

Castle of Hindelbank
"Event - Moral reparation"
10 September 2010

We who were under public guardianship of “between 1942-1981” have been penalised for a lifetime with the stigma “Hindelbank inmate”. We who were under public guardianship bear the stigma of having been in prison, of having “done time”. And yet we had never committed any offence. It has marked us for life.

We are now asking to be “de-stigmatised”, which is why a public apology is essential. However, this alone is not enough: we who were under public guardianship in the period 1942-1981 were, in contrast to criminals, not even able to justify ourselves before the court, but were rather handed over to the authorities without any protection. We were also not granted our right to a court hearing and a substantiated decision.

It was fatal, as has been evident in my life to date, that the “educational institution” and the women’s prison were situated in the same buildings and also had the same names.

In 1967, when I was 17 years old and in the fifth month of pregnancy, I was put into “administrative care” at the Hindelbank Women’s Prison. Translation: I was incarcerated. This experience marked me for my entire life.

Eight years ago, for therapeutic reasons, I wrote a book about what I suffered through in my youth, in order to free myself from my trauma. I then could only come to the conclusion that the arbitrariness of the public authorities of those times was simply not believed to have existed. It couldn’t be true that it had been possible in Switzerland to incarcerate people who committed no crime, without a conviction, together with dangerous criminals.

After experiencing many rebuffs from the media, my final cry for help went to the “Beobachter” at the beginning of 2008. Fortunately, Mr. Dominique Strebél took my story seriously. He did some research, published my story and called others who had been affected by the same arbitrariness to come forward. From that moment on everything started to move: In the newspapers, on TV and in other media. Politicians, both male and female, also took an interest. Here I would especially like to mention Swiss National Councillor Jacqueline Fehr.

To repeat: We who were put into “administrative care” carry the stigma of having been in prison, of having “done time”. However, we were never delinquent.

I have carried this shame with me for decades and due to this I have experienced unbearable rage at the authorities whose arbitrariness left me unprotected at the mercy of society. I was *one victim among thousands who had the same experience*.

Let us remember here all of the young men and women who were put into “administrative care” from 1942 to 1981 in the Hindelbank Women’s Prison. Let us also not forget the young men and women who were incarcerated in other Swiss institutions and prisons in those times for “social education”! Many of them have long since carried this dark secret with them into the grave.

We have (the victims) established the following:

1. The behaviour of the authorities, the head of the institution and some of the warders was injurious to human dignity for no reason and constitutes a clear misuse of power.
2. These psychological injuries have developed a destructive effect across generations – those of us who are affected still suffer as a result.

My plea – which I also make on behalf of everyone else affected – is directed to the judiciary and to society:

Do not let anything like this happen again!

The unconditional preservation of human dignity must be the supreme law.

This applies in particular to the police. They must perform their duties without judgment or discrimination.

It is not the duty of staff in reform schools or prisons to pass judgment or to punish. They are there to protect, care for and nurture.

This requirement also applies to other institutions such as schools, psychiatric centres, hospitals and homes for the elderly.

Wherever human beings are placed in the care of other human beings, particular attention must be given to the preservation of human dignity. There needs to be a contact point in Switzerland for people who feel that their human dignity is being threatened.

Of course, it is not only the authorities who are to blame. Also at fault are those individuals who exerted and abused their power over those at their mercy who were dependent on them.

If we want to be able to keep a better check on guardianship authorities, young people and children must have the right to involve an independent solicitor when it comes to important issues such as placement in an institution. We need a children's solicitor of this kind – as indeed our fate has shown.

It is also simply scandalous that, even today, blameless young people who have been institutionalised for their protection are housed in the same institutions as those with criminal convictions. Simply because there is not enough money for separate institutions.

We (the victims) appeal to the social conscience of the individual. Every citizen has a social responsibility and needs to be aware of this. –

I should like to say **THANK YOU** from the bottom of my heart to all those people who have helped me again and again to carry my cross – which often threatened to overwhelm me – through all my self-doubt, mistrust and impatience. –

21 April 1967 to 29 April 1968

Ursula Biondi – 5 months pregnant at 17 years of age, in administrative care at the women's prison from - one of thousands of victims of the arbitrariness of the authorities of the time 1942-1981 in Switzerland.