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Light shed on a dark chapter in Swiss social policy

After years of concealing the facts, Switzerland is beginning to come to terms with the history of its contract and care home children. Until well into the 20th century, the authorities remorselessly “placed” tens of thousands of these children with farmers and institutions where they suffered violence and exploitation. Other victims of compulsory custodial measures in Switzerland are also now awaiting justice and compensation.

By Susanne Wenger



Former contract children with Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga

11 April 2013 at the Kulturcasino in Berne proved a momentous occasion. On behalf of the Swiss government, Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga apologised to all the victims of compulsory care measures in Switzerland. Around 700 surviving former contract and care home children, those who were subjected to administrative imprisonment and those who were victims of forced sterilisation came to hear Sommaruga's words. “I apologise sincerely and from the

bottom of my heart for the suffering that you endured,” said the Swiss Minister of Justice. “It is time for us to do something that has always previously been denied you.” Apologies were also made by representatives of farmers, church organisations and social authorities. This was public recognition finally for something that had

previously been hushed up – the fact that the supposedly good old days were in fact a harrowing experience for tens of thousands of children in Switzerland. Boys and girls, usually from poverty-stricken families, were traded like cattle from the second half of the 19th century onwards and hired out to farmers and tradespeople. Most were subjected to hard labour and experienced a miserable existence. Others, including orphans, those born illegiti-

mate and the otherwise “morally compromised”, were sent to “salvation institutes” where authoritarian or overstretched educators would beat them rather than show them human kindness. There was a serious lack of supervision for such homes as well as for foster families.

Single teenaged mothers and “work-shy” men were imprisoned for re-education. At the stroke of a pen, custodial care authorities arbitrarily decided who would be locked up for an indefinite period of time. Whether against the “morally corrupted”, the poor or the maladjusted – at one time the Swiss state adopted a hard line to ensure discipline and order.

At one time? All this took place not so very long ago. It was not until the 1970s that values and educational methods began to change, and with them the social care system. So-called administrative care behind bars actually continued until 1981. For a long time shocking stories were covered up by a veil of silence. That is until surviving victims finally summoned up the courage to reveal what had happened to them and



Photographs of contract children taken by Paul Senn in the 1940s, on display at the “Verdingkinder reden – Enfances volées” exhibition being held at various local

to raise public awareness. One of those was Roland M. Begert from Berne. With his novel "Lange Jahre fremd" (Many years apart) published in 2008, the now 76 year old has become one of the leading voices of the former contract children in Switzerland. Begert describes how when he was born in 1937 he was taken from his mother, a divorcee, and put in a children's home. He was then sent to a farm as hired labour at the age of 12. After his schooling, his custodian forced him to undertake an apprenticeship in a foundry. Begert was often told that he was "nothing, a worthless vagrant". But the "vagrant" showed everyone who had ostracised him what he could do. He saved up to attend evening school, studied law and economics and spent 30 years as a grammar school teacher in the city of Berne.

The Swiss government issues an apology

"It was old Christian values, such as hard work and perseverance, which held me together and carried me through. I would not have achieved anything without them," recalls Begert today. He describes his fate without bitterness, but not all former contract and care home children possessed the strength to cast off the past. Many remain damaged and even traumatised. The historian Thomas Huonker from Zurich, who has been carrying out research in this field for years, has heard harrowing first-hand accounts of suffering, terrible punishments,

sexual exploitation and appalling humiliation. "The worst stories of victims who died young, committed suicide, suffered mental illness or who lost all hope can no longer be heard," Huonker points out. He was one of the first to call for official amends to be made.

Swiss President Alfons Egli actually made a start in 1986. He apologised to the Yeniche people for the government's involvement in the "children of the highway" programme. Compensation was also paid out. However, in 2005, the National Council deemed it unnecessary to come to terms with the history of the contract children. It was not until the victims could no longer be ignored and the magazine "Beobachter" took up their cause that progress started to be made again. In 2010, Federal Councillor Eveline Widmer-Schlumpf asked for forgiveness from those put in administrative care. They were also to be legally vindicated, but at no cost – there was no financial compensation. Lucerne was the first canton to carry out academic research into the history of its children's homes. The climax of the process of coming to terms with the past in Switzerland has so far been the aforementioned commemorative event that took place in Berne in the middle of April.

Compensation for the victims?

But that does not mean the issue has been dealt with. "There is still a long way to go," says Zurich SP National Councillor Jacqueline Fehr, who has regularly submitted motions in Parliament. She wants an inspection of the records for all those concerned but also more funding for historical research. Compensation payments as recompense for the forced labour that the care home and contract children had to undertake or as repayment for the social insurance contributions that were missed out on remains a contentious issue. There is also talk of a hardship fund because many of those concerned live in difficult circumstances. Federal Councillor Sommaruga made no commitment, which caused general disappointment. "If the suffering of the victims is only to be recognised by acceptance of culpa-

bility but not by means of compensation, then their rights will have been violated again," remarks the historian Huonker. He points to other countries, such as Ireland, which have paid out in similar cases. Huonker estimates the cost to Switzerland at up to 1.5 billion Swiss francs. The Federal Council has, even so, appointed a special commissioner to examine all the outstanding questions.

The former contract boy Roland M. Begert says that it is not about money for him. He did not even personally feel the need for an apology but he acknowledges that it might be different for many others. "Those previously in care had their dignity restored at the commemorative event. I really felt that," he remarks. His main objective now is to ensure that people do not forget. The next generation has to know what happened in Switzerland, he says.

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www.verdingkinderreden.ch
www.netzwerk-verdingt.ch

THE CONTRACT BOY DREAMS OF ARGENTINA

This dark chapter was also explored cinematically for the first time in 2011 by the director Markus Imboden in the film "Der Verdingbub" (The Contract Boy). Set in the 1950s, the movie proved a big hit with Swiss cinema-goers. In the first few weeks over 200,000 people went to see the disturbing story of the two Emmental contract children, Max and Berteli. Max plays the accordion to forget his miserable existence. He discovers Argentinian tango at school. At the end of the film, the young Max joins a ship that will take him to Argentina. Roland M. Begert from Berne, who was a real contract boy, knows of many

people affected who turned their back on Switzerland at that time. They were deeply disillusioned with a society and state that had robbed them of their childhood. SWE



Switzerland

