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# **INDEPENDENT INVESTIGATION INTO HELMUT KENTLER'S ACTIVITIES IN THE BERLIN CHILD AND YOUTH WELFARE SERVICES**

**Summary of the Final Report**

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**project duration:**  
01.03.2019 bis 15.06.2020

Study funded by the Berlin Senate's Department for Education, Youth and Family Affairs.

**editing & translation:**  
Jan-Henrik Friedrichs

Das Dokument steht im Internet kostenfrei als elektronische Publikation  
(Open Access) zur Verfügung unter: <https://dx.doi.org/10.18442/134>

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detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Satz, Layout und Titelblattgestaltung: Jan Jäger  
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In the summer of 2018, the Berlin Senate's Department for Education, Youth and Family Affairs approached the Institutes for Social and Organizational Pedagogy and Educational Studies at the University of Hildesheim with the request to carry out a research project on Helmut Kentler's work in the Berlin Children's and Youth Welfare Service since the 1960s.

One background to this project is Helmut Kentler's initiatives to establish various foster homes (*Pflegestellen*) since the late 1960s. According to Kentler himself, foster homes were set up with "three janitors" near Berlin's Zoologischer Garten train station who had previously been convicted of sexual contact with minors. The aim was to place street kids there in the knowledge and almost with the intention that there would be sexual contact between them and the adult men. The West Berlin administration possibly knew or even approved of these proceedings, presumably at least individual employees.

Another background to this research project was the fact that, in the course of a first investigation into the matter by Dr. Teresa Nentwig of the Göttingen *Institut für Demokratieforschung*, two men came forward who had been placed in a Berlin foster home until the beginning of the 2000s – a case in which Helmut Kentler was active as well. After the publication of our interim report, a third affected person contacted the team of researchers at Hildesheim University. All three men reported that they had been subjected to sexual abuse during their time in their respective foster homes.

The victims made it clear that we must critically reflect on the fact that both the media and academic reception of Kentler's "experiment" to date follows Kentler's own narrative, a narrative which he himself constructed in his book *Leihväter* (Substitute Fathers) in 1989. Thus the manifold and constant inquiries, e. g. to what extent our investigation covered "the actual experiment," make it clear that Kentler's own narrative is still very much in effect – and possibly misleading. The differentiated reports by and conversations with those affected have shown that the first step must be to deconstruct precisely that figure of an "experiment."

The focus of our investigation was therefore on three central questions:

1. How can our investigation support the concerns of the victims?
2. Which organizational structures and procedures have made possible the work of Helmut Kentler in Berlin's Child and Youth Welfare Services and how? What connections with other procedures and protocols can we trace?
3. What consequences can we derive for current child and youth welfare policies and future professional advancements?

We examined these questions from four different research perspectives: participation of and interviews with those directly affected as children and adolescents; analysis of public records; interviews with contemporary witnesses; and a reconstruction of professional discourse.

This report focuses on the right of the victims to learn to what extent organizations have made possible transgressions, violence and assaults against them, and who was structurally responsible.

As a first result, we show that Helmut Kentler has initiated, intervened in and controlled processes in different constellations and at different levels – both at the level of the Senate Administration (among others within the *Landesjugendamt* (public youth welfare office) of Berlin) and at the level of individual *Bezirksämter* (district offices).

As a second central result, we show that a network of actors in the Senate Administration and the institutions of educational reform since the 1970s not only tolerated that foster homes were established under the supervision of pedophile men, but that they must also have been responsible for monitoring and supporting these homes over longer periods of time.

Our investigation shows clearly that Helmut Kentler's work in its manifold forms was neither an "experiment" nor related to 1970s reforms of residential care institutions, but constituted a threat to the best interest and welfare of children in public custody.

## Part I: Youth and Child Welfare Services in Berlin – The victims' experiences

The two persons, who came forward to the Berlin Senate, are two adult men who grew up together in the foster home of a certain Fritz H. from the age of six. It is mainly thanks to these two men, their courage, their persistence and their openness, that it was possible to realize that Helmut Kentler's work went far beyond what he himself described as his "experiment". From their accounts, it has become obvious that Kentler's deeds cannot be explained with reference to 1970s reform ideas, nor were they about, in Kentler's words, "feeble-minded" (*schwachsinnig*) homeless street kids. These two men impressively report of opaque and incomprehensible procedures, massive experiences of violence and abuse in many instances, and a strong influence of Helmut Kentler on the foster home. They also vividly describe their powerlessness and helplessness, above all because the responsible Youth Welfare Office, or *Jugendamt*, did not notice them at all in their suffering. Ultimately, their stories reveal a massive failure of public welfare services for children and youth. Against this background, the demand of the victims that authorities assume responsibility is more than understandable.

The third person affected, who made direct contact with us, is an adult man who was placed in a foster home in West Germany in the early 1980s as a youth. A Berlin District Office ran this foster home. Although we cannot prove that Kentler was active in this foster home, both the accounts of the witness and further research allow us to trace references to Kentler and to show structural similarities to his proceedings. As in the case in which Kentler was involved in Berlin, the foster home was set up at the home of a man who was a professor in the field of social pedagogy, and several young people lived there, sometimes at the same time. We could also show that the foster father was familiar with Kentler's positions on sex-education in the context of residential care.

The witness also reports of the foster father's sexual transgressions and assaults, about child pornographic material he found and about letters to the responsible Berlin District Office in which he reported about the conditions he found himself in – without getting any response. Only through his massive rebellion and by putting pressure on the foster father was he able to free himself from the situation. Although he was not yet of age at that time, the District Office agreed that he could move to another part of West Germany on his own – without any vocational qualification, without proof of a perspective permanent residence, i. e. without support. Here, too, the failure of public welfare services is evident. Here, too, it is more than understandable that the person concerned asks for transparency and for someone claiming responsibility. It is also thanks to his participation in our investigation that we are able to recognize Kentler's work as part of a bigger structure and a network that needs to be further scrutinized in the future.

## Part II: Foster Homes with Pedophile Men – Organizational Responsibilities

### 1. The *Pädagogisches Zentrum*

Mayor (and future chancellor) Willy Brandt (SPD) himself founded the planning committee for the *Pädagogisches Zentrum* (Pedagogical Centre). The committee was active since 1962 and staffed by top-class members. These included the first Ambassador of the USA to West Germany, James B. Conant, former President of Harvard University, who served as an advisor on educational issues in West Berlin from 1963 to 1965. Other members of the planning committee were the renowned educationalist Heinrich Roth, who had been a professor at the University of Göttingen since 1961, and the director of the Max Planck Foundation's Institute for Human Development (founded in 1963, later Max Planck Institute for Human Development), Hellmut Becker.

The mission of *Pädagogisches Zentrum* was to mediate between academia and pedagogical practice and to carry out experiments, which were later to be established on a broad scale. Experiments appear thus as a motor for Berlin's educational reform. Due to the history of its founding and its political mission, the center was closely linked with not only the Max Planck Institute for Human Development but other academic institutions in Berlin as well, such as the Free University and the *Pädagogische Hochschule*.

With the Senate bill of 23 February 1965, the *Pädagogisches Zentrum* was directly subordinated to the Social Democratic Senator for Schools and Education, Carl-Heinz Evers. It was endowed with a budget of 3.5 million Deutsche Mark and 37 staff positions but held no legal capacity.

Senator Evers knew Helmut Kentler personally and Kentler worked several times directly for the Berlin Senate as an advisor and expert (in 1967, 1968 and 1988).

Kentler also worked at *Pädagogisches Zentrum* from 1966 until 1976, when he left for the University of Hanover. From 1966–1974, he was departmental director of the Department of Social Pedagogy and Adult Education, then presumably of the “Middle School” department. Kentler introduced the 1988/1989 report in which he described and legitimized the so-called “experiment” with this function as department director at *Pädagogisches Zentrum*. At the time he wrote and published the report, though, he was already professor of social pedagogy at the University of Hanover.

Just as the *Pädagogisches Zentrum* should serve as a mediator between theory and practice, Kentler claimed an expert status as both a theorist and a practitioner.

### 2. The *Landesjugendamt* as Part of the Senate Administration

Teresa Nentwig already pointed out that the foster homes Kentler referred to in his report could have been set up within the framework of the so-called *Schutzhilfe* (protective assistance) or as shared apartments. What has not yet been discussed is that the Senate Administration – through the *Landesjugendamt* (Public Youth Welfare Office) – was responsible for all cases of so-called *Freiwillige Erziehungshilfe* (Voluntary Educational Assistance) according to the Youth Welfare Act of 1961.

We are able to show that the establishment of such foster homes must have been in the hands of Department III – Public Education – and Department II – General Family and Youth Welfare Services – of the Senate Administration for Family, Youth and Sport. These departments were responsible for supervising individual cases and developing projects for young people at risk as an organizational chart of the Senate Administration from 1977 shows.

Furthermore, all contemporary witnesses from the Senate Departments II and III as well as from youth welfare institutions confirmed that it would have been the Senate's responsibility to institute the foster homes or shared apartments in question. All contemporary witnesses knew (of) Helmut Kentler, as he advised the Senate as head of the Social Pedagogy Department of *Pädagogisches Zentrum*.

Finally, we come to the well-founded assumption that the Senate also ran foster homes or shared flats for young Berliners with pedophile men in other parts of West Germany. These assumptions are based on our interviews with contemporary witnesses, the report of one of the victims and our exchange with researchers working on similar case studies.

To date, the records on the actual foster homes Kentler referred to have not yet been found in the Senate Administration or elsewhere. In the basement of the Senate Administration, however, there are still about 1.000 records on foster care arrangements under the supervision of the *Landesjugendamt*, which to date have not been classified.

We want to sum up our results concerning the organizational responsibilities with regard to the establishment of foster homes with pedophile men as follows:

1. A letter within a case file proves that the *Landesjugendamt* established a shared apartment as a foster home with an adult male in which, according to one of the victims, sexual transgressions and assaults took place.
2. There is a well-founded assumption that there may have been other foster homes or shared apartments with pedophile men in West Germany, for young people from Berlin, and in the responsibility of the Berlin Senate Administration.
3. The reports of professionals and those placed in these foster homes show that contact between young people and their future foster fathers was not always established by the authorities, but was also initiated by the future foster fathers themselves in low-threshold advice centers or in – often scandalized – residential care institutions.
4. Contemporary witnesses answer very differently the question of who knew anything about foster homes with pedophile foster fathers. All interviewees in the Senate Administration and the Youth Welfare Offices reject personal responsibility – but name other persons as responsible.
5. The Department of Social Pedagogy and Adult Education of *Pädagogisches Zentrum* was directly responsible for advising the corresponding Senate Administration and senator. Almost all interviewees report that leading figures, such as Helmut Kentler, used their status as pioneering experts to gain power and access to the Senate Administration. Helmut Kentler – according to several contemporary witnesses – was well known and repeatedly present in the Senate Administration.
6. *Pädagogisches Zentrum* and Helmut Kentler had also close ties to other institutions of educational reform in Berlin. Members of these institutions were in turn active in the contexts of the notorious Odenwald School and the Pedagogical Seminar in Göttingen; they also granted several persons access to and positions in academic communities. Teresa Nentwig and Jens Brachmann have already discussed such connections in the case of educationalist Martin Bonhoeffer. Brachmann also elaborated on Hellmut Becker's relations to the Odenwald School.

In summary, we assume that a “network” of actors tolerated, strengthened, and legitimized pedophile positions and that members of this network not only tolerated but also arranged and justified pedophilic assaults in foster homes, shared apartments and other care constellations.

It can be further assumed that several employees of the Senate Administration and of District Youth Welfare Offices (*Bezirksjugendämter*) were part of this network and thus may have created and legitimized organizational access to young people, e. g. for pedophile men, and may have taken over case responsibilities within the Senate Administration's youth welfare department. We also assume, based on eyewitness reports, that other persons in the Senate Administration did not explicitly oppose but tolerated the establishing of such foster homes, not least because “icons” of educational reform policies supported such arrangements.

A foster home with Fritz H. as foster father was established in 1973 and was under supervision by the respective district authorities. The foster home was closed in 2003. In the course of these 30 years, a total of ten children/young people were placed in Fritz H.'s care – some of them simultaneously. The H. foster home was initially the responsibility of the Kreuzberg District Office and, after a move in 1984, the Tempelhof-Schöneberg District Office. From the beginning, i. e. from 1973 onwards, Fritz H. tried to become acknowledged as a foster home for children with special needs. The Kreuzberg District Office initially rejected this request. It was not until 1984, when the Tempelhof-Schöneberg District Office became responsible, that Fritz H. was accepted as a special-needs education foster home. In this context, two children with severe disabilities were placed in the foster home.

With the consent of the affected persons, the foster home records were handed over to the University of Hildesheim in the form of two folders, containing about 830 pages in total.

### 1. Structure of the Record

As the central figure of the record appears the foster father Fritz H. Although the children and adolescents in the Fritz H. foster home were actually the central addressees of the support plans, they were hardly heard, only rarely got “a voice.” This means that Fritz H., and not the respective young person, was crucial for the production of knowledge about this case of foster care.

Fritz H. has endeavored to secure this position from the very beginning. Statements of professionals of different institutions who were personally known to Fritz H. managed to establish and control the case and – with reference to Kentler's expertise – even to make it immune to critique, thus countering potential concerns on the part of the Youth Welfare Office. The Youth Welfare Office, on the other hand, was assigned the sole task of formally administering the case.

### 2. Depiction and Categorization of Children/Adolescents, Birth Parents and the Foster Home

Within the record, the foster children were predominantly stigmatized as sick, disturbed, developmentally disabled, and deficient. The birth parents were either not considered at all or depicted as “unable” to provide for their children.

Both the categorizations of birth parents and foster children were put in relation to the Fritz H. foster home and resulted in a consolidation of the case. It is noteworthy, though, that Fritz H. did not initially succeed in establishing a foster home for children with special needs. Attempts in this regard failed and only changed when the Youth Welfare Office in Tempelhof-Schöneberg took over the case.

### 3. Strong Alarm Signals

We found a large number of strong signals in the record, including the report of a psychologist, proof of completed legal proceedings regarding child abduction and child sexual abuse, a critical assessment by the Health Office (*Gesundheitsamt*), and an autopsy after the unexplained death of a child in H.'s custody. These signals should have led to a re-examination of the Fritz H. case – and yet they did not. It is not clear, how the Youth Welfare Office processed these strong signals. Instead, Fritz H. appears as a robust and immune figure and was later even defended by the Youth Welfare Office.



## 4. Helmut Kentler and the Case of Fritz H.

Altogether, four documents by Helmut Kentler appear in the case file, two of them are expert opinions (*gutachterliche Stellungnahmen*), one comments on the educational reports filed by Fritz H. and one is a letter to the judge of the district court of Charlottenburg. Kentler issued every document in reaction to manifest conflicts.

In these documents, Kentler claimed to argue based on his “own experience with severely disabled (*schwergeschädigten*) young people” and his expertise as a professor of social pedagogy.

Overall, Kentler constructed Fritz H. as a person beyond all doubt. It is noticeable that his documents show an increasing level of insistence: they were first written in support of Fritz H.; later, however, Kentler succeeded in installing himself as the decisive authority for information instead of the Youth Welfare Office.

This leads us to the conclusion: Not Fritz H. but Kentler was controlling the case.

## 5. Comparative Analysis and Interviews with Contemporary Witnesses

After a comparison with randomly selected case files since the 1970s, we conclude that the record of Fritz H.'s foster home deviated from standard procedures on several levels. In no other record did we find reports by external experts or such demanding letters from foster parents as in the case of Fritz H. Instead, foster parents were assessed with great care, the voices of the young people were much more audible and birth parents were treated more considerately.

Our interviews show that these signals are certainly remembered as irritations in retrospect. Interviewees characterize the foster father as “special,” for example in the respect that he tried to influence staff at the Youth Welfare Office and bring them to take his side. They perceive and describe him as highly irritating in his demands and remark that it was and is unusual for a foster parent to constantly and pro-actively look for new children, or that a foster father himself dictates which topics should be addressed, and when and how they are to be discussed.

As a summary of the comparative file analysis, we can therefore conclude:

The record successively loses its status as a means of communication – once the basic constellations and attributions were established, they were never again examined, re-opened or discussed. Rather, Fritz H. was first made immune against criticism and later even defended and sealed off from further investigations.

In some instances, Kentler himself worked towards this immunization of Fritz H. On the one hand, this shows how Kentler efficiently used different professional positions to his advantage – as consultant to the Senate, employee of *Pädagogisches Zentrum*, or as professor at the University of Hanover. On the other hand, it shows that Kentler contributed to establishing and immunizing a case, which can by no means be understood as an attempt at reforming residential care institutions. Rather, it both violated the rights of children and enabled massive violence against them.

## Conclusion

1. Taking into account the reports of the victims, the interviews with contemporary witnesses and the file analyses, we consider the investigated establishment of foster homes as a danger to the welfare of children in public custody. This is all the more serious since child and youth welfare services are supposed to arrange foster care precisely to prevent young people from being harmed.
2. A whole series of contemporary witnesses confirm that the basic structure of setting up “shared flats or foster care with pedophile men” was known in the Senate Administration and was certainly also accepted in district youth welfare offices – although not by all of them.
3. The responsibility for the activities of Helmut Kentler as a leading employee of *Pädagogisches Zentrum* lies clearly and indisputably with the Senate as his employer. The great importance of *Pädagogisches Zentrum* also created the reputation that Helmut Kentler enjoyed as a member of the institution's staff, so that the protection of persons and institutions went hand in hand.
4. We want to stress that we need not only be concerned with the foster homes Helmut Kentler reports about, nor solely with the relationship of the Senate Administration to the Odenwald School and the cooperation between Gerold Becker and Martin Bonhoeffer. We also need to reconstruct how the Berlin Senate Administration and district youth welfare offices initiated, established and managed networks of shared flats and foster homes with pedophile men in West Berlin and throughout Germany since the 1960s.

In conclusion, we would like to point out that we have deliberately refrained from recommending a specific course of action in response to our findings. The discussions with the victims have made it particularly clear to us that such an investigation cannot draw a line under the past. Coming to terms with the past cannot mean to conclude this past and generate something new, because the past is still part of the present. In order to potentially shape and change the present, i. e. to develop and establish protection concepts for foster care, in a necessary first step someone needs to assume responsibility – responsibility for the past and the present, for what has happened, for what has been suffered and is still being suffered today, for endangering children in public custody.

Assuming responsibility includes continuing historical research in the matter. But it also calls on professional associations and academic organizations in the fields of social pedagogy, education sciences and psychology to face up to the question of how academic networks, surveys, reports etc. could be used to cover up the physical, sexual, or emotional mistreatment of children.

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