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This is the published version of a chapter published in *Orphans and foster-children: a historical and cross-cultural perspective*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Tedebrand, L-G. (1996)

Introduction

In: Lars-Göran Tedebrand (ed.), *Orphans and foster-children: a historical and cross-cultural perspective* (pp. 7-10). Umeå: Umeå universitet

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:umu:diva-155801>

## *Introduction*

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Orphans, foundlings and foster-children have far too long been a neglected subject in historical demography and social history. Studies in childhood history, so fruitful and innovative in many other aspects, have only exceptionally focussed on these groups of children. Our knowledge has, with some exceptions, mainly been restricted to the conventional wisdom of textbooks and popular studies when it not has been based on pure fiction. This sin of omission is not so easy to understand since we are discussing a substantial group of children. In a small country like Sweden with a population of about 4.9 million, 41 000 children were registered as being foster-children in 1894. It must be added that this is a minimum figure.

Recently however, a fast growing interest in this important research field has been shown, essential for a full understanding of the history of childhood and motherhood, family history, kinship history and the history of private and public care. This anthology contains revised papers from a session on orphans and foster-children at the Social Science History Annual Meeting in Chicago, Illinois, November 1992. The approach is demographic, historical and cross-cultural. Orphans and foster-children in Iceland, Sweden and Japan are discussed. Special attention is paid to early orphanages, foster-children and kinship and survival chances for orphans and foster-children.

Saga literature tells us that several types of fostering arrangements existed in medieval Iceland. But what happened in Iceland during the 19th century, a period characterized by growing poverty and deprivation? Gísli Ágúst Gunnlaugsson's in-depth study shows how kinship,

often difficult to analyze, functioned as a support network when lone mothers and families were faced with difficulties with which they could not cope. The fostering of relatives was dominated by close kin, primarily grandparents or uncles/aunts (60 per cent). This network of mutual assistance was however not restricted to close kin, friends and neighbours also played an important role. 20 per cent of the foster-children studied stayed with non-relatives.

In Sally Hastings' article we are transferred to a quite different cultural and geographical environment: late nineteenth-century Japan. During the Meiji era (1868-1912), the state spent very little on public relief. It was therefore left to private initiatives to develop institutions for the protection of orphans and homeless children, a growing group during industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the century. During their travels in Europe and the United States, advocates of modernization in Japan had observed orphanages, reformatories, and old-age homes. The Okayama Orphanage was founded by Ishii Jūji (1865-1914), a Christian of Samurai ancestry. He was inspired by the German-born British evangelist George Müller, famous for his orphanage at Bristol, and supported by Japanese and American Christians.

The Okayama Orphanage, initially financed by donors in the United States, was a concrete expression of the Christian ideal that compassion ought to be extended to all human beings. As Hastings stresses, it added to Japanese society a mechanism for caring for children without families. The activities were soon to be backed by the Imperial Household Ministry and also by major Japanese industrialists.

The target group was homeless children gathered from all over the country. Moral transformation and rescuing children from cities by practising agriculture were the central purposes of the orphanage. Ishii soon included the whole range of Western educational thought at his orphanage.

Hastings finally underlines the need for caution in cross-cultural comparisons: "Discussions of child abandonment and fostering in Western society take for granted concepts such as illegitimacy. Meaningful comparisons with non-Western societies will require recognition of the social construction of marriage and households. It is particularly important to keep this in mind when discussing Western-style institutions in non-Western societies".

## INTRODUCTION

Through the founding of the General Orphanage in Stockholm, the Swedish state established a nation-wide market where the supply of and demand for child labor was met. In their article about foster-children and the Swedish state 1785-1915, Birgit Persson and Lisa Öberg show that by the 1890s, care of foster-children had become a secondary source of income, a mean for women from the lowest social sector of society to survive. To receive a foster-child from the General Orphanage also served as a status symbol in the parish.

Files from the Stockholm Historical Database indicate that foster families were in many respects similar to average Stockholm households. However, one frightening result was the exceptionally high rate of mortality among foster-children, especially among infants.

Persson and Öberg also discuss the gradually developing bureaucratic control system aimed at supervising children, whether they stayed at school, worked in factories or lived in foster homes. A professional corps of childrens' experts was in its initial stages. When the need for child labor decreased, the length of elementary education increased as well as the average life span, contributing to fewer children becoming orphans, and the old foster-child system became obsolete. The authors also underline the importance of the new child laws adopted around 1920, creating opportunities for the cohabitation of single mothers and their children.

When the mother of the present editor was born in April 1906 her mother and a twin died. The surviving infant became a foster child and is still alive 90 years later. Apparently she was fortunate according to the results presented by Sune Åkerman, Ulf Högberg and Tobias Andersson. Swedish society was long unable to cope with the vulnerable situation of orphans. By using life table analysis based on parish registers transferred to computer by the Demographic Data Base, the authors analyze the survival chances of orphans in different environments in the Sundsvall region, the world's largest saw-mill district at the end of the 19th century. Infants and small children losing a mother or father were exposed to the most deadly threat. There was an enhanced risk of dying, especially for motherless children in industrialized parishes compared to rural ones. Mortality was also socially differentiated. There was a 50 per cent higher mortality rate among children of crofters compared to those of peasants. The strong proletarianization of both the saw-mill parishes and the urban centre of the

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district created a state of turmoil that struck the most vulnerable groups harder than in the traditional peasant society. Upon reaching the age of five, the children were more likely to survive. The tentative results indicating a surprisingly high upward social mobility for orphans reaching this age will be discussed more in detail by the authors later on. Having a stepmother or a stepfather meant an improvement. As earlier discussed by Gunnlaugsson the kinship structure was crucial here.