

Tinka: They arrive in Hong Kong. "God, what do you want us to do?" They had a map of China in front of them. They felt God was pointing out to them. They went there. They were actually able to build up a relationship with civil affairs bureau and with the orphanage director there. He allowed them to go into the orphanage for ten days, every day, and give the children attention. They had, actually, professional medical people with them, gave them therapy, medical care. They were able to go back and took teams in four times, five times a year at the beginning. In the end, they had suggested that to the director and to civil affairs to build up a rehabilitation center as a center to show that children with impairments can really make progress and are very valid people -- they are very valid people anyway, but the Chinese don't think that -- if they get the support they need. In the end, director and also civil affairs from the city and from the province invite the organization to come and build up a rehabilitation center and to build up training for Chinese orphanage staff. That's how it all started.

I was involved from '95 onwards. In '95, we got that invitation. In '96, we got the building, a very old but a very good building, needed a lot of repair. We had an organization from Australia, MMM, Mobile Mission Maintenance, they came several times to renovate that building. January '97, we were able to open. In the time of five months, we took in thirty school-age children with impairments, some with slight impairments, some multiple disabled. It was just amazing. In the beginning, we didn't have therapy stuff. Just giving those kids love and -- how do you say that? -- respect them made such a big change. I actually had taken pictures of them back at the orphanage, everybody of the team. We were six adults and two children who started to work there, could get to know them. I knew them well because I had been in language school and went to the orphanage three afternoons a week. Then three months after opening, we took pictures of the children again for the sponsorship program. Then we realized what happened when we looked at those pictures. There's such a huge difference in their expression, in how they lived. Some were shut up. They had become lively. It was just amazing.

From there, in '99 we were able to start the second center in the same orphanage for smaller kids. They are now caring for over a hundred, mainly young adults now, a few kids. The others have all grown up. We have built up group homes and a sheltered workshop for those kids. Some are physically disabled and are able to work in the workplace. We are trying to help them to integrate in the workplace, that they get more independent. Then they have also started a program to support families who have kept their disabled children in the family. They offer counseling. They offer schooling, medical care, therapy, or help those families to integrate the children to normal local schools, building up a support group among the families to prevent abandonment.

We realized those children who have been abandoned -- we sometimes found them. Sometimes they were at the gate to the orphanage. They were always dressed according to the season. They always had food with them. They were placed very secure that one would find them. You knew they have been loved. The families didn't have money, resources to look after those kids. If you have a disabled child in China, what do you do when it gets kindergarten age? No kindergarten will take the child. There is no school. There is no financial support. If you don't have money, how can you help your child? If it needs an operation, the child doesn't get the

operation. There are still lots of children being abandoned. Now, has built up a second center in another city. The third center --

Jena Heath: -- There are three centers now?

Tinka: Yes.

Jena: I'm interested in this effort to keep the children in their families. How widespread is that effort? Is that something that's being done as part of each of the three centers? Is that something located in one of the centers? How did you all come to the decision that actually trying to provide services so that children can remain with their families might be a desirable way to go?

Tinka: In coworking with the city government, the city government is very welcoming and supporting. They also realize that it would be a great help. They would like to do it in the other locations too. They didn't have the resources so far. They used to have two centers. Has gone back to one because their personal resources were lacking. It's always you need somebody from the foreign team to initiate it, to lead it. It's always the aim to hand over to local people. This is still growing and still being developed. They actually started this after I left. I left in 2005. We talked about it before. We sometimes saw these children being abandoned or coming into the orphanage. Our hearts just broke. We also think that the hearts of the parents must be broke when they see no other way to help their child.

I can give you an example which was really very, very touching. In 2000, a little boy was abandoned actually at the office of the welfare center over lunch time. It was a Saturday. Nobody was in the office. Our leader was there at the time. We had our office in the same building. When he walked down, he saw that basket with the child in it, actually had a letter in the basket. That's very unusual. He can read Chinese. He read the letter. The boy was about ten days old. The father wrote that he can't see any other way to have this child. This boy didn't have [indiscernible], wasn't open. [indiscernible] weren't open. He had taken the boy to the hospital. The operation would have cost ten thousand renminbi. At that time, it was a thousand, maybe two thousand US dollars. The father didn't have the money. The hospital wouldn't do the operation. He had to take the boy back. If the boy doesn't have the operation, he will eventually die. The father didn't know what to do. Maybe he had heard that there are foreigners working in the welfare center or that children are getting adopted abroad. He writes, "I really love that boy. I would like to keep him. I don't know how to help him. I'm hoping that you are able to find parents for him who will care for him."

That was so heart-breaking, and actually brought in the boy to the welfare center to the orphanage. We weren't allowed to just take children to our center. We had to have their permission. After the weekend, the welfare center asked us, "Are you willing, able to take the boy-- his name is [sp] Tangan -- and care for him?" Of course we agreed. We took him to hospital. We had good connection with the children hospital in Shanghai. They actually helped us. They had a fund who also paid for the operation. They sent their surgeon to [indiscernible],

to the children hospital. The child got the operation. The boy was never adopted. He is now sixteen. He lives in our center. He is also deaf. We don't know if he was deaf from birth or if it happened because of too high dosage of antibiotics. They sometimes do that in China, unfortunately. He's okay. I think he's happy now in our center.

Jena: What will his future be like, do you think? How long can he live in the center? What happens later?

Tinka: So far, keeps all the children or former children in their care and supports them to get some training to find a job. There are, of course, more disabled ones which work at sheltered workshop vocational training center. The boy might be able to do a job outside. As long as China, as the government lets [audio cuts out] work there, they will do that. There's a lot of local staff. All the leading positions are in local hands now. [Audio cuts out] there to give advice to support. Of course, a lot of money still comes from abroad. They also are trying to get support in China itself. They also have a sponsorship program in China that Chinese people sponsor children.

Jena: It sounds like the real goal here is to, as you said, is to have facilitated these services, set them up. Is the goal to ultimately one day see them be completely supported by Chinese people in China and really have as minimal involvement as possible, in other words, that it be self-determining by the Chinese people? What's the ultimate end-goal, do you think?

Tinka: I think that's the end goal. You never know how long a foreign NGO can stay there. At the moment, China is making stricter rules. Until now, NGOs were under the civil affairs bureau. Now beginning next year, they will be under public security bureau. That will be a complete different matter.

Jena: That's a change under Xi Jinping with the tightening of a number of things. Do you know how many children, roughly, have been actually, through the efforts of your organization, have been able to remain within their families?

Tinka: No. I don't know that.

Jena: This organization that you've worked with is a Christian organization. Is there any overt evangelizing about Christianity in the work that you do? Is it really by example, the philosophy behind what you all do?

Tinka: From the foreign team, it's by example because we have to work together with the government. It's very hard. What we realized because we also employed, right from the beginning, a lot of Chinese Christians, and we facilitated with just the center and the workers, that other workers became Christians or our kids became Christians. We openly prayed with the children before meals, or our Chinese staff did, also going to bed. They had some day services for them. After half a year, everything was closed down. We weren't allowed to do that

anymore. Why? So many new people came to the local church, were believers. They had to register where they work. It had to happen more secretly.

I remember we had one young lady with an impairment living in our center. She was already eighteen or twenty. She also took her in because her future would have been very bad if we hadn't taken her in. One of our local carers found her once, when everybody was eating lunch, going to the toilet. She says, "You have to go in to eat." She says, "Yes. I have to, but I can't pray at the table. I'm going to the toilet and pray there." That was really amazing. Also, our kids and young people have become Christians. I think it's a bit more relaxed now. They have, always, to be very careful.

Jena: Do you have any concerns that in becoming Christian, the Chinese people run a certain risk, do they not?

Tinka: I think at the moment, it always depends on the local government, how risky it is. You never know if it's going to change. You never know that.

Jena: I just want to make sure I have the parameters of this. You were in China for how many years? From when to when?

Tinka: 1995 to 2005.

Jena: Over that decade, can you tell me when you started to see a transition of mostly healthy children to mostly disabled children coming into your care?

Tinka: Actually, '95 they didn't have so many healthy babies, like forty. Four years later, they had about a hundred. It went up to two hundred. I wasn't there anymore. It must have been after 2005 when the numbers went down. When I was already back in Switzerland, I heard these stories that orphanages were found out that they actually actively tried to get babies. Some were bought to make money through adoption.

Jena: That was the big scandal that really reverberated internationally. What was that like for you to learn about that having done a decade's work?

Tinka: I just felt confirmed what I had been assuming. We lived in the compound. In the beginning, we had to live there nearly to the end. I only moved out 2004. I've seen a lot happening there.

Jena: While you were there -- I want to make sure I'm understanding this -- you suspected from what you were seeing that not all children coming into the orphanage were outright abandoned. There was something else going on.

Tinka: Yes.

Jena: What manifested itself that made you wonder while you were there?

Tinka: I observed once that a big load of children were brought in. That was in '99 after we had opened Hope House. It was a weekend. Suddenly, two policeman walked in. They each had a [indiscernible] box, quite a big one. In each box were two babies. I told them, "I'll just bring them in," because nobody, supervisors of the state orphanage, was around. I just took them in. Two of them were twins. One was very tiny. I took that one to the hospital. It was not very heavy, maybe a kilo and a half, three pounds. The other two were healthy babies. They went to the state orphanage after the weekend. The tiny little one, I told them in hospital, "You have to keep her until she's at least two kilos." I think I had to take her back when she was 1.8, but she was doing okay. Her sister was heavier. She was doing okay.

Then after three months I was told -- it was Friday -- "Tomorrow morning, you have to bring those two babies to the office." The babies apparently had been from Guangzhou Province. The babies need to go back there into an orphanage. I said, "Why? They need more care here. What happens to them afterwards?" "Oh, they will find parents for them." I couldn't do anything about it. I brought those babies to the office. Newspapers were there. High officials were there. I couldn't do anything. I just had to give them away. These people who have been caught with the babies, actually were on the way to sell them and they had been caught, it was a big thing. I had some suspicions. I saw babies coming in, a huge big load, early morning like five or six in the morning. That was really strange. I didn't do anything about it because I didn't know what to do.

Jena: That was around 1999? Is that correct?

Tinka: This one, the four babies. The other incident was later in the early 2000s, 2001, '03. I can't remember.

Jena: The other incident which you're told, "These children are going to Guangzhou," you understood there was really no point in raising any questions about that. They were headed there. That was it.

Tinka: We couldn't do anything. I tried. I spoke to an official and asked them to take good care of them. They didn't have any means to transport those kids. I said, "Just wait. I'll get some milk bottles." I can't remember. I got them blankets or whatever. I wanted the kids to be safe.

Jena: The officials from Guangzhou just took them off with the milk bottles and things that you supplied?

Tinka: Yeah. Actually, it's not Guangzhou. It's Guangdong Province. I don't know which place from there. Some children were sold by their family because they had so many. They didn't have enough money to feed them, so they sold some of them. In the countryside, they tried and tried and tried until they get a son, so they had so many girls, which didn't have papers, which were illegal. They sold some. I assume that those children were stolen.

Jena: At that point where you started to make this assumption and to see things that clearly did not paint a picture of random abandonment, did you ever rethink the role of your organization in China? I wonder what it did to your own understanding of being there and trying to help. Did it ever make you doubt it?

Tinka: No. We were working with disabled children, which is a different matter. They were not sold. They were not bought. We, or at least I, I think all of us, wanted to show people that these children are not rubbish. They are people, very precious people, even if they can never ever work or do anything for the society. Maybe they can smile at you. Just because they are there, they are precious people. That's what we wanted to show them and of course also show those kids and let them experience that they are important and precious.

Jena: A lot of westerners, I think, make certain assumptions about China. One of them is that there is just this no understanding of disability or willingness to try to help disabled people. What you described earlier was a father who was heartbroken at giving up his severely disabled ten-day-old son and efforts to keep disabled children within Chinese families who wanted them.

How do you regard the understanding of disability in China? What do you think needs to happen to help Chinese families accept and be able to care for their disabled children?

Tinka: First, I have to say I think in these twenty years, people in China started to think differently. We have met orphanage directors who really have a heart for those kids. The society is learning more and more about it. It's starting to think differently. That's already a very positive development. Of course, there are lots and lots of foreign NGOs doing same or similar work. That's a good impact. That Chinese families really can keep their children, care for them, they would need support from the government.

Jena: How do you regard the international adoption from China now? The conversation has evolved a lot even in the years since I adopted my daughter in 2008. One of the things we know for sure now is that the stories of random abandonments are not always true. There are real questions that have been raised that I think are harder and harder to ignore about how so many children arrive in orphanage care.

Has your thinking about the legitimacy and viability of international adoption of children from China changed at all as this information has become harder and harder to not see?

Tinka: I haven't thought about it. For the children I was caring for, I was always happy when they got a family. I was caring for disabled children, not for healthy babies. People who had heard about me through other people who had adopted and were assigned a healthy baby, sometimes they contacted me. I tried to get information for them. That happened also while I was living there, but not so much. We didn't work with the healthy babies because they got the better care than the disabled ones.

Jena: Do you think that there's still a legitimate international role for adopting disabled children from China?

Tinka: I just know, still now, they have more chances abroad. Some children, especially older ones, they really want to have a family and be adopted. In China, they don't adopt disabled children. We tried to build up a foster care program. Foster families wanted healthy, cute, little girls and not disabled girls or boys. At the moment, I think there's only just one. We started with maybe seven or ten, we had in foster care. We had to take many back because they were too difficult for the foster family. I think there's only one left in a foster family. Two or three got adopted, which also stayed in a foster family 'til they got adopted. There's one young lady now still in a foster family. We realized we can't build up that more. There's just no response there. Yes, they have more chances abroad. Of course, to have a family's great for them. On the other hand, if they have a good group home there and good carers, then they also have a good life there in China. That's not everywhere built up yet. I adopted a boy too.

Jena: I was going to ask you if you had children. You read my mind. Tell me about your son.

Tinka: His name is [sp] Pin Pin. I kept his Chinese name because he was used to it. He came into the orphanage when he was about three years old. I knew him from the very first day. He was a lovely little boy, didn't talk a lot. He has light cerebral palsy, righthand side. His muscle tone is too much. Sometimes I can't find English words, sorry. He has a middle-severe intellectual disability. He was very sick in the beginning. In the first weeks when he was at the orphanage, he got so depressed he refused to eat. We actually had to force-feed him with a tube. I always cared for the most sick kids there. I, not just me, my coworkers, we prayed for him. Eventually, he got better. Then I, one day, observed him. He was playing with one of our local staff. He's actually walking here.

Jena: Hi, Pin Pin. How are you? I'm Jena.

Pin Pin: Hi, Jena.

Jena: Hi, Pin Pin. I'm talking to you from America.

Tinka: I observed him playing with his caregiver. I realized that he really likes fun. I said to God, "It's amazing. You saved this child's life. Now, he's developing such a funny personality. I wonder what your plans are with this boy." I just felt God was telling me, "You can be part of it. Adopt him." I said, "But if I adopt him, I don't have enough time for all the other kids." I had just gone through that. I desperately wanted to adopt. I had many kids I would have chosen. I said, "No, you can't," because sometimes I was working a hundred and fifty percent. Then I don't have so much time anymore. After I dealt with it and thought, "No. I'm not going to adopt," this comes along, Pin Pin comes along. I just left it with that. That was beginning of the year, '98.

He got ill again in summer. He had hepatitis. Everybody knows some kids have hepatitis there. He was in isolation. Then he got well. Then he was ill again. He just was so ill. [indiscernible]. They gave him antibiotics. He was in orphanage care then, not in our center. I had gone back to the state orphanage to work there. I said to God, "You told me to adopt him. Now, he's going to die." He looked like a child from a famine area. Then one of my team members, she asked our leader if we could put him in hospital and would pay for him. He agreed. She did. I told her, "Ask them to investigate what's really wrong." Then I found out he had [indiscernible] and gave him the right antibiotic. Then he got healthy again. I told God, "If you really want me to adopt him, then you have to keep him alive."

After he recovered, I knew now I'm going this pathway. That was end of '98 by that time. I had planned furlough back home. After he was well, I could put him into our center until I came back from the furlough. When I came back in February '99, I took him into my home as a foster child and then started the adoption process, which was very difficult. China and Switzerland don't have an agreement on adoption. Their adoption laws contradict each other. Because I was living in China, it was possible. Switzerland has a law which says if a Swiss citizen has residence in a foreign country, they can adopt a child under the foreign law. Switzerland will accept the adoption, give the child they citizenship. They needed actually, the Swiss embassy in Beijing, to negotiate with national civil affairs on my behalf that I was allowed to hand in my pages to the Chinese adoption center. It happened eventually. It took six years. As I was leaving there and having him as foster child, it was okay.

Jena: How old is he now?

Tinka: Twenty-one.

Jena: Do you mind if I ask how old you are?

Tinka: Sixty-five.

Jena: Do you have a partner? Are you a single parent?

Tinka: I'm a single parent.

Jena: Before you were retired, what did you do? Was this volunteer work that you were doing, or were you a staff member?

Tinka: No, it's all volunteer work. Of course, I was a long-term volunteer. They don't pay people. It's volunteer work. I trained as a nurse and as a social worker.

Jena: Do you mind if I ask where you live in Switzerland?

Tinka: It's in Burgdorf. That's a little town near Bern.

Jena: When you came home with Pin Pin, how did you settle him into life? What was that transition like?

Tinka: It was easy for him because he had been living with me in China. I had already, in China, started speaking both languages to him, Chinese and Swiss German. 2001, they finally allowed me to take him with me on furlough. They gave him a passport. He had been in Switzerland one, two, at least three times or four times before we moved here. He knew my friends and my relatives. He has a very good memory. He won't forget them. He still knew them. First, we lived with my sister -- he loved that, she has two dogs, he loved those dogs -- for seven weeks. Then we found our own apartment, moved into our own apartment, and then was able to admit him to special ed school. That helped him a lot because there, they don't think about race. They're already different anyway. That binds them together.