Chapter 12
Surviving the Streets of Makeevka:
A Study of Subculture of Street Children in Ukraine

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ABSTRACT
The chapter explores the subculture of street children in Makeevka, Ukraine. Drawing upon qualitative and quantitative data gathered during longitudinal anthropological field research their surviving strategies along with social structures, economic activities and substance abuse are presented. In addition, extra-, intra- and inter-group violence is analyzed with an emphasis on the child’s situational interpretation and adoption of the code of the street through subsequent code/identity switching and subcultural reactions.

INTRODUCTION

“I was chatting with Sveta while we were sitting in the dust on a sidewalk. She told me that she was pregnant with Vinik [at the time the leader of the group of street children living in the center of the city]. I was shocked – she was only 13 years old and had already been living on the street for more than two years. She told me that she didn’t want to go back home, because all of her friends were living on the street.

“How about your country? It’s probably very nice over there?” she asked.

I didn’t know how to answer. Is it really that nice where I come from? I started babbling something about our beautiful scenery and kind people…”

“Do you have guys like us?” she asked so directly that it was good that I was sitting down, for I otherwise I would surely have fallen on my backside.

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“What do you mean?” I asked, trying to escape giving a direct answer.

“Well, Bomzhi…” she strived to clarify.

“What?”

“Bomzhi… well, homeless guys, living on the street…”

It was… awkward. How could I tell her that yes, we do have homeless people, but it’s completely different. In my hometown of Maribor there are not even 10 of them, they’re adults and in some respects, they have it easy… We have no children living in sewers, engaging in prostitution and shooting dope into their veins… (diary fragment, Naterer, 2007, p. 1)

The aim of this chapter is to present a picture of the daily life of street children in Makeevka, Ukraine and to describe the strategies that enable them to survive outside the traditional frames of socialization. Apart from the data gathered during my direct fieldwork among the street children, this account is based on my earlier work published in the anthropological monograph Bomzhi, street children Makeevka (Naterer, 2007) and two articles, “Bomzhi and their subculture: an anthropological study of the street children subculture in Makeevka, eastern Ukraine” (Naterer & Godina, 2011) and “Violence and street subculture: a study of social dynamics among street children in Makeevka, East Ukraine” (Naterer, 2014).

The street children who are presented in this chapter are runaways who have banded together for survival in the harsh environment of the Ukraine. Unlike street gangs, they don’t create or acquire an identity through membership in an organization. They look to each other for support to replace their absent traditional family. However, like gang members they participate in crime, such as theft, deviant behaviour, such as prostitution and substance abuse, such as consumption of intravenous narcotics, which all together present a way of coping with their harsh daily reality.

**Method**

The information presented here was collected during fieldwork among street children in Makeevka between 2000 and 2012, with 16 months of direct, in-field participation. A non-random sample of 68 street children was chosen and researched (52 boys, 16 girls, average age 13.6 years). The participants were living in four groups at four different locations in the city: Group 1 in the centre of Makeevka; Group 2 in the suburban part of the city (10 km from the centre) - Ziljoni quarter; Group 3 approximately 8 km from the centre of the city - Pushka quarter; and Group 4 near the centre of the city. In order to protect their identities when presenting qualitative data, pseudonyms have been used. Data collection was performed at locations occupied by street children such as the main bus station, the Marshrutka station, the Pasazh shopping-mall, the Univermag shopping-mall, the central market, restaurants and surrounding buildings.

The study was designed as an integration of qualitative and quantitative approaches. The three main methods employed were as follows:

- **Participant Observation:** Participant observation of the day-to-day life of street children in four groups. Data was gathered in the form of field notes written as a diary, field reports and conversation records;