

<http://www.rense.com/general50/children.htm>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml?xml=/news/2004/03/14/wswiss14.xml&sheet=/news/2004/03/14/ixworld.html>

'No one could help me escape'

By Kim Wilsher

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Tens of thousands of unwanted Swiss children were sold in auctions or given away as cheap labour until the 1950s, according to a shocking television documentary which has forced the country to confront a dark chapter of its recent past.

Many of the child workers, known as Verdingkinder (discarded children), ended up being beaten and sexually abused after passing under the auctioneer's hammer in Swiss provincial towns.

They were handed to farmers or factory owners, who were paid a fee by local authorities to feed and house them. Although the children were supposed to be paid a basic wage for their work, in practice many were treated as slaves.

Historians estimate that as many as 12,000 children of poor families, some of them infants and many with unmarried or divorced mothers, were given away or sold during the 1930s alone. The trade finally ended only in the decade after the Second World War, when increased farm mechanisation meant less need for youthful labour.

Peter Neumann, the documentary film-maker whose work has forced Switzerland to acknowledge its uncomfortable past, first heard of the ordeal of the Verdingkinder, from his grandfather.

"I was so moved by the stories of his gruelling childhood, and his struggle to put the past behind him, that I decided to research into the subject," he said.

He found that surviving Verdingkinder were frequently reluctant to dredge up painful memories of malnourishment, overwork, physical and sexual abuse.

"I found that many former discarded children still haven't come to terms with their experiences," he said. "For some, the memories of being physically and sexually abused run too deep. They still feel somehow ashamed about their past."

Turi Honegger, one of only a handful of Verdingkinder willing to talk of their terrible experiences, was just 14 years old when he was taken away to work on a farm.

"My life consisted of working and sleeping," he said. "There was very little food and everyone shunned me. I remember feeling invisible, like I didn't exist. I ate and slept under the stairs, well away from the family dinner table. I was shunned by everyone

and no one could help me escape."

Mr Honegger, now 80 years old and a retired journalist, said that he was regularly beaten by the farmer for whom he worked. "Everyone would turn away when he hit me.

"Once he beat me so badly that his wife took pity on me, cleaned up my wounds and put me to bed - but the farmer was so angry that he dragged me out and threw me into the stables.

"He kept me locked up for days and told me to eat the animal feed. It's very painful for me to think back to those times."

Marco Leuenberger, a historian who has researched the practice and is appealing for more Verdingkinder to come forward, said: "We estimate that between five and 10 per cent of all Swiss children may have been sold or sent away by their families to work in the countryside between 1850 and 1950."

He is campaigning for the Swiss government to establish a national register of those affected.

The trade in surplus or unwanted children started during the early 19th century. Although it was particularly widespread in the German-speaking cantons of Switzerland, it occurred elsewhere as well: boys known as "black brothers" were sent from the Italian-speaking region of Ticino, across the border to work as chimney sweeps in Italy.

Historians say that it is impossible to establish exactly how many youngsters were involved because no records exist before 1820, and some were traded without the knowledge of local authorities.

In the Bern region alone, an estimated 300,000 children were put into forced labour between 1850 and 1900. Public auctions for the Verdingkinder were still being held in Swiss towns and villages in the 1930s.

"It's astonishing that these slave auctions were allowed to happen in Switzerland," said Mr Leuenberger. "One explanation is that at the time it was a poor agricultural country and there was a desperate need for cheap labour. Poor families were forced to register with their local authority every year.

"They decided whether all the family members were adequately provided for, and in the 19th century they had the right to break up the poorest families.

"There were no criteria that farmers had to fulfill to receive a Verdingkind. They only had to prove that they needed more cheap workers."

He said that his research had uncovered records of "dozens of cases" of sexual abuse of the children, which were usually addressed by moving them to a different location.

Mr Honegger said that he tried to write about the painful episode in his - and Switzerland's - past in a book about his Verdingkinder experiences, 20 years ago, but was advised to "tone down" his work.

"My publisher told me to cut chapters out and to rewrite and tone down my account because he thought that no one would believe that this kind of thing had happened in Switzerland. It was taboo to talk about it in public."

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