

## THE SCHOOL :

■ [French text](#)

# *The stages of the life of a children's home*

## *1941-1949*

(Text by Yvonne Hagnauer)

An old town with fleur-de-lis decorated balconies, whose Main Street ploughs a blackish furrow and whose tortuous alleys rise to the assault of the hills: Sèvres; a place, squalid and delightful at the same time, swarming with life, popular in its old cracking houses, and sheltering behind the noble facades of its teachers' training college, a thought both fertilizing and generous.

At the top of a street which winds like a pass, on a patch of ground where still remains the stub of an old tower which, it is said, dates back to the Armagnacs, in a street which bears the name of a lieutenant of the "Maid of Orléans", rises a block of buildings without style, cast any old how at random needs, at first an old grey roughcast suburban house, perched like a look-out post, then buildings with terraces and a big unpretentious brick house.

It used to be, in recent past already, a stopping place and a rest place: nuns wearing the white clerical dress of the Oblates, would arrive from all over the world, to gather new strength on the native ground, for new departures.

Then came the flight of cornets and then, the war with its grey and silent processions, and the "Croix-Bosset" lane, as sad as a calvary, as narrow and muddy as the gallery of an ant-hill drilled in the hillock, saw children with their few belongings, in noisy wooden clogs climb up the unsteady stairs...

An old door, never closed, that one pushes to enter, and here is the stopping place, until the departure for the life that one will have to start with a new and confident soul this time.

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The Home opened in 1941, it was inaugurated by **Training centres specialized in the methods of Active Pedagogy. Laborde and Mademoiselle de Faily** held their first trainings there and it seemed that the impulse was then given.

The first summer camp opened there; the premises were no doubt a little cramped, the garden was not very large, but the belt of woods nearby surrounded the house with the mystery favourable to the rambles of teenagers...

In October 1941 only did our team of educators discover the big quiet building which would become *Our home*. We immediately saw how we could put to good use the cells of the nuns, the big chapel paved in grey which would become our ward, and we duly appreciated, the whitewashed walls, the bare rooms, as we had known summer camps set up in manor houses; emblazoned gates, coffered ceilings, and the shocking contrast between the campbed and the useless and anachronistic magnificence of the place. Didn't we have the changing magnificence of the hills which stretch their long softened hilltops onto the horizon, the deep woods and the leaden touch of Corot's ponds under the willows ?

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The miseries arrived in successive waves, each one as a distinctive deposit, different from the preceding one, as if the stream of the war abandoned in a merciless hierarchy the sufferings and the turpitude which it carried in its bosom.

Our first boarders were quite naturally the children whose parents had not come to take them home at the end of the summer camp, either because they had lost interest in them or because they had left for Germany. This first *clientele* of children's homes was composed of the human wrecks of a soulless proletariat which had not settled down since the exodus. The summer camp which we had just run in Charny had shown us some striking examples of it: absconders to whom the exodus had revealed the risky and violent pleasures of pilfering and adventure, children of unstable and never satisfied drunkards, tough leaders who bore in them the instinct of the gang and who were frightened by a somewhat organized community...

Their physiological miseries and their defects were such that it became necessary, after the attempt of specialised classes, to direct some of them to specialised centres. The others left as they had come, everlasting rovers, doing the rounds (as we noticed later) of the children's homes and lodging centres, without ever settling down in any. One of them, who was our boarder in 1946 had not, in five years' time, been to less than seven homes, and had thus done his "tour de France" without much intellectual and moral benefit.

1942-43: the others arrived. In 1943, they made up two thirds of the child population of the Home, those who came up the lane hugging the walls, those who were taken in during a favourable "black out" and who kept for months their walled-in faces of hunted children, unfamiliar with their assumed names, living, at first, with the terrifying urge of running away to be set free.

These made up the permanent hard core of our Home and brought an element of indisputable wealth: first because we had now become "their" family and, with the flexibility of mind and ability to assimilate that characterized them, they felt the need to settle down; then because they came from all over Europe, nay, from the ghettos and concentration camps as well, and thus brought through their variety all the human elements a child community can wish for: enthusiasm, a taste for culture, slight differences and oppositions of characters so rich that our work as educators was made more alive and more attractive.

The third wave which came up against our walls brought a mosaic of cases - children suffering from emotional confusion (the aftermath of war), children maladjusted after the storm, orphans - all social cases to be studied individually and whose stability can only be secured by individualized care in every field.

May we here be forgiven for going off the subject to add a few words about a change of the social conception of childhood.

Before the war, the prevailing concept of either/or was hardly questionable. There was either the a-priori perfect and indisputable **domestic cell** (and some bodies or social classes have not given up the idea yet) or, if the family was lacking, there was the **boarding-school** and for the maladjusted or rebellious child, the **reformatory**.<sup>\*</sup> Not until the war and its turpitude, the disappearance or abjection (more visible than in normal times) of the domestic cell, was it possible to admit the need for children's homes as well as the generous (although still a little artificial) conception of **children's communities** ("**Villages d'enfants**").

Our Home functioned all through the war and the German Occupation with its 80, and later 100 children, its staff struck down by Vichy or resistant to its laws, in an atmosphere of eager research and creation, enhanced by the mystery of our life, so isolated behind grey walls and a curtain of thick trees.

True, our life was not a quiet one: problems with providing fresh supplies, which threw the bursar and myself on the bombed roads of Sully-sur-Loire, which forced us to pull up by night, in the fields around Tours, the tons of carrots which would make up much of our winter food; problems of admission into hospitals for the children with a fake civil status; worries caused by the unexpected visits of representatives sent by the Commissioner for Jewish Affairs, or by the arrival of some Germans who had seized a lorry filled with our foodstuff; constant nervousness when going down to the shelters, fortunately situated in our house (they were, it is said, an appendix of the Royal Cellars of Sèvres, and formerly one of the secret underground passages from Versailles to Paris).

During that period when life outside would pass dull and sinister, no wonder the efforts of our little team were directed towards research; and no wonder either that the peculiar nature of our boarders and the

deficiencies in their education led us to the "new education" with its effort of individualization in the teaching methods. At that point, several problems arose.

1° **A social and moral concern** : safeguarding the values on which our lives before the war had been built and which were the basis of our culture; that is why we posted, as early as 1942, at the entrance of our Home a sort of proclamation which should - according to us - annihilate all ambiguity. It ran as follows :

### **For a method of New Education: preserve moral values.**

*« The New Education » would only be a technique, more alive and more ingenious than the others, and no more, if its supreme purpose was not the building of man's moral personality, sole condition for the improvement of the society in which he lives. »*

*« The New Education » must therefore make the child aware of the meaning and greatness of his responsibility towards himself and towards the others. Living in teams is the best initiation. It is important that each child in the team should have some responsibilities and that he should carry out freely and by himself the task assigned to him. »*

*« If he has been chosen as "team delegate" **he is at all times accountable for his actions to his peers.** We do not want to take the risk of emptying the team of its deep social meaning by setting up prematurely a hierarchy that might weigh on a maturing conscience. So, the team as we conceive it develops a sense of equality and cooperation. »*

*« But man's little one can create only if he is placed in favourable surroundings, without the constraints which repress his initiative and paralyse his taste for action... He must be given the possibility to act and undertake as he pleases. He is thus **initiated to freedom** at an early age, the freedom without which his creative faculties and the originality of his responsibility die away. »*

2 ° Having made this clear, and in response to the notions of **team** and of **leader** dear to Vichy, after a thorough study of the different methods in use, after visiting many centres where, too often, innovation lay in easy phrases, more gregarious than cooperative, we decided **to give our allegiance to neither school nor sect whatever**, anxious in so doing to respect the personality of the master whom we did not want to deprive of his creative power by condemning him to be the priest in charge of an established cult; and if, in the background, Decroly's serious and sweet face, his rigorous methods of observation guided our teaching, we did not make use of the centres of interest codified by his followers.

As all of us came from state education, we had felt that all there was to do was to widen, individualize and make more flexible the active methods already in use in many country schools. We did not have a nice bourgeois class clientele free from money problems like Decroly's; on leaving our Home the children should be able to attend primary and secondary schools and not be maladjusted, and should be in a position to get a good job to protect their dignity and normalize their lives: the "New School" techniques allowed us to direct them quite naturally towards the right training or trade.

These children - about fifty of them from the heroic period - have grown up. Our Home has attempted to extend in order to follow their development and give them new workshops, new classes... But sheds can only be a temporary solution before the departure for the vaster premises we expected.

After eight years of experiment and research we are threatened by routine and facility. We are aware of it and we try hard to keep young and watchful, with the help of "our children" whose individual problems force us to remain **in a constant and necessary state of salutary anxiety**.

Yvonne HAGNAUER

P. S. — Since the Liberation, our Home has been supported by the Entr'aide française whose breaking-up could have meant the death of our oeuvre. The generous intervention on our behalf of the Director of Education of the Seine Department, the appropriate initiative of the General Council backed up by the action of all our friends, known and unknown, allowed to create an association placed under the control of the Seine Department and subsidized by it.

\* In French, "internat" and "pension" both mean "boarding-school", but the boarders came from

underprivileged social background. "Maison de redressement" and "maison de correction" both mean "reformatory", but the latter was commonly used to stress the punitive aspect of the institution.)



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