

Press release

July 2024

Experiences of Switzerland – Forced fostering

Up until the 1980s, many children in Switzerland were taken away from their parents or other caregivers and placed either in institutions or with foster or adoptive families, where many were subjected to violence and abuse. In a video installation, ten witnesses tell their personal stories.

It was only in the 21st century that a dark chapter of Swiss history came to light: state intervention in the lives of people who failed to conform to social standards through so-called enforced welfare measures. The interventions affected not only adults, but also hundreds of thousands of children and teenagers up until the 1980s. They were taken away from their parents or other caregivers – often against their will – and placed in institutions or with foster families. In many cases the experience caused a great deal of suffering and left lasting emotional scars, due to physical, psychological or sexual abuse.

The forced fostering of children and teenagers in Switzerland is the theme of the second edition of 'Experiences of Switzerland' at the National Museum Zurich. The format does not involve objects, opting instead for a large-format and immersive projection relaying sound through headphones as well as a station that places the subject in its cultural historical context. It centres on accounts by ten contemporary witnesses.

One of these is Armin (*1927), who recounts how his unmarried mother had to give him up for adoption. Armin spent some time at the children's home in Thalwil before being placed with a foster family for two years. However, for cost reasons, he was then sent to the 'Sonnenberg' reform school in Kriens, Lucerne, where he and other boys were subjected to physical and psychological punishment. Armin was only able to take ownership of his own life at the age of 17.

Uschi (*1952) suffered an equally harrowing fate. After being taken away from her Yenish mother, she was sent to foster families, children's homes and reform schools like Armin. After years of abuse, she was raped by her uncle at the age of 14. While he escaped without punishment, Uschi was sent to the reform school 'zum Guten Hirten' in Altstätten, St Gallen. Over 3,500 pages of documents testify

to the prejudice directed towards Yenish people by the authorities and by staff in the institutions.

The ten witnesses represent hundreds of thousands of victims in Switzerland. People from all parts of the country were chosen for the interviews. They are all people who have spoken out about their experiences before. It takes courage to talk about difficult or traumatic experiences in front of a camera. Their accounts and their involvement are therefore crucial in coming to terms with what happened and asserting the rights of victims.

The subject of coercive welfare measures and forced fostering has been explored by researchers in recent years. The National Research Programme 76 'Welfare and coercion' (NRP 76), which looks at the impact of welfare and coercion in past, present and future, is one such example. As a next step, the Federal Office of Justice will initiate and support projects to disseminate the findings of the research. This will include a national travelling exhibition, which will open at the Musée Historique in Lausanne and visit a number of other locations up until the end of 2027. The current installation at the National Museum Zurich is not linked to this travelling exhibition, but plays a part in recounting this chapter of Swiss history.

The video installation will be open to visitors at the National Museum Zurich from 5 July to 27 October 2024, and from 17 January to 13 April 2025.

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