

**Media release**

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## **Child labour in the 19th and 20th centuries**

**The new exhibition «Child labour» at the Forum of Swiss History Schwyz deals with a topic that has, up to now, received little attention in Swiss history. It sheds light on how, in the 19th and 20th centuries, children helped to secure their family's income through their work, and how, over the course of time, legislative measures and compulsory schooling gradually curbed the various forms of labour exploitation.**

Children herded cattle, mucked out stables, and lent a hand in haymaking. They made bobbin lace, did spinning, or produced “straw strings” at home. Girls as well as boys have always had to pitch in; they were integrated in the work process from early age on, thus contributing essentially to their family's existence and wellbeing. In Rothenthurm they helped to harvest ice in winter (called *Ischä*); in Gersau they worked in the local silk mill, and in Einsiedeln they coloured the pictures of saints.

The new exhibition at the Forum of Swiss History Schwyz sheds light on various aspects of child labour in earlier days and explains what kind of tasks children were asked to perform. For instance, what kind of work did loaders (*Lädelibueb*) and spreaders (*Streicherkind*) do? Why were children's hands so valuable in embroidery? Or, how does one cut peat? The exhibition focuses in particular on the conditions in central Switzerland at the time.

It was only when compulsory schooling was introduced in 1874 and the Swiss Factory Act came into force in 1877 that the children's situation improved. Elementary education was now a basic right and child labour under the age of 14 forbidden. But particularly in the country's poorer and more remote regions, people still relied heavily on child labour – or else they were sent to work abroad. The «Swabian kids» from the canton of Grisons along with fostered and contract children who had to work as farm hands as well the so-called «Spazzacamini» from the Ticino, who were sent to Italy to clean chimneys, gained sad notoriety in this regard. The exhibition pays special attention to the fate of these children.

And what's the situation like today? Switzerland signed up to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1997. But across the world, roughly 160 million children from the age of five are still forced to work, for instance, on plantations, in factories, and mines.

Waiting for you in the exhibition are a range of historical objects, impressive photographs, documents, media stations as well as statements by contemporary witnesses – you even get the chance to smell certain scents that go with the subject: for example, hay and manure (agriculture), machine oil (factory), cabbage stored in a cellar (cottage industry), and soot (boy chimney sweeps).

At the end of the exhibition, visitors get the chance to recount and record their own experiences or those of their parents or grandparents at a special media station – in other words, their own personal work history.

Let us know if you have any questions:

Pia Schubiger | Exhibition curator | Swiss National Museum.

T. +41 41 819 60 15 | [pia.schubiger@nationalmuseum.ch](mailto:pia.schubiger@nationalmuseum.ch)

Karin Freitag-Masa | Communications | Forum of Swiss History Schwyz.

T. +41 41 819 60 18 | [karin.freitag@nationalmuseum.ch](mailto:karin.freitag@nationalmuseum.ch)

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