

# Europe's Forgotten Children

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Upon my arrival in Europe, one year after the war had ended, I found the people busily clearing away the wreckage and rebuilding the damaged structures. The reconstruction of the ravaged cities was being carried on with great rapidity; but, in their preoccupation, people overlooked the millions of children who were orphaned or deserted. Left to shift for themselves in a world of hunger, misery and squalor—and deprived of human care—these children wander aimlessly about the streets, begging or stealing. They have lost all sense of security, morals and decency.

My first experience with one of these unfortunate children has left such an indelible mark on my memory that in my mind's eye I can still see her skinny body, small white face and her dark curly hair that might have been lovely with proper care. Her dark strange eyes were the eyes of one who had been frightened, neglected, hungry and unloved. She could not have been more than ten years of age, but the expression on her face was that of an adult; and it disclosed that she knew about life—every hideous phase of it. Her bare feet were bruised and calloused, and she was inadequately clothed in a threadbare dress that was tight and much too short. The little waif kept tugging at my coat and repeating the same words over and over. I could not understand what she was saying, but I knew that she was begging for food or money. As I stared at her, I noticed a striking resemblance in this little gypsy to my young cousin. Although there was a great similarity in their features, their lives would be entirely different, for my cousin Judy would grow up educated, cared for and loved. This little brown-eyed street

urchin would grow up in ignorance and filth.

I took her to a cafe and bought her a meal which she devoured in gulps as though she feared it would disappear. Then she gazed at me slyly, and her eyes followed my hand as I reached for the money with which to pay the check. Quick as lightning she snatched the money from my hand and fled down the street. This poor, neglected child in her fight for existence had no sense of right and wrong and felt no shame in begging and stealing from the same person.

Many of these children are weakened by tuberculosis and other diseases. Some have been wounded, received no medical attention and are crippled and maimed for life. One of the saddest sights I remember was a little boy of eight or nine years of age who had one leg and one arm amputated. He hobbled about on crutches, carrying a basket filled with good luck and fortune-telling cards. On his shoulder was perched a tame bird, which would dip into the basket, grasp one of the cards in its beak and hand it to a person in exchange for a coin. In this modified manner of begging, the crippled boy managed to support himself in spite of his deformities.

These children need guidance and education, decent living conditions, treatment for their diseases and handicaps and, above all, love and security. It is just as necessary to rebuild their shattered lives as it is to reconstruct the war-ravaged cities. These children will become tomorrow's citizens, tomorrow's parents, tomorrow's leaders and tomorrow's hope for a more humane, peaceful and unified world.