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The trauma of Switzerland's morality detentions

By Imogen Foulkes
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Swiss victims of a practice known as "administrative detention" are calling for an official investigation, and possible compensation for those who suffered it.

Administrative detention was aimed primarily at young men and women, usually teenagers, who were judged by their parents and communities to be socially difficult.

The decision to send someone into administrative detention was made by the local politicians of the young person's home town or village, not by social workers or the police.

The practice continued until 1981. Today, many of those who experienced it say they were unjustly sent to prison without having committed any crime, and without a trial or any form of legal support.

Giving birth in prison

Ursula Biondi, now aged 60, was placed in administrative detention in 1967.

"I was 17 when I was sent to prison," she remembers. "I was pregnant, in the fifth month. In those days in Switzerland it was forbidden to have a baby without being married."

Ursula's mother was worried about her daughter, who had run away with the father of her child, a divorced man several years older than Ursula herself.

So she approached the Zurich authorities and asked for support in encouraging her daughter to live a more upstanding life. The authorities advised a closed "care centre" where, they said, Ursula would be taught life skills, including how to look after her baby.

In fact, Ursula was sent, for an "indefinite period" to Hindelbank prison, Switzerland's largest detention facility for women.

"I was sent to jail without trial, without having committed any crime, without even being given a hearing, nothing," she says.

"And the thing was, in this jail, we were treated exactly the same as the prisoners, but the prisoners had more rights, they knew when they would be released, but we didn't know when we would get out."

Ursula was eventually released after a year, but not before she was forced to give birth in prison.

The authorities put her newborn son up for adoption. After three months during which she had no idea where her son was and much protesting - "I screamed all the time," remembers Ursula - she managed to get him back.

'Work-shy and immoral'

Gina Rubeli, 58, has a similar tale to tell. In 1969, aged 17, she rebelled against the conservatism of her small, devoutly Catholic village and against the wishes of her father, who told her she had to leave school and get a job as a hairdresser - Gina had hoped to continue in education.

"I was a teenager, and I rebelled," she says. "I simply did not want to obey my father anymore. And you have to remember life was much stricter then.

"But I remember 1969 very well. Seeing the first man on the moon was one of my last days of freedom."

On the advice of the village mayor at the time, Gina was sent first to a psychiatric clinic, then it was decided she too would go to Hindelbank for an "indefinite period".

"I became hysterical," she remembers. "They gave me a tranquiliser shot and I woke up in Hindelbank."

Stories like these appear shocking today but it is estimated tens of thousands of young Swiss men and women were detained in this way. At one point, more than half the

inmates of Hindelbank prison were not criminals at all, but teenaged girls in "administrative care".

Swiss journalist Dominique Strebel has spent years researching the issue and has now published a book about it. He hopes it will draw attention to a period of Swiss history which until now has rarely been discussed.

"I was shocked that 30 years ago in Switzerland women were put in jail just for being pregnant and unmarried," he said. "And they couldn't even go court to appeal against that."

However, Dominique's research shows that administrative detention did not only affect young women.

"There was a 16-year-old boy who didn't fit into the working world of Switzerland," he says.

"He started one apprenticeship and left it, then another one and left. His dream was to be a sailor, and he went to Germany, he even managed to get a job on a ship, but then the German authorities found out he was too young, so they took him back to the border, and there the authorities from his home town were waiting. They took him and put him in jail."

The pattern that emerges, he says, is of a society wishing to punish those who disobeyed the social rules of the time.

"The people this happened to just didn't fit into the moral ideas of sexuality or working attitude, that's all," he adds.

"In law they called them 'work-shy' or said they had 'loose morals'."

Government apology

The publication of Ms Strebel's book and the decision by many of those who were detained to speak openly about their experiences have spurred the Swiss government into action.

Last week, Switzerland's justice minister publicly apologised to the victims of administrative detention, saying the apology should be seen as an act of "moral reparation".

But although the apology has been welcomed, many say the damage caused by administrative detention requires something more substantial than just saying sorry.

Many of those who were detained still live in financially difficult circumstances, because having a prison record at such a young age permanently damaged their employment chances.

Some young women - those deemed to have "loose morals" - were forcibly sterilised, and nearly all of the detainees were forced to work, without pay, during their time in prison.

At the same time, their parents were charged for their children's time in detention because it was regarded as re-education rather than as the imprisonment of a criminal, for which the state would have paid.

Ursula Biondi's mother, for example, received a bill for 7,000 Swiss francs, a small fortune at the time.

"For me it was and is a scandal," says Ursula. "I think they should admit it was wrong, and they should admit there are thousands and thousands of people, aged between 55 and 90, who are suffering, we are here, but we still suffer."

"We need profound historical research into this," adds Dominique Strebel.

"And the results need to be in our museums, in our history books, and they need to be taught in our schools, so that we all know about this dark period in Swiss history.

"I think that's important. It's the ground for solving the problems of today, to know what we did wrong, and to not make the same mistakes again."

