



# THE VILLAGE WHERE WOMEN ARE PAID TO BE MOTHERS

For more than 50 years, an Austrian charity has been employing single women to provide a stable home and family life to orphaned and abused children. Katya Cengel met three such women whose career choice has become a labour of love



Clockwise from above: Angela, pictured here with her young charges, doesn't feel as if her new role has made her miss out on a husband and natural children; Elisabeth has been an SOS mother for more than a decade and admits that it can be tiring; two of her current brood.

**E**lisabeth Hubney will never forget the day, more than a decade ago, when she became a mother. It happened very suddenly. One morning, a social worker drove up to her home and deposited six siblings on her doorstep, ranging in age from three to 12. When she asked where the children's belongings were, she was told that all they had were a few dirty clothes.

"It was unbelievably shocking how they looked," recounts Elisabeth. "They had lice in their hair; they looked like they hadn't been washed for months – they were absolutely filthy. I had never seen anything like it."

The children's parents were unemployed alcoholics and the entire family had lived together in a single room. Elisabeth, now 43, shudders at the recollection but says that cleaning the six of them up was the easy part. Beyond that, there were other, more serious, issues to contend with. "I found out pretty soon the girls had been sexually abused," explains Elisabeth, who has been exposed to a range of challenges during her time on the job as the children's mother.

That's what motherhood is for Elisabeth: a job to create a home for orphans and neglected children at the SOS children's village in the small Austrian town of Hinterbrühl.

The idea for a chain of such communities was the brainchild of Hermann Gmeiner, an Austrian war veteran. In the aftermath of World War II, he was shocked by the hordes of children who were left orphaned and homeless. So, in 1949, he set up SOS-Kinderdorf International, a nonprofit organisation through which he developed a unique approach to foster care. Based on the idea that a child needs a mother, siblings, a house and a village

or community in which to prosper, the concept involves training women who are paid to work as mothers and who raise up to half a dozen children inside purpose-built villages.

Gmeiner created the first village in the town of Imst. These days, Elisabeth's village, located 20km south of Vienna, is one of nine such enclaves in Austria and 423 in the world – all of which are registered charities funded by a range of corporations and individuals.

To be eligible to live in an SOS village, children must, as a general rule, be under the age of 10. Many are victims of neglect and abuse. Unlike other forms of foster care, SOS does not separate siblings, and thus often takes groups of five or six at a time. This means a great deal to the children, as what they have left of their family unit remains intact.

In Hinterbrühl, there are no cars – just kids on bikes, teens sitting on curbs, and family gatherings that look like kindergarten open days. The only bustle comes from kids racing through the town square with water balloons.

While it might seem straightforward to construct a village in terms of bricks and mortar, building families is much more complex.

"It takes an enormous amount of energy in the early years until a virtual family becomes a real family," explains Austrian SOS director Wilfried Vyslozil. "The mothers must be honest, open and energetic."

Vyslozil never promises the women he hires an instant family; instead, he offers them a group of children and a supportive environment. Whether a cohesive family unit forms depends largely on luck. Each mother is provided with a house, between four and six children, and around \$EUR1100 (\$2000) a month in order to maintain her household.

She is also given a salary of approximately \$EUR1500 (\$2700) every month.

Although it may seem unusual to outsiders, Elisabeth says she doesn't find the idea of paid parenthood strange. On the contrary, she claims it fits perfectly with her idea of a socially responsible job – hard work and the opportunity to make a difference. A former high school Latin teacher, Elisabeth says she chose SOS motherhood because she wanted to contribute something meaningful to the world – and because she has always adored children.

Dressed in a long blue dress and sandals, she settles into a chair in her living room. On the windowsill in front of her is a picture of her first SOS grandchild, one-year-old Patrick. Elisabeth has raised 11 children so far and, although she has found the experience deeply rewarding, she won't be taking on any more.

"Being a mother to abused children is very tiring," she says. "Now that I'm older and have less energy, it is really not fair to the children to keep working as a mother."

When SOS first began, most mothers took on the job for life. These days, women do it for an average of 10 to 12 years then go on to something else, although they invariably maintain regular contact with their charges.

The buzz in the village as the children pack for their annual three-week camping trip doesn't bother her. Neither do the frequent interruptions from her "daughter", a breathless blonde girl with brown eyes and skinny legs who strides into the living room and asks, "How many pairs of pyjamas can I take?"

"Three," replies Elisabeth with a smile.

The girl, 10-year-old Yvonne, nods and turns on her heels. Five minutes later, she is back with another question. Yvonne is one ▶



All the children revel in the freedom and safety the villages provide. Right: former German professor Elke with her natural daughter, Mara. Below right: there's rarely a dull moment in Elke's house.



**For Elke, motherhood isn't a profession, it's her life. On her holidays, she stays at home with the kids**

of four children whom Elisabeth is currently raising. The others include Yvonne's seven-year-old brother, Sascha, 11-year-old Jennifer and 16-year-old Daniel, who is the last of the first generation Elisabeth cared for.

**T**oday, mothers are given a degree of choice in the children they accept, but 15 years ago, all Elisabeth was given was a list of names, six siblings and, later, an unrelated seventh child, Sonya. Now 23, Sonya was the most difficult of the bunch. At nine, she talked about jumping off the balcony, overdosing on pills, and slitting her wrists. "She would say, 'You'll see – one day I'll kill myself,'" remembers Elisabeth. "So I always had to watch her."

This continued for over a year. It was even longer before Sonya stopped wetting her pants. Elisabeth, who wears a ring inscribed with the SOS logo on her left hand, enrolled all the children in counselling and closely monitored their social, physical and mental development. She devoted her life to raising them, leaving virtually no time for herself. Gradually, the children opened up to her. Manuela, the eldest child, told Elisabeth about the sexual abuse she had endured. But Sonya remained troubled and only began to deal with her life experiences after intensive therapy.

Although Elisabeth admits that she'd fall on to her bed totally exhausted at the end of each day, she never considered quitting. "I was young and fearless," she says.

She had to be. Strong single women are what SOS was founded on. Until very recently, the only roles men played were those of village directors and maintenance workers. Marriage and men were taboo subjects. Elisabeth didn't mind much; she says she was too tired to think of romance. Today, when asked about relationships, she laughs and then sighs. It has only been in the last few years that she has had the time to see anyone.

Although it's no longer forbidden for men to stay in the village, Elisabeth keeps her relationship private. "At times, I would like the opportunity to have more intimacy in my life," she admits, "but I have accepted that my job and my lifestyle make that nearly impossible."

Even this relatively low-key relationship would have been difficult seven years ago, before village director Monika Franta took the helm. As long as the children come first and the men meet her approval, Franta says she has no problem with the mothers having relationships. Her attitude is a huge step forward for village life and is now reflected in the organisation's new policy, which has loosened certain restrictions on intimate relationships.

Despite such advances, only three out of the 25 mothers at Hinterbrühl – who range in age from 30 to 53 – have a boyfriend. For most, it is still easier to abstain.

But the primary reason for the change has been to update the organisation's image in order to bolster interest among prospective mothers. In the past, the organisation has launched campaigns to raise money, but now, for the first time, it has launched a campaign to recruit mothers in Austria. It is also now open to fathers and couples – but few have materialised. It seems that the hard work, long hours and low pay simply don't appeal.

Elke Jirku, a tall, 38-year-old blonde in high-heeled sandals and a pink skirt, didn't intend to become an SOS mother. The daughter of middle-class intellectuals, she was satisfied with her life as a professor of German in Hungary and then Wales. But things changed in 1994 when her first child, Idris, was born and she and her husband divorced.

"I no longer felt I could be a professor and a mother," she says. Like most Austrians, she was familiar with SOS and decided it could provide her with a secure living environment as well as the opportunity to help others.

After being accepted into the program, she began her practical training and spent a year helping another mother care for her children and household. It is during this first stage that potential mothers begin to understand the high emotional toll that goes with the job.

"The kids in these villages have undergone a combination of everything that should never happen to children," says Elke.

She then spent a further year undergoing intensive psychological study and training. Most mothers who don't have the stamina for the job are weeded out at this stage. But nothing truly prepares them for the rigours of life once they start working.

When Elke saw her new children banging their heads against the wall one day, she found that she couldn't remain calm and distant in the way she had been taught. Instead, she shouted and later cried with them – a method she felt more instinctively comfortable with, and which she says had a positive effect.

"It sounds unprofessional, but I think it's more important to be human and authentic than professional and psychological."

Elke enjoys the noise her six children make and lets them run wild in the house. They're allowed to jump on the sofa, climb the shelves and hang on the coat racks – all experiences Elke was denied as a child. In her house, there is never a dull – or silent – moment.

"They used to race toy cars on the wooden floor in the hallway and make lots of noise," she says, her blue eyes sparkling.

For Elke, motherhood isn't a profession, it's her life. On her holidays, she either stays at home with the kids or takes them away with her – "like a real mother". And she doesn't need a daily motivation; for her, motherhood is perfectly natural. "It's like being in love – you want to see your lover every day," she says, smiling at the chocolate-smudged face of her biological daughter, Mara.

**A**ngela Sasshofer's house is as calm as Elke's is chaotic. Her five Turkish children are spending the day with their grandfather. At 43, Angela is a latecomer to the job. She spent 20 years as a foreign-language secretary travelling the world before deciding that she wanted something more meaningful. After much soul-searching, she took a substantial pay cut and began a new life with SOS five years ago.

Her house is spotless. Shoes are left in rows outside, cookbooks neatly arranged in the kitchen, novels tucked in bookshelves so organised they look like they belong in a library. Upstairs is a different story – a landing opens on to three rooms strewn with Barbie dolls and Lego, evidence of Angela's first batch of children, who are aged eight to 13.

All the children, who were placed in social services after their mother hanged herself three years ago, see the village psychiatrist regularly. The older boy doesn't like to talk much, but Angela accepts that because he has adjusted well to village life. However, the younger boy, nine-year-old Dogan, is plainly difficult.

"He's a nice boy but hard to handle," says Angela. "He has so much aggression. As a mother, you have to live your whole life with this aggression – not just for an hour like an ordinary psychologist, but day after day."

But it is the children's father, not Dogan, who upsets Angela the most. SOS recommends that its mothers make sure the children keep in contact with their real parents if they are still around, and many visit the children on weekends. When the kids first came to her a year and a half ago, it was agreed that their father and maternal grandfather would alternate visits every three weeks. "But in 18 months their dad has come perhaps five times," says Angela. "It really hurts the children to be abandoned by their father."

Their grandfather is more attentive and regularly takes the children to visit their extended family. Worried that they'll forget Turkish, he stays involved in their lives, encouraging them to learn their Muslim religion. But he leaves their day-to-day upbringing to Angela.

"He tells them that I am both of their parents now and to listen to me," she explains.

Just then, two boys tramp up the grass hill to the house and three girls materialise on the back porch. A guinea pig appears; little legs run to the toilet; voices shout.

Twelve-year-old Pinar is quieter than her younger sisters. It was she who discovered

**The best thing about village life for Pinar, 12, is that she gets to share it with her family. "This is my home because my brothers and sisters are around me"**

her mother hanging from the rafters, yet given her life experiences so far, she seems fairly well adjusted. Like most girls her age, friends are important to her and she dashes from the table the second the phone rings.

After their mother died, Pinar and her siblings were placed in a children's institution where it was hard to maintain friendships because they weren't allowed to have company over. Now Pinar can have friends visit whenever she wants, including ones from outside the village. "My friends think the village is cool," she says proudly.

Pinar and her playmates appreciate the beautiful house she lives in and the child-friendly village in which they are allowed to run wild and feel perfectly safe. But the best thing about village life for Pinar is that she gets to share it all with her family. "This is my home because my brothers and sisters are around me – I wouldn't like to be separated from them," she admits.

Having already lost their mother, the siblings despised the institution where they were initially sent, which separated boys from girls and thus brothers from sisters.

Pinar is eager to hold on to her extended family and her Muslim faith. She shies away from the camera, having adopted the traditional practice in which women prefer not to be photographed. But she happily talks nonstop about the exciting day she spent in Vienna visiting with her aunts and cousins. She considers herself part of two families – her Turkish relatives, whom she visits every third weekend, and Angela and her siblings, with whom she lives. Although she is fond of children and would like to be a kindergarten teacher, Pinar says she doesn't want to be a mother. "I don't want to think of that now," she states firmly, her shy smile fading.

Her eight-year-old sister, Songul, eager to voice her opinion, adds that she considers the house she lives in home because when she's hungry she can just help herself to some food. Her comment gives a startling insight into the rigours of institutionalised foster care.

Angela stops the excited Songul just before the porcelain dish she's piled high with cheese and jam tumbles to the ground.

"I don't feel like I'm missing out on a husband or natural children," muses Angela, who spends her five weeks of annual leave and her weekly day off with friends and family. And, like all the mothers at Hinterbrühl, she says she has no regrets. "I thought to myself, 'This is meant to be,' when I met another mother here who I knew in high school."

That mother was Elisabeth.

Like Angela, Elisabeth has never looked back. Even her parents, who discouraged her from becoming an SOS mother, are proud of her and delighted when the children call them grandpa and grandma.

Soon Daniel, the last of her first batch, will be leaving. In their late teens, most of the children move to SOS youth houses, where they live with limited supervision while performing apprenticeships. Afterwards, SOS counsellors help them secure jobs and even find and pay for an apartment. If they run into trouble, they can seek personal, professional and financial counselling at SOS crisis intervention centres. But, like most grown children, they often return to their mothers when they need money, want to talk or hit a rough spot.

Elisabeth's older children are regular visitors. She is clearly happy with the way all of them have turned out. "I know they're not perfect," she says with a wry smile. "But they lead productive lives, are in healthy relationships, and never go very long without work." It is for Sonya that she feels the most pride. For years, Elisabeth worried that the troubled girl would not be able to overcome the abuse she had suffered. However, with a great deal of courage, she went on to finish school, complete an apprenticeship and get married.

"I knew it was all worth it when Sonya's older sister, Manuela, told me that without the chances I gave them they would never have been able to achieve what they have managed to," she says. For Elisabeth, those are the most rewarding words a mother can hear. ■

*There is one SOS village in Australia, which was set up in the South Australian beachside suburb of Seaford Rise in 1996. For more information or to contact the Australian branch, phone (08) 8232 9988, email [sos@sos-australia.com.au](mailto:sos@sos-australia.com.au) or visit [www.sos-australia.com.au](http://www.sos-australia.com.au).*