

(For Private Use Only)

(8 years later...)

Shameful Hush: Breaking the Conspiracy of Silence

The story of the contract children belongs to the darkest chapters in Swiss history. Historical research only began to shed light on it about twenty years ago.

The “Verdingkinder” or “contract children” used to be taken away from their families by the authorities, or sometimes given away by their parents, and placed at farmers’ to work as unpaid farm hands.

(5 pics)

These were sad times, from the beginning of the 20th century up to 1981. Foster care meant that the children were “made to things” as the word Verdingkinder literally means. They represented the cheapest labor force for the farmers, cheaper than any farmhand not only because they worked for free but also because the farmers got money from the authorities for ‘taking the children in their homes and educating them in the right way’, quote.

In most cases, however, the reality was quite different.

Most contract children were shut out of their foster family, hardly nourished, badly dressed, no shoes, washing at the fountain, with lice in their hair. They were up for work at 4 or 5 in the morning and again after school until 10 in the evening, beaten, exhausted, with no time for schoolwork.

1. Silence can be a form of violence

Everybody knew or *could* know if they wanted - the teacher, the police, the minister, the guardian, the neighbours. But no one said anything.

Silence – but not secrecy. It was a mute acceptance of this organized child labor, increasingly applied at the time in the rural areas of CH. Silence can eat into body and soul of both, the accomplices and the victims.

Silence was broken from time to time by books and articles written by one former foster child who was a lone fighter for many years. In 1944-46 a series of publications set off a few local changes: a journalist published several articles about sexual abuse on a youngster and the death of ill treatment of another boy of 5.

(2 pics Senn)

A woman, a former court clerk, wrote a book about her experiences. A guardian protested against the living conditions of his protégé. But nothing much changed until in the 1960ies the 1st testimonies were published about various coercive welfare measures. The placement

of contract children was officially stopped in 1981, once a law was voted to regulate foster care.

The change of mentalities and consciousness was amazingly slow.

In the 1990ies for the 1st time, the story of children welfare policy was the subject of a touring exhibition called *Stolen Childhood, Contract Children Speak*.

Another 10 years passed until the final break through.

In 2004 a historical research project starts with a public call to all former contract children for their testimonies. The taboo is now definitely broken, the conspiracy of silence has come to an end. Testimonies are published in the media, former contract children meet for the 1st time. They discover that they are not alone, that many have suffered the same hardships and felt the same terrible isolation. Those of the 10'00 all over the country who are strong enough to come out in the open and speak out meet with understanding, empathy and interest and can thus begin to shake off the ingrained feelings of shame and guilt and the mistrust of authorities. They are 70, 80, 90 years old and feel a pressing need to tell their story for everyone to hear before they are gone. They want it for their own recognition, but also for the sake of all those whose lives were destroyed (violent deaths, suicides, drugs, psychiatry, criminality). For those who are grandparents and watch their grandchildren grow up, the ordeal they went through hurts more than ever. Those who dare speak require the rehabilitation of all of them, an official recognition of the wrong done to them, and they wish their testimonies to prevent such injustice done to any child ever again. From then on, associations and scholars voice their concern and require that the governmental institutions promote and finance the research on a national scale, work out new regulations of foster care and organize financial reparation. A film "The Contract Boy" as well as an exhibition called "Contract Children Speak" that tours all over the country are eye-openers for the large public.

2. From then on, former contract children speak out

What they tell sounds like a nightmare.

They were overtaxed, overworked, with little sleep. They had to work before school. Many had to walk a long way from the farm to the village and back 3 times a day: to bring the milk to the dairy early in the morning and back home, where they ate a little, then they went to school. At lunchtime back home and again work, then back to school. After school they had to come home immediately to work again. They hardly had any time left for school work, at 8 or 9 pm. Never mind if they were ill and had fever, or had been injured on the farm - they had to work.

(3 pics Senn)

They were beaten almost daily, with leather straps, wooden shoes, cast iron pans etc. Quite a number of them, girls and boys, were regularly sexually abused (by foster father, or both parents, or brother, or a farm hand).

Talking was forbidden, to anyone on the farm or in the village, or to other children. They had to come straight home from school. A few *did* try to tell a teacher, a minister, a policeman about their miserable condition. They never did it again. Because, once the enquirer had been reassured and had left the farm, they had been beaten up as never before.

They endured the silence of withheld dialogue, hearing only commands with humiliations that sunk deep into their souls: “Your family is worthless and so are you” or “You and your kind are good for nothing” or “Your family is genetically deficient”.

They were usually shut out of the family life. The little food they were given, they had to eat on their own. They slept with the animals in an unheated shed.

They were most often kept away from their biological family and did not know where their parents and kin were. Those who had been placed as babies or at a young age knew nothing about their origins and discovered, if at all, only in their adulthood who their parents and kin were. Unless they had been at least 5 before the separation, no family ties could be established in later years. So the only family these children had was the place of their ordeal. Few of them were allowed to have rare, short visits by a relative (aunt, uncle, father, mother). The presents (coat, shoes, money, watch) they happened to receive was taken away from them.

The visits of the guardians usually once a year – if they came at all - are described as a superficial show.

(1 pic)

The visits were announced and the children were dressed in nice clothes for the occasion, and nice rooms presented as their bedrooms. If asked at all, then always in the presence of their foster parents, the children knew well that they must say “Everything is fine”. Not one of them tells of a real control by the guardians of their living conditions.

School was a refuge and a safe place for the few children who managed to get good results and be appreciated by the teachers. But for most of them school was yet another place where they were disliked, humiliated, unjustly punished (for falling to sleep or coming late to school) and laughed at by the other children (stench, dirt, lice, bad clothes, no friends).

3. “I have never been a somebody”

The most dreadful thing, the survivors say, was not the violence done to them, not the hunger or the hard labor. The worst was the lack of love.

As one survivor explained: “All my life I had to learn how to be. You were not allowed to exist, you had no one. I got no love from anyone.”

No body contacts except for violence and abuse. No words spoken except for insults and degradations. Nearly all who were treated like less-than-humans, and with no power to change anything to their condition, became passive and withdrawn.

As one of them explained “When you are flogged all the time, you go numb. You stop protesting, you say nothing about your pain.”

A woman farmer would sometimes sneak an apple into a small hand, that was all. The feeling of hopelessness and powerlessness was overwhelming. One of them put it in a nutshell: “I have never been a somebody.”

We know from the research done on bonding that an emotionally insecure environment, little or unforeseeable interactions, changes in the care givers – all these factors represent a

severe impairment in the emotional and mental development of children, esp. in the early years but also later on. Children deprived of affection, stimulation and interactions are noticeably retarded in speech, “less intelligent”, less emotionally flexible and severely handicapped in their relational ability. For quite a number of them, how many is not known, the circumstances proved devastating for their mental and psychological development. As Jean Knox notes in her book *Archetypes, Attachment, Analysis* (London, NY: Routledge, 2003) about trauma:

There are some people for whom all defences may fail, in the face of overwhelming and consistent mental or physical abuse, neglect or indifference. The terrifying experience of [a caregiver’s] cruelty, malevolence or destructive intent can sometimes be defended against only *by the elimination of thought itself*. (p. 137)

This represents, in Knox’s terms, the most extreme dissociative defence, that deprives of ‘the capacity to be aware of themselves and others as independent psychological and emotional beings’.

(3 pics)

Many of the children just fell asleep at school, they were isolated, anxious and weak in school. Practically none of them was allowed to go on with school beyond the compulsory time (15). Very few were allowed to complete an apprenticeship, a professional training still in use for many young people in Switzerland. Why? Because of the cost, but mostly because of the mindset: the contract children must stay in the lowest social position, they were not supposed to improve their living in any way. Most of them went on serving as farm hands for free or very little money, at least up to the age of 20.

4. How have they survived?

Being taken away from their family without warning or with no explanation was a shock for those who were big enough to realise what was going on. Some of them remember precisely how at 5 they were taken crying and kicking, away from their mother. Some were told that they were leaving for holidays. Others were picked up directly from school by a stranger and brought to an unknown place, for an unknown reason.

Except for a few who were glad to get away from their family or who had the good fortune to be treated nicely, the placement was for most contract children a devastating experience from the start. Some lost their speech for some time. Some rebelled. A few who knew of a relative living close by fled and found a shelter before finding another, hopefully better place. Or they fled and were just brought back.

How did they survive this situation of utter loneliness, exploited, cruelly treated, stigmatised, shut out of their kin family, with seldom any support from relatives?

Clearly, not all survived. No one knows how many committed suicide, or died of ill treatments.

And many remained lonely and mute all their lives.

Many survivors suffer from complex post-traumatic stress disorder, including chronic anxiety, depression and impulsiveness. Many had difficult marriages, were divorced several times.

Nevertheless, a few miraculously managed to keep up some sense of resilience during these years. They mention the animals on the farm: the cows who kept them warm, or the faithful farm dog or the cats or the horse. A few found solace in the prospect of seeing their mother once a year, or in secret meetings with kin on the way to school or in sharing secrets with a member of the foster family. The school was the refuge of the few who managed to do well, the only place where they felt safe and free. Some found soothing in faith. Some fled in their imagination, one kept an imaginary dog. Music was a savior for at least one of them.

The survivors know that the wounds cannot heal and that they will always feel “different”. Understandably, many have remained deeply suspicious of the authorities. Most of them kept silent about their past full to the brim of shame and guilt. Not many did try to tell their stories. They said that they had to stop because they felt not heard or not understood. Some waited decades until they began to tell their spouses or their children, as a life crisis let memories come flooding back, or once they were retired and had more time for themselves. Some offsprings confided to the researchers how they had had to carry the burden of the untold and had themselves attempted to raise their own children, the grandchildren, free of guilt and self-loathing.

A most bitter experience for them was the arrogant response of the local authorities when they enquired much later in their lives about their files. Quite a number of them had made the difficult decision to try and answer the “why” that had pursued them so long. They wanted to understand what had happened to them, what had become of their biological parents and kin, and why they had been taken away and sometimes moved several times. With this they hoped to regain some of their lost identity. The authorities sometimes bluntly denied them the access to their files and gave in only at the sight of a lawyer. Sometimes the authorities would not let them copy the documents. Sometimes the files had even been destroyed.

Public apologies given (November 2013) by the Swiss government for the wrong done to them and to all other victims of coercive welfare measures proved soothing for a number of them. But their overall response was that they did not trust the words said, that only facts, the immediate, financial support for the most impoverished among them could correct some of the wrong done.

5. How could it happen?

Faced with these tragic destinies, similar figures come to mind of socially marginalized, outlaws, outcasts, or political prisoners of all kinds. Sad to say: Society has proved at all times capable of ostracizing, tormenting and declaring not worthy of being treated as humans a part of their fellow human beings. Think of national socialism, of the camps in Siberia or in Cambodia, of the massacres in Rwanda, the many civil wars and persecutions of minorities.

So you end up asking the painful question that many have asked before: “How could this ever happen unhindered?”

It cannot be that all these people who let it happen were monsters.

C.G. Jung, who had lived through 2 dreadful wars, considered *evil* a highly if not the most meaningful issue with regard to the future of humankind. He insisted on the necessity for

monotheistic religions to integrate evil in the image of the divine. Religion in his view must pay its tribute to the fallen angel, since evil is but one side of the trans-personal forces that run our psychic process and hold the universe in balance like Yin and Yang. We would be far better off, he thought, and not at the mercy of the hugely destructive potential we now have in our possession, if we would learn to deal with our ambivalence, and to look more closely at these dark, 'bad' impulses that we like to deny and repress.

Alexander & Margarete Mitscherlich wanted in their seminal work written in 1967, 20 years after the end of World War II (*The Inability to Mourn*, 1967/1984) to answer precisely this question: How could national socialism ever have such an impact on us Germans? They hoped that their reflections would encourage others to break the silence about this shameful period. Their main concern was evil and their conclusion would surely have met Jung's approval. They analysed that persons raised under rigid moral norms and values, are forced to repress whatever is collectively rejected as "bad" and shameful. So to be "allowed" to project their repressed urges on to a social group labelled "devious" and "immoral", and therefore beyond any humane considerations, brings enormous relief. The authors hoped that society might improve - if only humankind would educate their young to mature, critical egos and train them to constantly question their opinions and all things taken for granted. Otherwise humankind would go on making the weakest among them (their scapegoats, unloading their frustrations and rage on to them).

Jung called the development of this "critical ego" the individuation process. He was keenly aware of the tremendous power of archetypal symbols on the psyche. National-socialism in World War II had been a lesson in the seductiveness and the relief found in the celebration of common beliefs and grandiose self-ideals that automatically ostracize the misfits of all kinds. Because the archetypal forces from the collective unconscious know no morals, they can trigger both in us, inspiring us to generous and creative deeds or poisoning our hearts with hatred and feelings of vengeance. Jung had far too much respect for the collective unconscious to believe that reason alone could ever gain control over the destructive urges in our shadow. He warned on the contrary not to over-estimate the capacities of the rational ego. His hope and the ultimate task of individuation was in his view for everyone to watch closely for the forceful impact of collective ideas and images on the ego.

Psychology and neuro-psychology have made huge progress since Jung and we have now a solidly founded confirmation that the *emotions* and not reason underly our so-called 'logical' decisions.

6. There is not only one truth

The historians who in 2004 have been collecting 270 life stories were pursuing the truth in two ways. They wanted the former contract children to be able to tell their stories and be heard by representatives of public institutions, and provide them in this way with the beginning of a reparation. While interviewing the victims they witnessed the healing power of telling one's story, how by going through and re-examining painful, shameful memories and ordering the main events of your life, you can give it a continuity and a meaning, and thus can consolidate your own identity.

But they were also convinced that next to the "oral history" of the victims, which was a subjective truth in its own full rights, next to this truth were **other** truths that must also be told to fully understand. These were the realities of the officials, of economy and politics.

By researching the social structures as well as the beliefs and mentalities of the time, they practiced some kind of psychic integration on a collective level. They tempered the comfortable reaction of outrage and disbelief that we all have at first. We draw a clear line between victims and perpetrators and take sides with the “good”, the victims. This first response, very ‘naturally’ exempts us from questioning a possible collective responsibility. Because we know where the ‘bad’ are.

But what do we know?

The researchers wanted to get a comprehensive picture and for that to find more about the *other* realities, those that had to do with the living conditions, with the values and the political structures of the time.

Foster care: How was the law?

The law of 1912 allowed the local authorities to take the children away from their families if it proved necessary to preserve their physical and mental well-being. The parents were then deprived of the custody of 1 or several or all children. The children were assigned guardians who organised the placement in foster care. This placement was supposed to ensure that the children would grow up under healthy living conditions and have a moral education in an intact family. The task of the guardians was then to watch over the children’s well-being up to the age of 20.

The local authorities: Who was it?

They were a few lay men, the guardians were also lay men. They all knew each other, lived in the same neighbourhood, depended economically and socially on each other and shared the same norms and values.

What was their duty?

It appears that their main concern was twofold, to minimize their financial duties towards the poor, and also to ensure social stability and proper morals.

The moral values (right education, right way, intact family) were in actual fact closely connected with the social status. Only the lowest on the social scale were easily labelled incompetent and depraved, they were those whose way of life must be controlled by the community. When you were somehow on the fringe of society you got easily suspected of being at fault.

The duty of the authorities was by law to establish peace and order in three areas:

- When the family’s poverty was such that they needed financial support from the authorities. Poverty was deemed self-inflicted, and poor families morally and socially deficient. Rather than supporting the parents, the authorities would take away 1, several or all children and finance foster care at the farmers’. Not only was *work* supposed to be the best way of educating children. But the farmers were also in dire need of farm hands.

By the way: what the Swiss agriculture got over the years from children labor has been evaluated to 20 to 65 billion Swiss francs.

- When the parents proved incapable of raising their children with proper morals, or in cases of “depravation”, alcohol abuse or motherhood out of marriage. The main factor

of social stability was in their view an orderly family, with gender roles clearly defined: the father the head of the family, responsible for the material well-being of all, and the mother a support for husband and children.

- Or finally when one parent was left alone, after a divorce or the death of a parent, or in case of a disabling illness of a parent.

Today the social taboos are broken and we have a much more realistic view of the conditions in families. We know now that alcoholism, neglect, abuse and violence occur in *all* social classes to the same extent.

7. Yet another reality: how much worth was a child?

One last reality of that time has to do with the status of children in society. Lloyd de Mause wrote 1974 (The History of Childhood): “The history of childhood is a nightmare that we are only now waking up from.” He describes how children have always been treated like objects from the ancient times on. Up to the 19th century they had been murdered, given away, tormented, or exploited in many a hard labour, for ex. on building sites, as mine workers, chimney sweeps etc.

It is amazing how quickly our views on childhood have turned to the reverse. Within only 100 years, the obligation to control and chastise children has receded and empathy and care are being advocated. De Mause notes at the end of his study that this change of attitude towards childhood has occurred at a different pace in different cultures and countries, and interestingly even within the same country.

With this in mind, it seems likely that the rural areas of CH have long been enclaves of a past time where social order was based on strict norms (with regard to religion and gender roles) and values (such as work, obedience, community). It is a fact that up to now the world of farmers has always been different from the urban areas, that they *claim* their difference, and that the farmers’ lobby is one of the most influential conservative forces in Switzerland.

If the farmers had themselves been raised according to a brutally rigid set of moral rules, they may have seen in the contract children a fair game and a welcome outlet to their own frustrations.

8. Who done it? Who was it then?

Most of those who have told their stories are clear: the guardians are responsible for their ordeal. The guardians were assigned by law to look after the children and make sure that they grew up in a ‘healthy and morally sound’ environment, quote. But the survivors tell another story: the guardians never questioned the children confidentially, never came without announcing their visits in advance, and they never said a word for the sake of the children. And when they happened to move the children to another farm, they would not tell them the reason.

The guardians were in fact shutting their eyes on what was happening. They kept silent on what they heard, covered up and were the accomplices of the farmers.

What were their reasons, apart from belonging to the same community? At this point, nobody has an answer. None of the guardians is left to testify and their files have apparently been destroyed.

The historians for their part point at others, they point at the local authorities. *They* were the decision makers and they were deaf to "the children weeping", as Elisabeth Barrett-Browning put it in 1843 in her series of poems called "The Cry of the Children" (in: de Mause). Even after 1978, after a new law had been voted to put an end to the practice of child labour and regulate foster care, even then the authorities took their time. Organized child labor stopped only in 1981.

And what about the whole community? What about the teachers, ministers, policemen, village authorities, doctors, neighbours, all of them went with it or profited by it? The general, silent consensus obviously exonerated them of any moral responsibility and pushed instead the guilt for being "wrong" and at fault onto the victims.

Imagine: What they did was 'normal' in their view. You really have to stretch your imagination to envision that such cruel treatments of helpless children were deemed normal.

Since my lecture in 2013 new things have come to light and a lot has happened.

Once the silence was broken in the 1990ies, the exhibition *Stolen Childhood* and the film *The Contract Boy* were shown, and once the victims started to speak about 10 years later, things accelerated.

Other victims of so-called coercive welfare measures had also started to speak and tell of the wrong done to them at that time. They had revealed how the verdicts "dissolute," "spoiled," or "work-shy," or the psychiatric diagnoses "libidinous" or "psychopathic" allowed the authorities to send them for years without any judicial proceedings to prison or to religious educational institutions where they were ill-treated and sometimes sexually abused. Or they were sent to psychiatric hospitals where they were forcibly sterilized or castrated. Here again, the morally colored judgments were directed solely against the socially weakest.

(4 pics Louissette)

These victims of coercive measures were obviously less psychically damaged than most former contract children. They had suffered and been ostracized later in their lives. And some of them were strong enough to fight back. In 2014, they demonstrated, published their portraits and claimed their rights. They demanded their rehabilitation, public recognition of the wrong done and the creation of a solidarity fund.

(3 pics)

In 2016 after a tough fight they finally got the government to offer a fund of 300 million Swiss francs, with 25,000 francs granted to every victim. The governments of Ireland and Sweden had long since paid high compensations for the ill-treatments of institutionalized and foster children.

(1 pic)

In retrospect, the researchers note what, 30 years after child labor and other coercive measures had been stopped, marked the turn in the public opinion. The trigger was the publication of the stories of women who had been incarcerated in their teens, as usual without any judicial proceedings, just for being pregnant out of marriage. The mindset had changed by the time and come a long way from stigmatizing female sexuality and the practice of coercive welfare was no longer perceived as normal but on the contrary as cruel and arbitrary.

This sad story has come to an end. But this kind of banal evil can happen anytime anywhere. Here we are back at the warnings of Jung, Mitscherlich and others, against our tendency to follow the common opinions and blindly adhere to the mainstream, to whatever is considered "normal". The thing is, we have a fine sense for what is 'not normal'. And we tend 'naturally' and most easily to project whatever is unsuitable, rejected, frightening within us on to the weakest, who may be the poor, the illegal residents, the refugees, the sexually maladjusted etc.

For Jung, as well as for Erich Neumann, who dealt intensively with the collective shadow in the Western world, we are not supposed to overcome our inner demons. Firstly because nobody can. And secondly, because nobody should. Our inner struggles with our inconvenient impulses constitute our psychic flexibility. Neumann insists on the value of our shadow, on its huge potential of renewal, individually and collectively. But.

But you have to watch it! This story shows how terribly human the whole thing is, I mean: how easily social exclusion and scapegoating can occur - when a collective shadow is being projected onto people we look down on.

Appendix

Brief history of children welfare and foster care in CH

1877	Factory Law: against work of children under 14 (only in factories!)
1903 -1974	numerous autobiographical books and lobbying by Carl Albert Loosli
1912	Law for protection of children, increase of institutional placements on a large scale
1915	47'000 foster and contract children Growing needs for labour force in agriculture
1920	20 % labour forces in agriculture are children under 15
1928	authorizations for foster care, control by canton and municipalities.
1944-6	Emma Moor's testimony as a court clerk (Gerichtssaal spricht) 1 st public scandals : Sonnenberg ob Kriens, Kandersteg, Madiswil, « Die Nation », Peter Surava & Paul Senn. Rathausen, guardian.
1950	Foster Children Action (PACH)
1960ies	Growing number of biographies by former foster children
1976	new Children's Rights
1978	Law about Regulation of Foster Care Gradual implementation in cantons
1981	end of child labor and coercive welfare measures
1990ies	beginning of historical research, exhibition "Stolen Childhood"
2004	public call for testimonies by former contract children 1 st meeting of former contract children, Nov. 2004, Glattbrugg. Start of 1 st research project on foster care in canton BE (oral history, 270 interviews, archives, media) (2004-8)
2005	Federal Council: no need for national research on welfare policy (CH 18.5.05).
2008	Meetings of national institutions, cantons and foster children's association (PACH) to clarify the need for national guidelines and new regulation of foster care.
2010	Film "The Contract Boy" (Der Verdingbub), Markus Imboden Apologies by Federal Councillor Evelyne Widmer-Schlumpf for the coercive welfare measures in Hindelbank
2012	touring exhibition "Contract Children Speak" with testimonies by contract children and public debates with them. 2 nd historical report on children's conditions in educational institutions 1930-1970 in canton LU Call of a group of 30 researchers in sociology, history, psychology (among them Verena Kast) for a round table with political authorities, associations and institutions in order to discuss financial reparation and a national coordination of the various projects so as to obtain a comprehensive view of all coercive welfare measures and placements. The history of this once common practice, they argue, has been already worked on by historians in different European countries.
11.4.2013	Memorial Day for victims of coercive welfare measures. Apologies by Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga for coercive welfare measures and placements of children and youngsters (child labor in farms, abuse in educational institutions, forced sterilisation and castrations and abortions,

emprisonment, forced psychiatric treatment and experiments). Ombudsperson on national level, hotlines in all cantons. Start of historical research on national scale (no statistical data!).

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