

We ate the Children last – Part 2

Little was made at the time of a report by the Société protectrice des animaux on the surprising drop in the number of stray cats and dogs. Garbage became a sought-after commodity. Unscrupulous racketeers began selling it. Dumps became dangerous places. Garbage collectors were assaulted. The less fortunate resorted to eating grass.

Then old people began vanishing without a trace. Mothers who had turned away momentarily were finding their baby carriages empty. The government reacted swiftly. In a matter of three days, the army descended upon every one of the operated, without discrimination between the law-abiding and the criminal. The newspaper *Le Cochon Libre* tried to put out a protest, but the police raided their offices and only a handful of copies escaped destruction. There were terrible scenes during the round-up: neighbours denouncing neighbours, children being separated from their families, men, women and children being stripped in public to look for telling scars, summary executions of people who tried to escape. Internment camps were set up, nearly always in small, remote towns: Les Milles, Gurs, Le Vernet d'Ariège, Beaune-la-Rolande, Pithiviers, Recebedou.

No provisions were made for food in any of the camps. The story was the same in all of them: first the detainees ate their clothes and went naked. Then the weaker men and women disappeared.

Then the rest of the women. Then more of the men. Then we ate those we loved most. The last known prisoner was an exceptional brute by the name of Jean Proti. After 41 days without a morsel of food except his own toes and ears, and after 30 hours of incessant screaming, he died.

I escaped. I still have a good appetite, but there is a moral rot in this country that even I can't digest. Everyone knew what happened, and how and where. To this day everyone knows. But no one talks about it and no one is guilty. I must live with that

Yann Martel, *The Guardian*, Jul 2004