

Nordrach – A French nursery (1947-1949)

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After the capitulation of the "Third Reich" in 1945, the French occupation zone (ZFO) in Germany – as with every occupied territory throughout history – saw the birth of children whose fathers were occupiers and whose mothers were local women. In all of the regions of the ZFO – Württemberg-Hohenzollern, South Baden and Rheinland Pfalz – there were an estimated 15 000 to 20 000 of these children of the occupation in total, most of them raised by their mothers in spite of material difficulties. Some of them, however, could not withstand the pressure of their community and of society, and consented to giving them up for adoption. On their end, from 1946 onwards, French authorities had been practicing the highly topical pro-natalist ideas of the time and reached out to these mothers directly, in the hopes of moving them to give up these children "with French blood". By signing a "protocol of the transferral of a child to the French authorities", the mother relinquished all rights to the child and accepted their adoption.

A place steeped with history

The child was then entrusted to one of the French nurseries, the most important of which was located in the village of Nordrach, in the Black Forest, in a building from the late 19th century. The Rothschild Foundation had bought this property in 1905 to set up a sanatorium for Jewish patients in the fresh air of the Black Forest. In 1942, the Nazis used it to create a facility for the *Lebensborn* programme, which aimed to develop a perfect "Aryan race" through the selection of children. In 1945, the building served as a military hospital. Finally, in 1947, the French occupation authorities set up a large nursery (150 beds) to care for the children who had been given up by their mothers to be adopted by French families. Many of them were in poor health upon arrival, but usually returned to a normal level of development after some time.

Children up for adoption in France

As soon as children were admitted to Nordrach, steps were taken towards their adoption in France. Adoption agencies were tasked with finding adoptive parents and transferring the children to France. The head of the Nordrach nursery was particularly active: "these children have been abandoned. France has taken them into its care a bit like public welfare [sic]", "I would be happy to see these little ones – those who are healthy and well – go to chosen families". Indeed, the children were examined and selected before adoption. The mixed-race children – many French occupying soldiers being from Africa – were difficult to place in metropolitan France, in spite of the Nordrach director's efforts. Refused by the French agencies, some of them were sent to orphanages in the colonial possessions in Africa. The children displaying developmental delays were not offered up for adoption. They were instead returned to their mothers, sometimes on the grounds that the French authorities could not be certain that their fathers were French. The French authorities were well aware of an unfortunate consequence of this: "the massive restitution [of children] to the German mothers [...] will inevitably provoke discontent and spread this idea that the French government is practicing racism such as could be seen at the height of the Nazi regime".

The turning point of 1949

The manner in which the French occupying administration organised the giving up and adoption of the children clearly illustrates the unequal relations between an occupying force and a vanquished, occupied and stateless country. The French authorities acted as they pleased in the ZFO, but the restoration of a German state in May 1949 with the creation of the Federal Republic of Germany changed matters: "the political inconveniences, when it comes to the German side, are increasing". Faced with these difficulties, the Nordrach

nursery was closed in November 1949. One year later, the operation of the giving up and adoption of children, "more delicate each day", was brought to an end; all that remained was to cover it up.

Archives for history

The children born of the occupation were registered at birth by the *Jugendämter* (German social services), while the French state handled the transferral to its archives of the files of the children who were adopted in France: "There would therefore be no trace remaining in Germany of the children's origins." This quiet operation was successful, as all the papers relating to these adoptions can be found in the archives of the French occupation in Germany, preserved at the Diplomatic archives at La Courneuve, near Paris.

There is a paradoxical effect to this dissimulation: the adopted children of the time are septuagenarians today, including some who, having learned of their personal history very late, are turning to the French archives, which were supposed to seal their secret away, in order to have information on their backgrounds. By cross-referencing the sources, it can be estimated that around 1 500 children born to German mothers were adopted in France. Many of them had been taken in by the Nordrach nursery, which remains the symbol of a very particular relationship between France and Germany.

Further reading

Denéchère, Yves, « Des adoptions d'État : les enfants de l'occupation française en Allemagne, 1945-1952 », *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, 57 (2010) 2, p. 159-179.

Tout a commencé par un baiser. Les relations germano-alliées après 1945, catalogue de l'exposition du Musée des Alliés, Berlin, 2005.

Satjukow, Silke, Gries, Rainer, « Bankerte! » *Besatzungskinder in Deutschland nach 1945*, Francfort/M., 2015.