

A difficult legacy : the enduring pain of Switzerland's mistreated children

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A difficult legacy

The enduring pain of Switzerland's mistreated children

Until as recently as 1981, authorities responded to Swiss families who fell on hard times by taking their children into care – with or without parental consent. Now, the victims of these policies are calling for recognition and compensation.

Out of the many life stories of individuals who have suffered the consequences of historical Swiss coercion policies, we have chosen Clément Wielly's story.

"I was born in Fribourg in 1954 into great poverty. Along with my two brothers, I was handed over to the authorities when I was three. There I suffered malnutrition, corporal punishment and sexual abuse, but also lack of affection."

"Next to the orphanage, there was a military base. One day, I was alone in the courtyard and an officer in his smart uniform spoke to me. The next day he brought me a toy and I asked him: 'Don't you want to be my dad?'. He explained that it wasn't as simple as that."

"When I was 14, I was placed with a family in the country. I was made to work hard and would fall asleep at school. In three years, I earned 15 francs. I returned to an institution and passed a tinsmith certificate but after four years I had to stop this sort of work because of physical problems. It has been sport that has sustained me throughout my life. Through hard work, I became a sports teacher."

"Once I was able to get access to the archives, I learned that my mother had not left, as I had been told, but that, abandoned by my father who was a vagabond, she was unable to feed us. She asked for help, but no, the authorities separated us. I also found out I had a 66-year-old sister living in Aarau. I met her, what a moment!"

A long road to a formal apology and compensation

1981: following the ratification in 1974 of the European Convention on Human Rights, Switzerland stopped all practices that allowed for internment (institutional or penal), infringement on the right to procreate (castrations or forced abortions) as well as forced adoption or family placements.

April 2013: the government formally apologised to the victims of forced institutionalisation and coercion policies, and proposed assistance.

June 2013: the Round Table was created, bringing together all parties implicated in the practices of the past, including representatives of the churches and the Swiss Farmer's Union.



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March 2014: a popular initiative "Pour la réparation" (For the reparation) is launched calling for the creation of a compensation fund of CHF500 million (\$655 million). As of early September, 60,000 of the 100,000 signatures required had been collected.

July 2014: the Round Table delivered its report and a list of compensation measures, most notably the allowance of an immediate one-off payment to victims of CHF 4,000 – 12,000 to be paid for through a CHF7 million fund paid into by the cantons, cities and communes. The payments started flowing via the mechanism of the Chain of Happiness (the humanitarian foundation of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation). The number of requests for assistance is estimated to be around 1,000 by June 2015.

August 2014: the federal law for the rehabilitation of people institutionalised as a result of administrative decisions is enacted. It recognises the injustices that were done, creates the Synergia research project and guarantees the archiving and opening of victims' files.

Compensation: The Round Table gives Parliament a mandate to pass a law to allow for lump sum payments to victims as a supplement to the AVS pension and taking into account individual circumstances. This legal framework could be established as soon as 2017, an unusually fast pace for Switzerland.

Extracted from an article by Isabelle Eichenberger published 10 September 2014. Translated from French by Sophie Douez
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Coercion policies

Children institutionalised by force: minors from poor families, orphans or children of unmarried mothers were placed by force if necessary in institutions or with families, often farmers.

Administrative care: Under the 'administrative care' legal provision, young people, including many pregnant girls, could be deprived of their freedom without trial or any means of appeal. A recommendation from the guardianship authorities was often enough to seal their fate. On the grounds of "depraved lifestyle", "licentiousness" or "alcoholism", victims were often placed in prisons alongside genuine criminal offenders. Others ended up in residential institutions.

Forced sterilisation: until the 1970s, abortions and forced sterilisations were carried out on individuals deemed unsuitable for parenthood for social or genetic reasons.