



Nelly's childhood

A true story from a book for adults written by Nelly (only available in German).

*Nelly is now a grandmother. She grew up in Switzerland at a time when some children were taken from their families without explanation and put into **children's homes** or on farms far from their families.*

When **Nelly** was young, she lived in her uncle's house with her extended family in the town of Fribourg in Switzerland. Her uncle and his eight children lived on the top floor. Her grandmother lived on the floor below and everybody, including Nelly, called her "**mother**". Nelly called her own mother Bella because she never learned to call her mother.

They lived in the basement. Sleeping was a bit of a squeeze! Two cousins slept in the grandmother's bed and other children often slept in with an aunt in a bed in the same room.

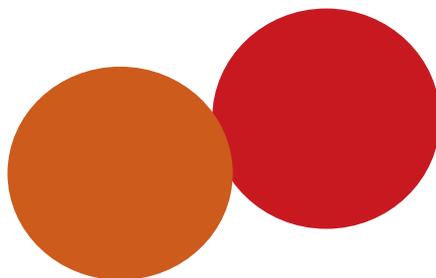
* children's house: A center where children lived without their parents

Nelly used to ask her grandmother *"Can I sleep in with you, as well?"*, but her grandmother always replied *"Your place is downstairs in the basement with Bella."* So Nelly would go downstairs, feeling sad, to sleep next to her mother.

Her mother was always working. She cut wood in the forest and brought it back to the house, always making sure that there were enough logs to keep the house warm in winter. She did the laundry at the fountain in the village for the whole family.

The water was sometimes very cold! She did the washing up for everyone, morning, noon and night. Nelly always heard it said that there was no money for her mother.

For two years Nelly went to nursery school. She liked going there a lot.



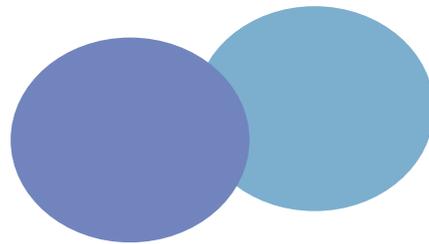
One morning just before the summer holidays, her grandmother told her *"You're going to leave soon."*

"Leave? Where?" said Nelly. She didn't understand.

Her grandmother replied *"We are going to send you to a place, and when you grow up, you won't have to work in the factory."*

Nelly said nothing. What could her grandmother mean? Did she think that Nelly was going to get a good education and learn a trade? Even now, thinking back, Nelly still doesn't understand.

So Nelly had to say goodbye to her mother and grandmother to go to a children's home . She was seven years old. She was welcomed by a nun who opened up her suitcase to see what was inside. The nun said *"Did your mother forget to pack your pajamas?"* Nelly mumbled back that she didn't know; she had never owned a pair of pajamas in her life! Someone wrote to her mother who brought what was missing two weeks later. Nelly didn't stay there for long. The doctor said she was ill and sent her to the **sanatorium**** where she stayed for over a year.



When she came back to children's home she was finally allowed to go to school. The teacher welcomed her to the class and said *"You can do dictation with us."* That evening, the teacher told her *"You can't keep up with the small kids' class, even though you are old enough to be in a class with the older kids."* She sent her to another nun for one to one lessons. But the nun was old and sick and had no patience with Nelly. Nelly ended up just weaving with her all day. She was very disappointed.

She couldn't return home during her summer holidays and she was sent to work very hard on a farm.



****Sanatorium** : A hospital for people with long term diseases like Tuberculoses.

Back at the children's home she really wanted to go back to school. She was determined to learn how to read and write! However, that was not what the adults had in mind for her and she was sent back to the nun and to the weaving.

One morning, after the autumn holidays, she left. She wanted to go to school. She walked home to Fribourg which took a long, long time. Just before getting home, she stopped at the local school and shouted to the teacher who opened the door

"I want to go to school!"



In the book, Nelly explains that the teacher was not able to accept her at the school. She went back to the children's home and never learned to read and write as a child, even if she really wanted to!

She says that she was deprived of her intelligence. She later learnt how to read because of her two daughters, Hope and Melody, while helping with their homework.

As an adult, Nelly met people from the International Movement ATD Fourth World who accepted her and gave her self-confidence. Little by little, she became involved with them in defending the rights of people who are socially excluded. She thinks of children a lot in her work.

She says that no child should suffer what she did and that a child's future is built with their parents.

In 2013, Switzerland apologized to people like Nelly whose childhood had been stolen from them.