



Victim – offender dialogue

Interview with Ruedi Szabo, one who knows direct victim-offender dialogue first-hand from the viewpoint of the offender

The questions were asked by Ines Aubert, November 2017

You have your own personal story about Restorative Justice. Can you explain what this is all about?

23 years ago, I committed seven robberies and almost beat my ex-wife's lover to death. I was sentenced to nine years in prison for attempted manslaughter and qualified serious robbery, for which I served six years.

Crimes were processed in a conversation group, and the prison chaplain talked to me about the themes of remorse and atonement. This then led to my personal victim-offender dialogue. I initiated practically all conversations alone, first near the end of my prison sentence with correspondence through letters, then by telephone and afterwards with meeting, mainly in a restaurant.

You know restorative justice first-hand from the viewpoint of the offender. Can you tell us something about these conversations?

One of the first conversations was with a man who was the branch manager of a post office and bank (Zurich cantonal bank) in H. His wife picked him up at closing time and waited with their small children (at that time, a 3-year old boy and a 7-year-old girl) in the package room of the post office. I entered the premises through the rear entrance and held a weapon on the mother and her two children, as well as another employee present. The mother had a panic attack and crying fits and feared terribly for both of her children. The branch manager saw both of us masked robbers through the glass security door to the counter room. He opened the door from his side. My accomplice went into the counter room, and, according to my memory, I forced the five employees and the mother with both children into a corner with a table and a kitchenette and guarded them there. Due to my excellent military training, the robbery was perfectly timed, and we were outside again within minutes.

After my release from prison in 2001, I contacted the branch manager and father of the two children and set an appointment to meet in a restaurant in W. In therapy, I learned to allow the victim to express themselves however they want. I learned from this family how traumatic the hold-up was for the mother and the children, from which they suffered for years. The mother could never enter her husband's workplace again because she suffered from panic attacks. The boy, likewise, suffered from fear of the dark, large, black men and became a bed wetter. He could not sleep in his own bed anymore because he was afraid that the black men would come to get him. He felt protected and secure with his parents in their bed. It took about two years for him to stop wetting the bed.

The girl was in the first grade at that time, and a very good pupil. After the hold-up, she suffered from attention deficit disorder and experienced great difficulty concentrating. She was in psychiatric treatment and received private lessons. After about four years, she could reintegrate in a normal class.

The parents suffered for years from the psychiatric aftereffects and their marriage almost fell apart because of this. Through counseling, they were able to save their marriage. I was deeply impacted by how much and for how long a four-minute hold-up affected this family.

I appeared twice on television with the father, during which he as the victim could describe the dramatic encounter and its effects. I stood for reparation as the perpetrator of my crimes. The victim not only had the psychiatric suffering to bear, but also unbelievably many financial problems to handle.

I must say that I find it very shocking to hear your report. This family experienced unspeakable suffering due to a four-minute robbery which you timed so well. It is good that you have taken accountability for it. Were there reactions to the television appearance?

In February of 2016, I was invited by a journalist K., to a radio interview. The theme was religion and violence. One of my earlier victims, an employee of the post office in G., heard the interview and became very upset that a media platform had been given to me as a perpetrator, and that I was allowed to present myself as a “good person”. She herself was affected by panic attacks and nightmares at the post office for more than twenty years after the robbery. Ms G. could only go out at night when accompanied by her husband or her now-grown children. She wrote me a letter which I received through Ms. K. We met each other two months later, accompanied by her husband. This conversation was also for both of us very liberating.

You have had other media appearances, even with Ms. G. Would you like to tell us about that?

When I received an invitation from the Swiss Congress of Criminologists to give a presentation on 9 March 2017, I asked Ms. G. to join me. I was expected to give a 20-minute presentation about how I, as an offender, had experienced my trial and six-year-long imprisonment. I wanted to promote Restorative Justice and my goal was to present the results of my victim-offender discussions. As the victim, Ms. G. stated how it was for her during and after the hold-up and about the years-long anguish up until the moment that we met for our first discussion last year. It was impressive for all the listeners.

Ms. G. has already said that she is willing to support our organization Swissrjforum in victim-offender discussions in Swiss prisons.

Were all your victim-offender discussions successful as well as healing for the victims?

For such a challenging discussion with a victim of my robbery, I asked for the support of St. Gallen Victim Assistance. Ms. B. was the president of Victim Assistance, and in the scope of reparation, she was engaged in the Saxerriet prison, where I was serving my sentence and arranged the discussion with the victim.

This woman suffered a stroke after the hold-up and has been partially paralyzed ever since. It was only upon meeting her that I became aware of her severe disability with spastic movements.

This disability is a result of the bank robbery? That's horrible!

At that time, this woman was the manager of the E. post office. As I guarded the people and my accomplices cleaned out the safe and cash drawers, she consistently walked with me about 1.5 meters in front of my pistol. As I then ordered her not to do that, she said rationally: "I fear for my co-workers and I am helpless, but if you shoot, then you have to shoot me first". Her courage truly impressed me.

Because of her courage, I wanted to apologize to her after I was released from prison. I was informed that she was not in good health. After the robbery, the police and forensics team came and took statements. The woman had to find new personnel for the following day so that the post office could remain in operation. On the following Saturday evening she was expecting guests and was cooking with her husband. While they were cooking, she told him all the details of the robbery. While doing so, she had a dizzy spell and fainted. Her husband called an ambulance. In the hospital, it was discovered that she had suffered a stroke which paralyzed two-thirds of her body. Perhaps there were some predisposing medical factors, but for me there was a causal connection: she had described the robbery while cooking, and the entire stress of what had happened during this explanation led to the stroke. I was very shocked about the fact that I was the cause thereof and that I had destroyed a person's life, although I left the scene of the crime thinking that I had not caused anyone any physical harm. This woman is severely handicapped for the rest of her life, can no longer work, cannot make long vacations, and is dependent upon equipment and medication.

The best part was that she forgave me during the conversation, which I felt bitterly. Before that, it had been difficult for me to forgive other people.

I can understand that the processing of your crime must be profound for you. The consequential damage to these people is extraordinarily severe. What have you concretely learned from these encounters with victims of the robbery?

As I was more and more preoccupied with the victim-offender difficulty and completed my education as a social worker, I learned to better understand the victim through psychological and pedagogical approaches. In therapy we spoke in detail about the difficulty of psychological injuries which I experienced as a child due to physical abuse

by my father. The therapist showed me how the feeling of inferiority resulted therefrom and was occurring within me, as well as how people build up protection around themselves and seek refuge through violence. During my education, I learned through theoretical approaches how criticism can be felt as rejection and how it can lead to feelings of shame and rejection.

It appears that for you the victim-offender dialogues have had a crucial influence on your future life. Do you know if your fellow prisoners have gone along the same path?

I have to answer in the negative. I don't know any other prisoner who, in this stretch of time, participated in such talks. In Switzerland, victim-offender dialogues are rarely supported because among the circle of experts, a persistent perception exists: that this confrontation can be re-traumatizing for the victim and stigmatizing for the offender. When such dialogues are led unprofessionally without background knowledge in addressing vulnerability, shame, feelings of inferiority and rejection, one can make things much worse. One must be proficient in questioning techniques: Where does the person stand? Is the person stable? How does the person avoid statements which he/she senses as provocative? Is he/she capable of inquiring when he/she has the feeling that he/she has misunderstood something?

In Restorative Justice, the victim and the offender are prepared in a professional manner prior to confronting each other. In the event of psychological instability on the part of the victim or the offender, then there is no meeting. The offender is asked particularly about his/her motives. These must arise out of genuine remorse. As a former jailbird, I notice quickly whether a person's remorse is genuine, or if he/she only wants to have a few hours of release from their prison cell.

There are programs which deal with the victim-offender dialogues on several evenings. It is important that where possible and desired the victim and offender can meet eye-to-eye. It was sensational how after these eight evenings, the victim and offender were often able to approach each other sensitively; there were some very moving scenes. The wonderful thing is that it is a win-win situation for both involved.

Can you describe such a moving situation?

A woman over 70 was robbed in her automobile and her purse was snatched away. Because her keys and identification were in her purse, she had dread fear that the thief would be able to break into her house. The juvenile criminal with whom she had a dialogue was not the one who committed the crime against her, but one who had committed the exact same crime. Throughout the entire resolution process, the young man said that she could be his grandmother whom he loves above all else. At the end, they hugged each other.

I still have contact with some of my victims and together we give presentations or appear in the media. In so doing, it is important to me to ensure that the victim always takes

center stage, and that I as the offender thank the victim that he/she has the courage to conduct these dialogues with me.

About four or five years ago, I became a member of Prison Fellowship Switzerland with the goal of establishing victim-offender dialogues in Switzerland. Unfortunately, it was extremely difficult to get this idea through to the prisons.

In the German juvenile detention center Seehaus, I was invited again and again, as an ex-jailbird, as a “cart horse”, where I explained unsparingly and in all detail about my own crimes. Because my victim-offender dialogues were very successful, I could take away the juveniles’ fear of dialogue.

Ruedi, you speak much about you as the offender and your victims. You are not only an offender. Can you tell us a bit about Ruedi as a person?

I am the father of five children. Contact with them has always been very important to me. It was they who made me realize in prison that I need to act as a role model now.

Today I work in the “Falkennest” in L. with some juvenile criminals and some violent young adults who can no longer find their way. In so doing, there is crime rehabilitation and, if possible, organization of dialogue with some of their earlier victims.

Thank you, Ruedi, for your openness. You gave us a very interesting insight into your life and into your past. I wish you all the best on your future journey.