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Autor: [s.n]
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Are Our 'Au Pair' Girls Really Safe?

Of the various sections of the population that can be said to be exploited in that they do not get a fair reward for their contribution to society, the anonymous and floating group of *au pair* girls are in a particular position. The *au pairs* have no spokesman of their own, no union to defend their interests and none of the traditional collective means of fighting for a fair deal.

The Home Office has drawn up a series of regulations on the conditions of their employment and the number of hours they are supposed to work, but the application of these rules vary immensely from family to family.

In the great majority of cases, *au pair* girls are definitely exploited because they get paid a pittance for working full-time (which they are not supposed to do) and often far more than full-time.

Their vulnerable situation as aliens and as "semi-employed", their young age and the lack of strict controls leave them easily exposed to exploitation by unscrupulous families who dream of having "servants", while they can't even afford to pay an *au pair* properly.

The families who are the worse in this respect appear to be those who, obviously identifying with the genteel characters of the "Upstairs, Downstairs" television series, fail to see the difference between an *au pair* girl and a servant.

An *au pair* girl is not supposed to work more than necessary to earn her keep. And yet there are innumerable stories of girls working for nine hours or more a day and being lumbered with *any* chores such as decorating and painting a house, or looking after children by themselves while parents go away on holiday.

To be fair to the British, it must be said that the fate of foreign *au pairs* in France, Germany or Holland doesn't appear to be different. They can be considered as the pariahs of the migrant population of Europe!

There are of course a great many Swiss *au pair* girls in Britain. According to some figures, there are about 5,000 of them in London at any one time. Some come to the capital completely misinformed on the life they will lead and often get into trouble. Fortunately there are organisations, such as the Swiss Welfare Office, concerned with their welfare. The Swiss Churches in London

have been traditionally active with young visiting Swiss, and this constantly changing parish has increasingly been regarded as their principal *raison d'être*.

I had a chat with two *au pair* and one former *au pair* girls on a recent Sunday at the Eglise Suisse Street. The three had just completed the washing-up after the parish lunch in the basement kitchen.

The two *au pair* were called Dominique. The younger one, 17, came from Lausanne. Petite, rosy-faced and smiling, her appearance didn't bear out her description of life with her present "family"; a widow of 60 living in Barnes with two married sons constantly turning up. She said that the past three months had been "terrible" and that she was looking for a new family with the help of Pastor Raymond Renoud, suffragan minister of the French-Swiss parish.

This was in fact Dominique's second London home. She had remained for only a week with the family on whom she had landed on her arrival from Switzerland. The house was so filthy and untidy that it was more than a Swiss-bred lass could cope with! Her main complaint concerning her widowed employer was

that she gave her too much work. Dominique reckoned that she put in at least nine hours work a day in cleaning the house and preparing meals.

She had to do all sorts of other jobs such as painting the living room. Moreover, she had to bear with her employer's constant changes of temper. This appeared to be Dominique's major complaint. She was allowed time off at nights (many *au pairs* are tied down by baby-sitting chores) but with £5 a week there was little opportunity for her to enjoy the pleasures of London. Also, she hadn't had the opportunity to go to a language school during that time.

For mysterious reasons her employer had dissuaded her for a long time from filling in the mandatory form required of *au pair* girls by the authorities. Dominique only came to sign this document offering her legal protection when she had been informed of its importance by the Swiss Church.

For all her tribulations, Dominique plans to live through the year she had intended to spend in London. She is looking forward to a better and more congenial family where she will be able to pursue her study of English, the reason



Scotland Yard's Chief Inspector Evans talks to some of the young Swiss in London.

why she came to Britain in the first place.

There was also a taste for adventure involved. But this stay will only be an interlude. When she gets back to Lausanne, Dominique will return to a private school where she will continue her secondary education.

The other Dominique, aged 18, came from Paris. She also came to work as an au pair to learn English and was more fortunate than her friend in being able to attend classes at the Purley Language Centre. Her stay in Surrey and her classes had been previously organised by a specialised agency.

Dominique was not unhappy with her family although there was rather a lot of work for £7 a week. She had to prepare breakfast and serve it to "Monsieur et Madame" in bed. With the cleaning chores, Dominique was not free until 11 am and then again committed to the kitchen at 12 noon. There was some time off between 1 pm and 3.30 pm, when she had to look after the two young children back from school. Every evening except Monday and Wednesday were tied up with baby-sitting. Dominique's main entertainment during these long hours was television.

Her existence was complicated by the hectic life-style of the lady of the house, who apparently worked at night and slept in the morning. Rows were frequent between her and her Irish husband. When this happened, Dominique was the usual victim of frayed feelings and unspent anger. This, and the

five rooms she had to clean, didn't make life easy but she will remain with that family during the planned duration of her stay and is sure that she has established lasting links with it.

The third girl I talked to, Henritette, was proudly nursing her baby. Henriette, who hailed from Grandvaux, near Lausanne, had come to London as an au pair at the age of 30. A qualified social secretary with a good job in Lausanne, she had felt the urge to break away from what she considered a stifling and oppressive environment. She couldn't breathe in Switzerland's materialistic atmosphere and found a way out as an au pair with a divorcee in London.



Young Swiss in the kitchen of the Swiss Club enjoy their supper.

But the change was more radical than she bargained for. Her employer led an amorously hectic life with a gallery of lovers filing by and sleazy parties going on all the time. Henriette was invited to join in but this wasn't quite her thing and she decided to look elsewhere after three months. Her relationship with the divorcee remained excellent and Henriette, who had found a secretarial job with the magazine *Time and Tide*, continued to live in her flat.

In due course, something much better happened – Henriette met the man in her life at the school of English: an Egyptian cameraman studying at the London film school. Henriette is now happily married and comes to Sunday service with her lively baby. When her husband has completed his course in London, she will follow him to Egypt, and is looking forward to her new existence.

These three cases are of course insufficient to convey a picture of the life of au pair girls in Britain. None of the three girls seemed to have serious difficulties with children. This is one of the recurring problems faced by au pairs; they are often entrusted with impossible children who are rude to them and disobedient. Many girls have to leave their family because something doesn't click between them and the children under their care.

But the three cases highlight the close involvement between an au pair and the life of the employing family. If the

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parents have a row, the au pair will usually suffer in one way or another. They are not infrequently enmeshed in marital strife, especially when a jealous wife suspects her husband of dishonourable intentions towards their au pair.

In one particular case, an au pair had to remain alone for three days with several children while the father went to see his mother, and the wife her lover. Mrs Nicole Languillat, sister of the Rev Michel Languillat, told me that of eight au pairs known to her, only one was happy in her home. Another complaint that is often voiced concerns the bad quality of the food they have to put up with.

Au pair girls are in the main too young and inexperienced to suffer from the exploitation, although they are usually aware of it. There is too much good nature and good will in a teenage girl coming from a good home for any emotional reaction over their "rights", and this of course makes them easy prey for unscrupulous families.

Despite the fact that the realities of being an au pair in London are well known, they continue to arrive in large numbers for better or for worse. It should also be pointed out that au pairs come from virtually every social level.

The daughter of a banker is less likely to become an au pair than the daughter of a caretaker. She is more likely to be a paying guest in a good home. But many girls from wealthy

Continental homes do come over here to earn £5 a week cleaning pots and pans. Their main reasons seem to be an urge to see something different. Although teenagers of both sexes are coming to enjoy equal opportunities, the easiest way for a young girl eager to see the world still remains to sign as an au pair in a foreign land and the institution is far from disappearing.

PMB

How About Marquetry?

If you are a person with infinite patience and a very precise personality, this hobby I am sure, you would find very absorbing. In essence it is the cutting and inlaying of varying veneers of wood on to a background to form such things as pictures, decorated trays and so on.

If you think you would like to try this hobby, it is best if you start off with a marquetry kit which can be purchased from most if not all handicraft or hobby stores. These kits usually consist of a base board of plywood, a selection of thin wood veneers with various grains, a paper pattern of the design or picture which is to be made and a tube of glue for sticking the veneers to the baseboard. In addition you can buy a set of special cutting knives although the writer produced quite

a good picture by using a very sharp penknife and a two-sided razor blade; the latter is stipulated as it is more pliable and handier for cutting round curves.

Having obtained the kit you take the baseboard and carefully trace the design thereon, you can use a carbon paper (as used with a typewriter) to achieve this. What follows now is that you take the piece of veneer indicated on the pattern and cut it to the precise shape and size indicated by your tracing. It really must be precisely and delicately cut for other abutting pieces have to exactly fit to the shape.

Some of the pieces which you have to cut out are really tiny and delicate to handle, viz: reins on a horse or tiny boots on a man. Having cut all the pieces indicated and mounted them on your baseboard you have the design or picture finished. If it is a picture, the kit usually also contains some half mouldings in wood, you then measure these and mitre the corners and tack to the baseboard to give the picture a complete, neat finish. If the article was a tray you would have the side pieces included with the kit and these you would affix around the design and hey presto! a finished tray.

These things can be used for years, can be gently polished with a good furniture polish and really look very nice.

Of course if you become really interested you can make your own designs and pictures, choosing your own veneers to get the desired effect.

HJT

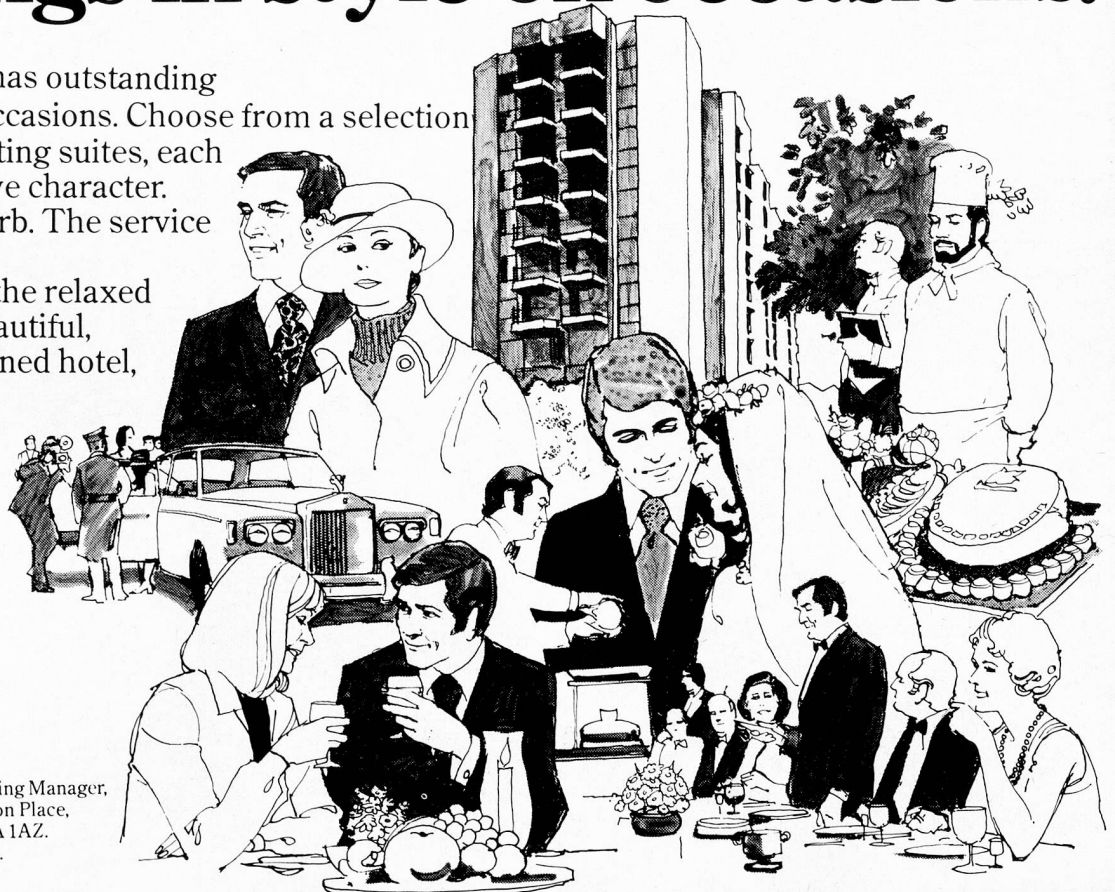
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