-learning purposes
- We are preparing a Book Box (free books for the most vulnerable communities)
- We take care of grocery shopping for families with whom we agree on a delivery plan, eliminating the number of people in shopping centers
- We take care of grocery shopping for pensioners, single mothers and quarantined people
- We telephone the elderly to lift their spirits
- We help to entertain children in the quarantine centers in the city (we lend them board games, books and toys)
- At the entrance to the mother / family center, we have coloring pages available for children
- We cooperate with a facility for the elderly – on the basis of an agreement with the head of the Home for Social Services for elderly, we came up with an activity called “Easter post” – families connected to Mother Centers made paper postcards, Easter decorations, flowers, butterflies, sheep, etc. at home. To make sure there is no health risk, special sterilization lamps were used to disinfect these hand-made products. Activity was well received from both ends.
- We help with clothes collections for homeless people
- We sanitize handles, rails, elevator buttons in nearby common areas...

Supporting activities for parents online / by telephone

- We provide various counseling and advisory services to families (psychological support, career and employment counseling, legislation, health care, etc.);
- We inform about the possibility of providing masks, hygiene products;
- With parents, we discuss (messenger, telephone) the possibility of homeschooling (we focus specifically on socially excluded families);
- We consult different situations related to upbringing – counseling (hygiene, educational methods – how to make home more peaceful, weekly menus, daily routine, how to engage children – to keep them accountable without it being overwhelming);
- Social counseling – we spot changes and look for answers / solutions in the legislative area affecting families (nursing, enrollment and application to preschool and school facilities, incapacity to work, etc.);
- We provide online antenatal classes and postnatal assistance, counseling;
- Online exercise for moms;
- Updates / spreading awareness – via social networks and websites – about current events, sharing important and relevant information and recommendations on the status quo;
- We work with families in groups on social networks and in mail groups = as a substitute for face to face meetings. We try to respond to the demand of families, especially at the non-physical contact level
- We share ideas for daily menus and routines, we try to keep families in good spirit and prevent panic
- We regularly contact parents from the socially excluded families that are part of the “Learning for Life” program, which is about 80 families, to accommodate their needs
- We motivate families and support each other by mutual cooperation



Online activities / Activities by phone for children

- We organize online video courses, do creative and physical activities which don't require buying anything special, things around the house are enough
- We cooperate with first-graders from marginalized Roma communities, providing them with worksheets, having video calls, sending them online support activities, playing online games with them, etc.
- We distribute activities to train graphomotor skills and fine and gross motor skills
- We organize activities, directly explaining the impact of the activity on the child's psychomotor development
- We share inspirations for Montessori activities, instructions on how to work at home and use household utensils as education material, we give simple instructions, take pictures of worksheets, provide coloring books, use voice recordings of fairy tales (done by ourselves) to help enlighten parents and motivate children to read
- We record fairy tales, songs, and theater pieces for children
- On social networks, we create groups of families that can help and advice each other in specific areas

EXPERIENCE WITH THE PANDEMIC IN SLOVENIA

European social and economic sphere has been under significant strain because of the **COVID-19 pandemic**, often exposing inherent weaknesses, with far-reaching effects, including on **children's well-being**. The job losses that followed the beginning of the pandemic put more families at risk of poverty, as many of the country reports¹ underlined, among others in Slovenia as well. The combination of financial stress, uncertainty about the future,

and families being confined to their homes during lockdowns led inevitably to increased anxiety and mental health problems. The national helpline TOM Telefon (helpline for children and adolescents, which is one of the SAFY's programs), reported more calls concerning family relations, psychological issues, depression, destructive behaviors, and loneliness. The coronavirus lockdown in Slovenia deepened the education gap. Children in violent families has started to show distressed behavior more.

Research² on the topic of everyday life of children during the COVID-19 pandemic in Slovenia highlights the **following key findings**:

- **The negative impact of the pandemic on children's lives** (is the most exposed). This is reflected mainly in the poor mental health of children, lack of outdoor activities and declining social contacts with friends and classmates. Among the enhanced risks, the research most often mentions excessive use of ICT and an increase in negative experiences with it (increased exposure to hate messages, misinformation, increased number of online violence victims, etc.) and negative effects on children's physical health (obesity, decreased physical performance and moderate to intense physical activity).
- **In some respects, the pandemic has had a positive impact on children's lives and even brought new opportunities.** Studies show that children have spent more time with family members. Among the positive aspects, we can also point out the possibility of increased time spent outdoor and integration into their neighborhood and community. Students needed to take a different approach to learning during their online classes – one that promotes development of critical thinking skills – and they had different learning experiences.
- **The pandemic has affected various groups of children differently**, as children are a heterogeneous group and, like adults, perceive new circumstances differently.

¹ Growing up in lockdown: Europe's children in the age of COVID-19 2020 Eurochild Report

² Relevant research on children, which deals with the analysis of children's daily lives in 2020 (and partly in 2021 as well).





Children in the garden

- **Differences between children grew during the pandemic,** as vulnerable groups of children (migrants and children with poorer academic performance) became even more vulnerable during this period.

Mala ulica Family center

Although 2020 was supposed to be the Fairy tale Year in the Mala ulica Family center, the COVID-19 pandemic put that on hold. The operation of the family center as a public space, the “public living room”, as we like to call it, was restricted by epidemiological

measures the most, as a visit to the Mala ulica Family center was considered an “outside the bubble” movement which was at that time undesirable. Although the realization of our basic mission was carried out on a smaller scale in 2020 (the family center was closed for more than a third of the year, more precisely 151 days due to the COVID-19 pandemic), we managed to make about 40% of our program happen, taking into account all preventive measures. The rest of the activities was moved online.

Adolescents and children spent much more time with their phones and computers than usual due to restrictions on movement and distance learning, thus increasing the trend of obesity among children. The consequences of excessive sitting and addiction to video games and social networks, which are accompanied by other negative phenomena, such as unhealthy diet, lack of socialization and communication, are worrying and have a strong impact on the physical and mental development of children. **Numerous data and research show an increase in the number of children and adolescents with mental health problems (lack of concentration, hyperactivity, anxiety, depression).**

Awareness of this negative effects of the pandemic on the physical and mental development of children led to the emergence of new ideas in Mala ulica Family center. With new activities (which are summarized below), we have significantly improved and upgraded our work, so we will continue to implement them in the future:

- **The garden (called Vrtiliče),** situated in Mestni park Rakova jelša, which we put in use just before the outbreak of the pandemic, made an important contribution to the upbringing of children in a sustainable way, improving their psychophysical abilities and competencies, as well as their eating habits. The experience of understanding the importance of local sustainable food supply and preparing and eating a healthy and balanced diet is invaluable for urban children and is the foundation of sustainable development and future lifestyles of all of us. By encouraging the consumption of vegetables among children, we strengthen their concern for health and eating



habits, and through a variety of outdoor activities, we enable children to experience natural environment in many ways. The garden thus offers a lively, attractive and more sensory space for teaching children about growing and eating healthy food – the importance of sustainable development.

Due to the measures, children in vacation care programs were distributed differently, namely in smaller groups of ten children. Already in the first week of the holidays, we observed that children in smaller groups connect faster and on a deeper level than in larger groups. The educators found it easier to take into account the wishes of the children and followed their ideas on how to spend holidays.



Forest path

- Our colleagues came up with a new activity called the **Forest path**. Its goal is to spark interest of children and their parents to spend more time in forests. We started at the end of October and new improvements were made each week. Firstly, we placed wooden fly agarics (which were made and painted by our colleagues) throughout the forest to mark the trail, then erected a road sign at the beginning of the trail, hid a treasure in the forest, etc. – there are many challenges waiting for little hikers. This idea was, once again, very well received by the parents as their children finally gave in and wanted to go for a walk, even in the rain. Families go on the trip on their own, so no registration is required.
- **Forest ideas** (Gozdne zamislice) were created **with a goal to inspire families with young children to spend their free time in the forest and to encourage them to be in nature as much as possible**. It is a collection of ideas for children from the age of 1. These children find observing nature more closely interesting, while strengthening their knowledge, awareness of the importance of the natural environment, motor skills, attention and focus. The ideas are expected to be published with a circulation of 1,000 copies in early 2022.

At the Mala ulica Family center, we weekly ensured that children and their parents remained active in various ways during the pandemic.

As part of the European URBforDAN project, we prepared **forest activities for children in Golovec**, which relate to the areas of forest pedagogy and points of interest within the urban forest. Weekly on Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings, we organized guided forest walks, where children with experienced forest educators explored the forest, plants and animals, were told stories and had opportunities to be physically active.

At fall closure, we immediately moved the entire **program online** and, due to increased needs, greatly strengthened the program for parents. We also found out that **moving the program online** brought some advantages. Dino's school, which we transferred to the Zoom web application, could also be watched



live by parents, who were therefore more sovereign in their “home” work, got to know the program better and, equipped with more knowledge, implemented it more confidently and intensively. They all reported remarkable shifts in children’s behavior and were impressed with the implementation and effectiveness of the program. In addition, we carried out a number of other activities online, such as reading and telling fairy tales, cooking workshops, Pilates for moms, pedokinetics, yoga for pregnant women, chats for moms and parenting evenings. The latter was a new program that proved to be very appreciated by the participants as they could share their experiences during pandemic, when children and parents were more burdened and under a lot of stress.

“The whole Erasmus+ Program was an enriching, encouraging and empowering experience, although we had to reschedule and move face-to-face meetings online due to the pandemic.”

Daniela Hettich, EKIZ Stuttgart and board member of the Federal Association of Mother Centers

Mother Centers and refugees from Ukraine

Germany

Assistance to refugees from Ukraine varies from MC to MC.

The support generally includes:

- meeting spaces for Ukrainian refugees;
- help facing bureaucratic hurdles;
- volunteering;
- free meals;
- playgroups for Ukrainian children;
- matching Ukrainians with volunteers;
- donations;
- help overcoming language barrier.

How the Czech Mother Centers involved Ukrainian families

- Common community space;
- Accepting them in the community – friendship;
- Explanation of the life in the Czech Republic;
- Mixed self-help groups (Ukrainians and Czechs);
- Czech language lessons / translating or interpreting for them;
- Adaptation groups, children’s groups;
- After classes and leisure activities;
- Material help (medical, food, clothing, toys, etc.);
- Exchange of things (bazaar, SWAP, etc.).

Activities in the Slovak Mother Centers

- First contact packages = collected by MZ, distributed immediately at the border (sanitary napkins, towel, toothbrush, plasters, vitamin C, baby food, juice, biscuits, glucose, colored pencils, books);
- Relaxation talks, meeting them at eye level, talking about the ways of dealing with stress and war – parenting help;
- Durable food collection, hygiene, clothing in the warehouses;
- Mobile office – printing of Edu documents, documents, scanning, etc.;



- every week two 45 minute lessons
- 20 children in two groups
1st group: 4–7 year old kids
2nd group: 8–15 year old kids
- Klubičko offers free space and material
- teachers offer free education

Czech lessons for children from Ukraine



Medulienka Levice – help for refugees from Ukraine

- Networking – connecting partners for effectiveness (accommodation, food, school, jobs, health, digital devices and data, connecting with family in Ukraine);
- Health care/system in Slovakia (cancer treatments, broken glasses, vaccination, pregnancy care, support to autistic children, etc.);
- Navigation in the region/area;
- Career advice – job search, solutions for recognition of UA education;
- Targeted help – various forms (strollers for twins, cheaper cellular data – SIM cards at the border, kitchen utensils, wood for heating, medicines, psychologist for adults / children, video calls with parents: many children are here without parents, translation / interpretation);
- Creative and sport activities, crafts and hobbies;
- Slovak language courses – including children’s books and downloadable materials;
- Garden voluntary work – therapy “Helping Hand – help each other”.

Experience of Ukrainian refugees in Slovenia

Mala ulica Public Institute is a safe place, where all refugees can come free of charge and enjoy juice, coffee or tea. In addition, on Wednesdays we offer Ukrainian refugee Oksana who is a child psychologist by profession and has already helped children overcome war problems in Ukraine, a place where she can support and give advice to Ukrainian refugees. On Thursdays, Kateryna from Ukraine runs Ukrainian creative workshops dedicated to creating and socializing with families from Ukraine. The creative workshop takes place in three languages (Ukrainian, English and Slovenian).

On Mother’s Day, March 25, members of the Youth Symphony Orchestra of Ukraine (YsOU) played a short concert at the outdoor playground of the Mala ulica Family Center. It was a free admission event during which we managed to collect charitable donations to help young musicians from Ukraine. We raised a total of €680 and gave them to young Ukrainian musicians who took refuge in Slovenia from the war!

TEAM

AUTHORS OF THE TEXTS



Beatrice Schilling

Editor and Political Scientist. Press officer for the Federal Organization of Mother Centers in Germany. Responsible for publications, political campaigns and social media.



Rut Kolínská

Founder of the Mother Center movement in the Czech Republic, author of Czech know-how of Mother Centers, Woman of Europe 2003, Social innovator awarded by the Schwab Foundation 2005.



Daniela Konečná

Statutory representative of UMC Slovakia



Andrea Dobošova

Statutory representative and coordinator of Mother Center Nevedko in Ruzomberok since 2015, mother of 2. Also representative of Union of Mother Centers Slovakia in international projects.



Daša Cvjetičanin

She is involved in EU funded projects and responsible for general organizational, communicational and developmental aspects, including striving towards bridging the gap between theory and practice of family centers as well as translating the project findings into national policy measures in the field of family policy.



PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Bundesverband der Mütterzentren e.V.
(Federation of Mothers' Centers, Germany)



We empower women and families, improve the quality of life in neighborhoods and communities, promote intergenerational togetherness and understanding, facilitate child-rearing and the compatibility of family and work, fight against gender care gap, pay and pension gap. We represent the interests of Mother Centers on the federal level and are an umbrella organization, grouping 350 Mother Centers and 137 members.

www.muetterzentren-bv.de

Sít' pro rodinu, z.s.
(The Network for Family)



We are an umbrella organization and a carrier of the know-how of Mother Centers in the Czech Republic, since 2002 we have been strengthening the value of the family in society, in centers and on the labor market. We advocate conditions for a family-friendly society. Along with 260 centers across the Czech Republic, we have helped approximately 78,000 families.

www.sitprorodinu.cz

Únia materských center
(Union of Mother Centers, Slovakia)



Our goal is to achieve respect for and recognition of motherhood in society (a better world and more favorable conditions for mothers and children). As of 2022, we bring together 40 Mother Centers, help them grow at local level and unite them. We assist centers to maintain their position of a strong and irreplaceable place in our society.

www.materskecentra.sk

Mala ulica Public Institute –
Center for children and families in Ljubljana



The purpose of Mala ulica Public Institute is to provide a network of safe and family-friendly spaces for spending quality free time and to organize and implement support programs and activities for preschool children and their parents. Our vision is to remain the central informational-educational point and a meeting place for young families in Ljubljana, and to establish in Ljubljana at least five family centres, which will offer a place to socialize and play, as well as overall support for families in terms of occasional childcare, counselling and education.

www.malaulica.si/si

MOTHER CENTERS AS A NEW PHENOMENON OF CIVIC SOCIETY IN EUROPE

Output of project:

**Parenthood as motivation for lifelong learning
in Mother Centers**



With the support of the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

© Síť pro rodinu, z.s.

Editing: Rut Kolínská

Proofreading: Translation agency Explika (Sára Guryčová),
www.explika.cz

Graphic editing: Kateřina Svobodová

Illustration: Petr Kolínský

Photographs: archive of partner organizations

