

ENDURING EVIL

As Trump separates families, legacy of children stolen by Nazis haunts Germany

A trial by a victim of Nazi Germany's policy of abducting "Aryan"-looking children in occupied Eastern Europe shows the lasting pain suffered by families torn apart by cruel governments.



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June 22, 2018 6:05 pm



Early victims of an inhumane policy. Source: DPA

After weeks of outcry both in the United States and abroad, Donald Trump backtracked on the most abhorrent part of his controversial “zero tolerance” policy on illegal immigration. With the stroke of a pen, he ended the systematic separation of migrant families caught crossing the border with Mexico.

But the fate of thousands of victims caught this way before Mr. Trump’s reversal is unclear. Some of the separated children may never be reunited with their parents.

By coincidence, a trial taking place in Germany this week shows the lasting damage caused by a similar Nazi policy decades ago. The plaintiff, Hermann Lüdeking, is suing the German government for a crime committed in the early 1940s. As Nazi Germany occupied much of Europe, the SS kidnapped hundreds of thousands of blond-haired, blue-eyed children who fit the regime’s [racist](#) ideals. The children were brought into “assimilation camps” where they were “Germanized,” robbed of their identities and eventually given up for adoption to loyal Nazi couples.

A forged birth certificate

Though it did not aim to [crack down on illegal immigration](#), one crucial aspect of the Nazi policy was identical to the American one: Uniformed officials snatched toddlers from their parents. Many of those children never saw their real families again. Estimates vary, but it is usually stated that up to 400,000 “Aryan”-looking children were taken from their families in Eastern Europe and Nazi-occupied Norway. Half of all the abductions took place in Poland.

Mr. Lüdeking belongs to the rapidly dwindling contingent of survivors of this wartime atrocity. He was 6 years old when the Germans abducted him. He still remembers the day when, months later, “an elegant woman with a hat” turned up at his Nazi-run orphanage and chose him. From then on, Maria Lüdeking, a senior member of a Nazi women’s organization, was his “mother.” Some 76 years later, her “son” is still fighting for justice.

Schäuble’s shrug

Mr. Lüdeking doesn’t know for sure what his real name is, but it certainly is not Hermann Lüdeking. He found his Nazi adoption paperwork, which referred to him as Roman Roszantowski, born in Poland in 1936. But even that birth name probably is fake. The Nazis were good at covering their tracks, and post-war Germany was all too eager to sweep war crimes under the carpet.

It is likely that 82-year old Mr. Lüdeking will never discover for certain his real name and family history. But he wants compensation from Germany for his ordeal — and above all, official recognition as a victim of Nazi crimes. But that’s proving problematic, even in today’s Germany, a country more anxious than most to right [the wrongs of the past](#). He has been lobbying German authorities since 2003.



A stolen childhood: Hermann Lüdeking with his German adoptive mother. Source: Geraubte Kinder, vergessene Opfer e.V

A decade later, none other than [Wolfgang Schäuble](#), the influential finance minister in Chancellor Angela Merkel's previous cabinet, dismissed Mr. Lüdeking's petition. "The fate of a child kidnapped for 'forced Germanization' meets, as such, none of the criteria of an offense under the reparations statutes," Mr. Schäuble said.

And so in 2015, Mr. Lüdeking, aided by a war victims' association, started legal proceedings. Unlike many victims of Nazi crimes, Mr. Lüdeking has powerful evidence documenting his case. But it took until this week for a hearing to finally take place. He described his case on Thursday in an administrative court in Cologne. "It's clear that the authorities are dragging their feet," said Christoph Schwarz, who chairs a charity group called Stolen Children, Forgotten Victims. "They know the claimants are elderly, and in a few years, well, there will be no claimants left," he told Handelsblatt Global.

Legal precedent

The two-hour hearing left the plaintiff crestfallen. The verdict is pending and will be mailed to him in three weeks, but the court said the authorities were probably right to disregard his petition, despite the presiding judge admitting Mr. Lüdeking had "suffered grave injustice." There is a fair chance that the lawsuit will be dismissed. But if this is the case, Mr. Lüdeking will appeal. "I'm stubborn," he told reporters after the hearing.

A court decision in favor of Mr. Lüdeking would set a legal precedent obliging Germany to compensate anyone who has suffered a similar fate and is a German citizen today. But since many of the victims are not even aware that they were stolen as children, and many others left Germany after the war — or died —, few claimants are left. The Stolen Children charity supports just four victims in Germany and another 150 in Slovenia. "They were never organized like the victims of Nazi genocides; they never had a lobby fighting for them, so it was easy for Germany to dismiss them," Mr. Schwarz said.

If the US fails to reunite the 2,300 Central American children with their families who tried to cross at the Mexico border, this could end up in courts, much pain and many decades down the line.

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