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Money cannot heal all the wounds of the past

Rita Soltermann was a contract child on a farm in the Emmental. From then on she remained “trapped in the bottom drawer”. She appreciates the federal government’s moves to offer reparation for the suffering inflicted during that period. But the scars remain.

MARC LETTAU

In the sitting room of the soon to be 80-year-old Rita Soltermann of Niederönz (BE) there are flowers everywhere – and 350 porcelain piglets. It is a sight that draws a smile. But the little pigs are a souvenir of a childhood that was anything but rosy. At the age of six, Rita Soltermann was contracted to a childless mountain farming family in the Emmental. Rita was the 14th contract child in a row to slave away there on the steep hillsides of the small farm – as an unpaid worker.

At six o’clock in the morning it was time to get up and feed first the chickens and then the pigs. The farmyard smell clung to her when later, unwashed, she hurried off to school. Rita Soltermann puts it bluntly, “We stank.” After school, it was time to change clothes and get back to work. There was no time for homework on a work-day. As a result, her limited schooling did not prepare her well for the future. She was not able to learn a trade, was always dealt a bad hand. “When you start out that way, you will just be ‘a helper’ for the rest of your life. You remain trapped in the bottom drawer”, she says.

The piggyback rider

Feeding the pigs was also the highlight in Rita Soltermann’s everyday life as a child. She liked the pigs. They became her companions and even gave her moments of happiness. “Sometimes I rode out of the sty on the back of a mother sow.” At school “Söirittere” – Piggyback Rider Rita – became her nickname.



Rita Soltermann, former contract child, in her sea of flowers today:
“To have felt no love is the most painful thing.”
 Photos: Danielle Liniger

Rita Soltermann is one of many thousands of victims of compulsory social measures. Her fate is typical of those children robbed of their childhood by the authorities supposedly for their own “welfare”. Children from lower-income families were contracted; others were moved to institutions or given up for adoption. Jenisch children were taken away from their families to guarantee them a “decent” future.

Other victims even came under the knife and were sterilised at the behest of the state. For years now Switzerland has been debating about reparation for this dark chapter in Swiss history that lasted until 1981.

The federal government has made an important contribution towards dealing with the past. In an intensive dialogue with those affected, the issue of reappraisal was tackled. The vic-

tims were promised a solidarity contribution of 25,000 Swiss francs. More than 9,000 of the mostly elderly victims have filed for a solidarity payment (see also “Review” 4/2018). Rita Soltermann is one of them.

Does the federal government’s gesture of solidarity change the view of one’s own fate? It is not so simple, Rita Soltermann says. Recognition of the injustice suffered is indeed very important. But ultimately there cannot be any actual reparation. “The experience as a child not to have felt love and never to have been hugged cannot be undone.” The memory of the distress she felt as a young mother having to fight to prevent her own child being taken away cannot be erased either. The federal government’s solidarity contribution is important, “but at the same time it is just a small gesture that does not make the scars go away.”

The dilemma that reparation cannot put everything right has also been addressed by victims’ organisations. Robert Blaser of the organisation Fremdplatziert said that the state had done much, but also underestimated many things, such as the defensive reaction to everything official. “For many, the authorities – government, canton, municipality and church – are in the role of perpetrator. And many could not understand why the ‘perpetrator’ wanted to give them money.” The solidarity contribution also represented “a recognition of injustice” rather than an improvement in living conditions. Blaser goes as far as to say that for victims in a precarious life situation the contribution is “disastrous”, describing it as “five months’ wages for a wrecked life”. For him that is not reparation. Luzius Mader, charged by the federal government



with the dossier, does not completely contradict that – he calls it a gesture of solidarity and not reparation (see Interview, page 19).

Appeal to the farmers

Werner Zwahlen of the Netzwerk verdingt says solidarity payments cannot change any person’s life history. His network had hoped for a pension solution instead of a one-time payment. Small, monthly subsidies would “have made a greater difference to the past”, he says. Zwahlen and his fellow campaigners also say that it is not enough for the federal government alone to feel committed to a historical reappraisal. Municipalities, cantons and farming organisations are hesitant in tackling their task of reappraisal. Kurt Gägger of the Netzwerk verdingt makes the criticism that as far as the farmers are concerned, the point is to “rehabilitate the farms, or free them from the curse of the past”. There is probably no basis for discussion on that yet – Hans Jörg Rüeggsegger, president of the major farmers’ association in Bern, recently responded to Gägger’s claim, saying that he did not know of any farms that felt stigmatised because of the past.

Daniel Huber of the Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse (the Jenisch umbrella organisation), which campaigns for the welfare of the Jenisch and Sinti, agrees that state reparation

alone is not sufficient. Money as a gesture of solidarity is “all right and proper”. But particularly the Jenisch and Sinti who are still travelling are shown little understanding in their daily life. Huber said, “The living space for travellers is becoming ever scarcer, farmers are under more and more pressure not to permit them to set up camp.” The contrast between the benevolent attitude of the federal government and everyday reality is just too great.

Granny in a sea of flowers

Back in Niederönz, Rita Soltermann describes other facets of a life without a childhood. She did not meet her youngest sister until she was 68 years old. That shows how much one as a contract child belongs to “a family without a common history”, she says. And she talks about how easily the violence and incivility suffered are passed on, “It was only in hindsight that I realised I was a very strict mother who also dished out the lashes at times,” she says. She regrets that today, but says people carry the cruelty they have suffered within them. Nevertheless, she also speaks of great happiness – she feels secure today at her husband’s side, aware of being surrounded by a loving family.

Obviously, some things are turning out well. The “Söiritterin” from back then now lovingly devotes herself to her flowers and has become “Margritli-Grosi” – Flower Granny. That is what her grandchildren call their grandmother when Rita Soltermann smiles at them from amidst her elaborate floral arrangements.