

Swiss grapple with history of forced child labor

FRANK JORDANS - Associated Press (AP)

Thursday, November 24, 2011

LA-CHAUX-DE-FONDS, Switzerland (AP) — Michel Frene vividly recalls his childhood on a farm in Courtelary, a village in the foothills of Switzerland's Jura mountains. There were cows, lush fields, even a nearby chocolate factory.

Most of all, he remembers the 220-pound (100-kilo) bags of wheat he hauled on his back, the Red Cross donated clothes, the animal dung that clung to his body from spraying fertilizer with a leaking hose.

"I was just wearing thin overalls, I had no socks, no briefs and I was wet and cold," he recalls. "I was dripping with manure, it was horrible."

Frene was one of hundreds of thousands of Swiss children taken from their parents and sent to work on farms from the early 1800s until the 1960s, a period in which Switzerland was transformed from a rural backwater into a wealthy and modern society. Many of the so-called *Verdingkinder* — or "contract children" — experienced emotional, physical and sexual abuse at the hands of those who were meant to care for them.

Now pressure is mounting on the government to grant compensation and an official apology to the dwindling number of surviving victims. Authorities are planning an event next year to commemorate their suffering, a first possible step toward healing.

"They stole our childhood," Frene, a 68-year-old retired watchmaker, told The Associated Press in an interview at his home in the western Swiss town of La-Chaux-de-Fonds.

Officially, children were only taken away from parents who were too poor to properly care for them. In practice, historians say, authorities also targeted the children of single mothers and others whom they considered to have fallen into "moral destitution."

"If a family didn't meet society's expectations then they quickly ran the risk that their children would be taken away," said Ruedi Weidmann, a Zurich historian. "Unmarried, divorced or widowed mothers could rarely keep their children."

In Frene's case, both parents were alive but considered unsuited to raise him and his five siblings. The mother wanted little to do with her children, and the father's long hours as a porter meant they were neglected at home.

Foster families, and in some cases orphanages, were meant to provide the children

with food and schooling in return for a small sum from the authorities. But in rural Switzerland, where machines didn't displace manual work until well into the 20th century, the children were just seen as cheap labor. Some authorities would hold public auctions where the bidder who asked the lowest fee for taking the children would win.

Boys worked in the field, while girls were made to cook and clean. Many recount being clothed in rags and living off scraps the family wouldn't eat. Forced to work the fields, few children were able to complete an education, leaving them unable to pursue anything but menial jobs in later life.

"We were always on the farm. We didn't do much at school. There was always work to be done, even in the winter," said Frene. He didn't learn to write until he got married and his wife taught him.

Surviving contract children including Frene also recount beatings and sexual abuse. Those who tried to flee were threatened with institutions — little more than prisons — and suicide rates were high, according to historians. A recent feature film "Der Verdingbub" — The Contract Boy — portraying the abuse suffered by one youngster at the hands of a farming community has sparked outrage in Switzerland.

"The film doesn't show the worst of it, but the victims say it's very realistic," said its director, Markus Imboden. "There are many damaged people who are still suffering the effects of what was done to them."

Authorities at the time regarded the children as an economic problem, not individuals in need of protection, said Jacqueline Fehr, a lawmaker with the Social Democratic Party who has campaigned on behalf of victims.

"It wasn't just individual farmers or authorities who failed," she said. "It was an attitude of the whole Swiss society that needs to be re-examined."

The Swiss Justice Ministry acknowledged to the AP that the number of living victims may be as high as 30,000. Plans are being drawn up for an event early next year to recognize the history of the contract children, said Justice Ministry spokesman Folco Galli.

"The main purpose is to provide moral redress for these persons, not financial compensation," he said in an emailed statement, without providing details.

But many say official recognition isn't enough.

Historians calculate that each surviving contract child could be owed an average of 120,000 Swiss francs (\$130,000) for unpaid labor alone. Based on Justice Ministry estimates of the number of living victims, that could amount to a bill of up to 3.6 billion franc (\$3.9 billion).

But while Switzerland has previously apologized to victims of forced sterilization and to Jews who couldn't access Holocaust-era bank accounts, financial compensation in those tragedies has been slow in coming.

Former contract children say stigma followed them even after they left the farm.

Thomas Shaw Cooper was born in Quincy, Illinois, in 1925. After his father disappeared when Cooper was a few months old his Swiss mother returned with him to her homeland. When his maternal grandfather died, Cooper was sent to a farm in the mountains outside Bern.

Cooper says he was never beaten and didn't go hungry, although he was forced to work seven days a week looking after animals, clearing the stalls and cutting peat.

"My problems only started when I left," he said at his modest row house in the town of Biel.

"As soon as you say you're a contract boy the question always comes, what did you do. They were convinced that you'd committed a crime," said Cooper. People imagined that contract children had come from 'bad families,' and must therefore be corrupt themselves. "People looked at you like you were a little gangster."

It never occurred to him to challenge the officials who denied him permission to learn a trade. Once a stable boy, always a stable boy, one official, Cooper's legal guardian until he turned 20, told him.

Cooper worked several low-paid jobs all his life, despite showing a talent for engineering that he still pursues today, aged 86. Had he been properly paid for his work on the farm, or allowed to pursue a professional career, life might have been easier, he said.

The film, and a traveling exhibition based on stories such as those of Frene and Cooper, have stirred public debate in Switzerland, adding to pressure for an official apology and a proper examination of the history of the contract children.

"In Switzerland we know exactly how many cows there are at any one time, because they are all tagged. But to this day nobody knows for sure how many children were sent away from their families," said Alexander Leumann, as he guided a group around the exhibition.

Former contract children like Frene say official Swiss recognition of their suffering would be a start.

"I wouldn't say no to damages but what's more important to me is the apology," he said. "What's missing is that the authorities acknowledge they made a mistake."

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Exhibition about Switzerland's "contract children" in Zurich, through April 1, 2012:
<http://www.verdingkinderreden.ch/>



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