

**Excerpt from “Adoptions of Children from Sri Lankan origin in Switzerland, 1973-1997”**

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**Conclusions**

In the case of a young woman who was adopted by a couple in Switzerland in the 1980s, all the statements made in her adoption documents may have been falsified. The young woman found her ‘mother’ in Colombo, or at least the woman whose name is mentioned in the documents and listed as her mother. However, during the young woman’s visit, she realised the ‘mother’ knew nothing about this and was shocked. This Sri-Lankan woman’s personal data had been stolen and used in an adoption decree without her knowledge.

This case shows clearly how the Sri Lankan adoption system was abused in many ways in order to realise the unfulfilled wishes to have children of couples from prosperous western countries, such as Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. To meet this need, a veritable adoption market was created in the second half of the 1970s, controlled by a network of lawyers and agents. Placing Sri Lankan children for adoption became highly lucrative for local operators, given the large differentials in prosperity and income between the countries involved. This encouraged corruption. In the 1980s thousands of Sri Lankan children arrived in European countries under dubious and sometimes illegal circumstances. Between 1973 and 1997, the Swiss authorities provided 950 entry permits for children from Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan authorities tried repeatedly to stop the adoptions because of the irregularities, but they were not successful. It is not clear from the files examined whether Switzerland, for its part, considered stopping the entry of Sri Lankan foster and future adoptive children because of the alarming reports.

The critical media coverage that began in Sri Lanka in 1981 exposed clear cases of child trafficking. This information was not only in the hands of the federal and cantonal authorities; by the spring of 1982, anyone who read a daily newspaper or a weekly magazine knew what was happening. However, for many of those in Switzerland looking to adopt, the child trafficking networks and baby farms that were uncovered were not sufficient reason to abandon their wish to have children. Many of them travelled to Sri Lanka, often without consulting an adoption agency recognised by the authorities. However, using such an agency was certainly no guarantee that the adoption of a Sri Lankan baby was in conformity with the law. It was not unknown for agencies to deceive and swindle adoptive parents.

Indeed it was these recognised adoption agencies in particular that put pressure on the Swiss authorities to process foreign adoptions under more relaxed conditions. The founder of Terre des hommes, Edmond Kaiser, who was already beating the drum for international adoptions in the 1960s, lobbied for international adoptions in Bern in the 1970s. Furthermore, the adoption agent Alice Honegger from St. Gallen, together with the Christian Democrat parliamentarian Edgar Oehler, also from St. Gallen, persuaded the Swiss Federal Migration Office to introduce simplified entry procedures for adoptive children.

What is particularly serious, as revealed by the historical evaluation, is that the federal and cantonal authorities knew early on about the commercial and sometimes illegal nature of the placements. Despite

this, Sri Lankan children were able to enter Switzerland without their biological parents having consented to their adoption.

Alice Honegger's case shows in particular that the responsible supervisory authority allowed her to carry on with her work for decades, even though she had repeatedly faced legal action and continually ignored official orders and prohibitions. The supervisory authority did not react even when a social worker went to the authorities and stated on the record that he could not be held responsible for Honegger's actions in Sri Lanka.

The Swiss authorities were also aware that children were exchanged in Colombo for money, everyday goods and luxury items. People such as Dawn de Silva or the lawyer Rukmani Thavanesan-Fernando, both of whom placed children from Sri Lanka in Switzerland, were part of a corrupt system. Others, including the adoption agent Alice Honegger and, for a short time, Terre des hommes Lausanne, tapped into this system.

The fact that the irregularities were recognised and discussed in Switzerland is illustrated by the fact that officials at the time repeatedly added explicit and cautionary handwritten notes to official documents, and that a dossier labelled 'child trafficking' can be found in the Federal Archives. Switzerland and Sri Lanka did not work together to curb child trafficking. When the chargé d'affaires at the Swiss embassy in Colombo, Claude Ochsenbein, proposed that a Sri Lankan minister be received in Bern for a meeting, the idea was dismissed. Instead, the Swiss Federal Migration Office declined any responsibility for dealing with the matter and referred the problem back to the Swiss representation in Colombo.

An examination of the legislation enacted between 1973 and 1997 has shown that efforts were made to improve the situation of foreign foster and adopted children. However, this was only partially successful. Indeed, when the Ordinance on the Placement of Children in Foster Care was revised in 1988, the new law endorsed a controversial practice. From then on, it was possible to bring children into Switzerland whose personal details had only been provisionally established.

In the adoption cases during the period examined, it was also clear that authorities turned a blind eye to missing or contradictory documents. Although powers were spread very thinly among the cantons, it would have been possible for the authorities to insist on obtaining clear information on a child's origins and the declaration of consent from the biological parents. A careful examination of each case at the time of entry would have been necessary, because if a Sri Lankan child came to Switzerland for adoption, the child would initially live as a foster child with a Swiss family for two years. If, after this time, the adoption was not authorised, it would have been virtually impossible to send the child back to Sri Lanka. To sum up, it has become clear that children were sought for parents and not parents for children.