

A Safe Place

A conversation about Lebensort Vielfalt in Berlin, Europe's first multi-generational co-housing community for homosexual men and their allies, with:

Dieter Schmidt, 62, founder and coordinator,

Klaus, 76, resident,

Horst, 77, resident,

Robert, 40, resident.

Beginnings

Klaus: The idea was born twenty years ago. This was supposed to be a place where we would never have to explain ourselves to anyone. Where no one would ask us: "Where's your wife? Your grandchildren?" Outside the community, we're seen as oddballs, even here in Berlin, one of the most diverse cities in the world. Inside these walls, we're normal. It's liberating.

Dieter: We have a discussion group at Schwulenberatung, a support organization for gays, and we were hearing more and more people say things like: "I'm afraid of growing old" and "I'm terrified that I might need care." Men knew that they might suffer discrimination in a public retirement home, and they didn't want to have to go back into the closet in their old age. They remembered the 1950s and '60s, when homosexuality was a crime. Some of them even remembered the Third Reich. One of them moved out of an assisted living facility for the elderly after his neighbor asked: "What, did Hitler not get you?", and none of the staff members even batted an eyelash.

We realized that we had to create a safe space together. Lebensort Vielfalt, German for Diverse Living Space, is a co-housing residence with 24 autonomous apartments and one shared unit who residents receive around-the-clock care. The latter is intended for people who can no longer live on their own.

Architecture

Dieter: All of the apartments are rental units owned by our association. We currently have a waiting list of 400 people, but when we were just starting out, not a single bank was willing to give us a mortgage. They thought we'd end up defaulting on the loan because we wouldn't drum up enough interest.

Klaus: That's also why our apartments are on the small side: anywhere from 31 to 84 square meters. The bank pressured us to opt for a larger proportion of smaller units, which are more cost-effective and easier to rent out.

Robert: I was assigned the smallest apartment, because I was the youngest resident when we moved in in 2012. 31 square meters for a thirty-one year old. Not much, but the rent includes a shared living room, kitchen, garden, and bicycle locker.

Dieter: It took us a long time to find a building. Finally the mayor of Charlottenburg, Berlin, offered to let us buy this property. It had stood empty for a long time. As luck would have it, it was just a few blocks away from the offices of Schwulenberatung.

Robert: When renovation work began, we would meet once every month or two. The architects would present their plans, and we would share ideas. We didn't really talk specifics, because it was far from clear who would get which unit. The collaborative design process was more about who wanted a shower stall and who wanted a bathtub. What would the common area look like? What were our color preferences? The garden was an important topic from the get-go.

Klaus: And it's a unique garden, indeed. Residential buildings in Berlin usually abut the street, with an inner courtyard surrounded by two side wings and one in the back. But here there are no sides or back to the yard. It's an open space where you can breathe freely.

New Members

Dieter: The original idea was to make this a queer co-housing facility for the elderly, but we ended up going toward a multi-generational concept.

Robert: It's more natural that way. It's just like in the old days, when children, parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents all lived under one roof. It's good to live with men that have different outlooks on life.

Klaus: And don't forget about the women!

Robert: Right, the women! We're not just multi-generational, we're multi-gendered, as well. There are five women living with us, one of whom is a lesbian. Our community welcomes homosexuals as well as our allies. Furthermore, 60% of residents are gays over 50, and 25% are younger. The youngest is 25 years old.

Klaus: There are no heterosexual men, but not because we didn't want to have any. Everyone is welcome here. My feeling is that they're nervous about moving in. Dieter, have we ever had a straight guy living here?

Dieter: No. It's a question of outdated stereotypes. Lots of straight men expect a gay guy to "try something," like touch them, for example. I know this is the case because I run LGBTQI sensitivity workshops at Schwulenberatung. I explain that while we of course have different sexual orientations, we are more than just sexual beings. There are many elements that make up our identities. Unfortunately, straight people have a tendency to reduce us to our sexuality.

Robert: My only regret is that we have no families with children. I used to live in a squat in Berlin in the 1990s; we occupied an abandoned house. There were 35 of us, including plenty of children. It's nice having them around, especially when you can just hand them back to their parents when they start crying.

Aging

Horst: A few years after I moved in, I began showing signs of dementia. I suffered a nervous breakdown. I knew I could no longer live by myself, so I moved into the assisted living unit. Here we have around-the-clock care. There's eight permanent residents plus the caretaker.

Dieter: The assisted living unit is run by a care service provider. Our contract states that homosexuals must make up 70% of the staff the company provides for us. It's important for them to understand how our residents live.

Leaving your home is hard. Our community makes that transition less traumatic: You stay in the building, you still have the same neighbors, you go to the same newsstand for your paper. And it doesn't have to be a one-way street. When residents feel better, they can move back into separate apartments, as did a friend who moved to assisted living after suffering a stroke. Now, after three years of rehabilitation, he's once again independent.

Klaus: Having the option of assisted living gives me a sense of security. I know that if I need to, I can always move over there.

Dieter: Most co-housing communities are designed with active, sprightly seniors in mind. Many have an age limit and do not welcome people with dementia. Sure, we'd all like to keep our health as we grow old, but how often is that the case?

We located the assisted living apartment inside the co-housing facility, because that shifts the emphasis from a person's illness to maintaining all the other aspects of their life. We're fortunate that nearly all of our residents who have passed away have done so in their own homes, among their neighbors.

It's interesting that even though we've been here for eight years, relatively few people know about us. It seems that young people suppress the very thought of growing old. That's true whether you're straight or gay. And yet aging is a part of life. You need to be in touch with it.

Community

Robert: I'm very outgoing, and I couldn't imagine living on my own in a building where didn't know anyone. I've always lived in a group, in squats and shared apartments. I believe it's a very healthy way to live. A healthy lifestyle isn't just about what you eat and how much you exercise, it's also about having loved ones nearby. Sometimes your interactions are nothing more than the occasional: "Hey, I'm going on vacation. Could you water my plants and pick up my mail?" And sometimes that relationship develops, and you go out for coffee or hold a barbecue together.

Klaus: I moved into a co-housing building at the age of 71. Before that I lived alone. Living here reminds me of my time in Tanzania, where I worked as a doctor. All of the medical staff lived in a single compound outside the city, and together we formed a little community. I was close to some people, less so to others, but we all knew one another. We visited in the evenings. It's similar here. It's nice to run into someone on the stairs, to chat in the elevator,

the garden, or on the street. We have a community theater and a discussion group, we do yoga together and hold barbecues.

Dieter: Co-housing attracts the kind of people that have a need to share. It's different in the assisted-living apartment. The residents eat lunch together, but do most other things on their own. Some of them previously lived in a co-housing residence, but most have not, and are unaccustomed to communal living. They share only their need for care.

I never moved into Lebensort Vielfalt, but I'm a regular visitor and I supervise the assisted living unit. I try to strike a balance between encouraging residents to remain active and taking a hands-off approach. Dietrich, for example, has dementia, and skips morning yoga with the neighbors, preferring instead to sit in his chair and watch the world go by from his apartment. That's what makes him happy. Hans Peter, on the other hand, mentioned that he'd like to join our community theater, and I support him in that. Every Thursday he comes up with a new excuse, and I just ask him: "Do you want to walk down, or would you rather take your wheelchair?" And every Thursday Hans Peter comes down for rehearsal and says: "I'm here, he forced me come."

Klaus: Before the Coronavirus, we would all meet once a month, both the co-housing and assisted living residents. We strive to live as a more tightly knit and active community, because there wasn't enough of that in previous years. The makeup of our home changed since we started living together eight years ago. Some people died, a few others moved out. About two-thirds of the founding members are left, and not all the new residents share our original premises. We have to keep updating them. At first we had lots of ambitious ideas, but they began to fade as we struggled with the challenges of everyday life. My *idée fixe* is to make our lives more open to people beyond our community. I want to be connected to the outside world. When I moved it, I was worried that I was entering a bubble.

Dieter: We try to be an open home. We have lots of visitors from all over the world. Everyone wants to see the assisted living facilities, so there's a lot of traffic there.

Downstairs we have our stage, and that's where we hold events that are open to the public: bingo nights, plays, comedy shows, fashion shows, and workshops. We invite theater groups and choirs. We provide one of our neighbors with a free workspace, and in return he holds computer workshops for the residents. There's a lot going on, though there's probably more we could do.

Conflicts

Klaus: There's no end to the conflicts. We meet every two weeks to talk about management and interpersonal issues. The main idea is look for solutions, not point fingers. But that's easier said than done.

Dieter: We try to talk about everything, always in a respectful manner. And we try not to take ourselves too seriously.

Klaus: Some of the conflicts stem from age differences. For example, it can be difficult to even schedule a meeting, because our younger residents work during the day and can't show up, say, at 3:00 pm. When the older residents gripe about it, I remind them that the younger members are working to pay our pensions. The same is true with community activities. When you're in your twenties and work all day, you might not want to spend your evenings with eighty-year-old men. At least not every day. That works both ways. Not every elderly person is interested in what younger people have to say. But what can you do? Differences are a part of life, and you just have to cope with them. As you can see, we don't live in a bubble — fortunately for us.

Dieter: One of the residents of the co-housing facility, Gabriela, is sensitive to smoke, but the guys in the assisted living apartment like to smoke on the balcony right outside her window. This has been a problem for eight years. Our current strategy is to have Gabi call us and say: "I want to open my window. Could you not smoke right now?" That solved her problem, but the guys have since started smoking on the other side of the building and we've been getting complaints from other neighbors.

Klaus: We don't have a lot of strict rules. That said, if you get sick, you can be sure that someone will go grocery shopping for you, bring you dinner, and come by to visit. That system usually works. We have some ways to go with the garden. Only a few people actually tend it; the rest just enjoy it.

Robert: And yet the garden has been a lifesaver during the Coronavirus pandemic. It's the only place where community living is possible.

Motivation

Klaus: The meaning of the words "safe space" has changed over the years. In the 1960s and '70s it meant a hiding place. We knew where to go to find like-minded people. There were bars with peepholes in the door. You had to ring a bell, and someone would peer through the hole. If you looked gay, they'd let you in. And if not, they'd yell out: "This is a gay bar!"

The biggest change came in the '60s. In 1968 West Germany amended Section 175, under which homosexuality had previously been a crime. Changes in East Germany came more slowly, and the persecution was more severe. I came out of the closet in 1969. What about you, Dieter?

Dieter: In '77. I had lost my job as a therapist after it was revealed that I was gay. I was told that I was no longer allowed to work with children. The underlying assumption was that all gays were perverts. I later worked at a Catholic institution for families, and my sexual orientation was of course against the rules there, too. I feared losing my job again, so I was always careful about what I said. Could I talk about what I did over the weekend? Which details were better left unmentioned? It was so exhausting. Lots of older gay men share the same experiences.

Klaus: The first protests in Berlin were held in 1973. Teachers who took part in the demonstrations wore paper bags with eye holes over their heads to obscure their faces. They

feared losing their jobs. Everything changed once the AIDS epidemic broke out, forcing society to have a public discussion about sexuality and homosexuality. That helped our community coalesce and become a visible part of the public sphere. Berlin was suddenly full of activists and politically-active drag queens. The first gay bar opened in the 1970s. The first Christopher Street Day Parade was held in 1979, and in fact one of the organizers now lives here.

Dieter: And still, Section 175 was only abolished fifteen years later. And the process of pardoning people convicted for being homosexuals didn't begin until 2016.

Klaus: Our project would have been impossible 40 years ago. 20 years ago it was a groundbreaking initiative. Just ten years ago, one of our neighbors was afraid to put his name on the list of residents out front, by the Schwulenberatung symbol. Nobody's afraid anymore. Lebensort Vielfalt isn't a hiding place.

Ada Petriczko