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# The Ungemach Experiment

A STORY OF EUGENICS

A film written and directed by Vincent Gaullier  
A coproduction by Look at Sciences and Sancho & Co

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***Eugenics: A set of beliefs and practices that aim to provide the most favourable conditions possible for the procreation of healthy subjects and, as a result, improve the genetic quality of the human race.***

(Centre national de ressources textuelles et lexicales)

## Summary

In 1924, a charming model village called "Ungemach" was built in Strasbourg. 140 pleasant detached homes were to be rented to couples whose job it was to produce large families. It was not long after the devastatingly deadly First World War, hence the apparently pro-natalist project.

What the new residents did not know is that they were taking part in a eugenic experiment. Couples were only selected after being identified as "*healthy and fertile stock*". If either of them had anything negative on their medical report, the couple's application was rejected. Any couple that failed to produce a minimum of 3 children, within the first five years, was ordered to vacate their home. Leases were also revoked for families where the mother went out to work and was therefore guilty of "neglecting" the education of her children.

The eugenic experiment in the model village of Ungemach was approved by both local and national political and scientific authorities and continued until the 1980s!

To understand the genesis of the project and this almost unfailing support, we need to look back at the history of eugenics. The term was coined when the idea was developed in England in the 1880s. Then, from the 1920s onwards, America, Switzerland, some Scandinavian countries and Japan all adopted mass sterilisation programs to eradicate what they considered to be health or social defects. All long before Nazi Germany.

This film will weave together the stories of former residents, shocked at having been used as guinea pigs in the experiment without their knowledge, and the opinions of historians, ethicists, philosophers and international experts in this field. The statements from one group echoing the stories from the other. The micro-story of Ungemach becomes part of the greater story of eugenics, updated in the light of this recent discovery.

The question of eugenics is universal, its effects are multiple and it still permeates the ethical debate on assisted reproductive technology and transhumanism.

## History of the model village Ungemach

In the early 2000s, France's National Institute for Demographic Studies (INED) finally opened archives that had been closed for many years. Historian Paul-André Rosental accidentally came across a file from the 1930s that praised the Ungemach experiment in Strasbourg.

This model village, where the first houses were completed in 1924, was described in the file as *"a project with eugenic aims"*. Through the careful selection of its tenants, it promoted *"the development of society's most valuable elements"* and helped them *"to progress faster than others"* by providing exceptional living conditions for the time.

The file lists the results like a performance report: birth-rate, height, weight and health of the infants, etc. Everything is "higher than average": the birth-rate (29 per thousand residents, instead of 14 in Strasbourg, and 16.3 in France as a whole), the size of the children (7 or 8 centimetres taller than the norm) and scores given for "tidiness and cleanliness" in the homes were also much higher than elsewhere.

Paul-André Rosental decided to undertake a long research project to understand the motivations behind this model village, to delve deeper into how it worked and to present the experiment in its national and international context.

During the First World War, an Alsatian company called Ungemach, which specialised in confectionary and other foodstuffs, managed to continue its production and secure its supply of sugar. But once the war was over, the company found itself with stock worth 2.42 million Marks. To pre-empt the inevitable enquiry and a trial that could find them guilty of war profiteering, Ungemach's managing director, Alfred Dachert, suggested to the company president, old Léon Ungemach, that they invest their millions in a project of indisputable human value.

In 1918, he convinced the old man to build a *"nursery"*, which would enable middle class couples to form a family under the best conditions possible. The First World War had caused 15 million deaths in Europe, 1.7 million of them in France alone. One quarter of 18-27 year-olds had been wiped out. The country had lost its lifeblood and there was an urgent need to repopulate. Why not use the latest innovations and advances in health and hygiene to "improve" the quality of population as well?

# LES JARDINS UNGEMACH STRASBOURG

La Fondation „Les Jardins Ungemach“ est une œuvre à visée éducatives.

Son but est de favoriser le développement des éléments précieux de la société et de leur aider à progresser plus rapidement que les autres.

Elle procède à cet effet à un choix réfléchi parmi de jeunes ménages en bonne santé et leur loue à un prix modique, pour le temps de leur épanouissement familial, une maisonnette de la cité „Les Jardins Ungemach“.

Cette cité-jardins, édifiée dans un lieu charmant aux abords de la ville de Strasbourg, a été étudiée dans ses moindres détails en vue d'offrir aux familles qui l'occupent des conditions de développement particulièrement favorables.

L'expérience des „Jardins Ungemach“ qui se poursuit depuis onze ans compte une série de résultats heureux dont les principaux sont :

## I

### Une natalité bien supérieure à la natalité française.

#### Comparaison sommaire.

Natalité de la ville de STRASBOURG	14 par mille habitants	27,054 207 3322 1443 604
Natalité de la FRANCE	10,2	24,7
Natalité des JARDINS UNGEMACH	30	35,20

#### Comparaison exacte.

A STRASBOURG			
1000 Femmes mariées			
dont 1200 ont compris entre 20 - 40		80 enfants	66,2 enfants
diminué de tout à			
AUX JARDINS UNGEMACH			
1000 Femmes mariées			
dont 1200 ont compris entre 20 - 40		128 enfants	106 enfants
diminué de tout à			

## II

### Enfants d'une taille et d'un poids supérieurs à la moyenne.

	Moyenne de la ville de Strasbourg		Moyenne des enfants élevés dans les Jardins Ungemach	
	Sexe	Hauteur	Sexe	Hauteur
<b>POIDS</b>				
Garçons de 0 ans	17,400	14,00	18,00	15,00
Garçons de 6 ans	18,100	15,00	19,00	16,00
Filles de 0 ans	17,100	13,00	18,00	15,00
Filles de 6 ans	18,200	15,00	19,00	17,00
<b>TAILLES</b>				
Garçons de 0 ans	520,2	500	525	505
Garçons de 6 ans	110,20	105	115	108
Filles de 0 ans	510,2	495	515	500
Filles de 6 ans	110,20	105	115	108

## III

### État de santé supérieur à celui de la moyenne.

L'état de santé de la Cité se reflète dans le tableau de mortalité de ses enfants et de ses adolescents.

Tranches d'âge	Pourcentages des décès	
	A STRASBOURG	AUX JARDINS UNGEMACH
0 - 1 an	1,47%	0,74%
1 - 2 ans	0,26%	0,13%

Ces données s'appliquent aux années 1939 à 1944.

## IV

### Niveau d'ordre et de propreté supérieur au milieu habituel.

Une commission est chargée de maintenir le niveau d'ordre et de propreté des familles qui demeurent à l'intérieur des Jardins Ungemach. Tous les ans la même commission examine le niveau d'ordre et de propreté des familles habitant la Cité. Cette note sera et se sera d'autant plus élevée que le niveau sera meilleur.

Années	Moyenne pour la Cité	Moyenne pour la Cité
1931	7,5	8,5
1932	7,5	8,5
1933	7,5	8,5
1934	7,5	8,5
1935	7,5	8,5
1936	7,5	8,5

La note sera le nombre de notes et se présente sur échelle de 0 à 10.

En aidant les familles intéressantes à se développer plus rapidement que les autres, LES JARDINS UNGEMACH augmentent dans la société de demain le nombre des éléments précieux et contribuent par là à guider l'évolution humaine vers une ascension plus rapide.

Des renseignements détaillés sont fournis par le secrétariat des „Jardins Ungemach“, 9, rue des Iris à Strasbourg (France).

The selection of potential tenants was based on a questionnaire in order to favour those of "*healthy and fertile stock*". Applicants had to provide a medical report and declare any previous family history of health problems: -50 points for a bad report. Young couples were given preference: 25 was the optimum age for the women. They earned 25 points for being that age, but lost one point for every year they were above or below it. How recently married they were was also taken into account: +6 points for being married one year, but -2 points if the union was already five years old. Particular importance was also placed on mothers not working so they could stay at home and look after children full-time. Mums going out to work meant -50 points. There were also visits and inspections of the shortlisted couples' homes: -50 points if they were judged to be "*insalubrious, untidy or flea-infested*".

Couples who succeeded in being "selected" were monitored throughout their time there. If the couple did not produce a child within two years of moving in, or more than two children within 5 years, they were issued with a warning from the Foundation. Upon the third warning, the insufficiently large family was ejected. «*Breed or leave*» was the official slogan invented by Dachert. In a record he kept for the period 1926 to 1930, we see that 20 couples were forced to move out. 17 because they had produced no children, or only one, and 3 others because the woman worked.

It was the promotion of a whole moral standard. There were strict rules about keeping the garden neat and tidy, not drying laundry outside and requesting permission for a friend or relative to stay. Regular visits and inspections of the house were carried out, resulting in written reports, warnings and evictions.



In the early years of its existence, the Ungemach model village attracted a lot of interest from both the French and foreign press. French newspaper *Le Matin* carried the front-page headline "A Small Model City", the enthusiastic journalist wrote: "Our aim, says Alfred Dachert, is to attempt an experiment in eugenics. What we are looking for in our tenants is their vitality, their capacity to produce healthy offspring [...] I hope our example will be followed elsewhere."

*The Daily Telegraph* of November 28th 1930 mentions the city's "early success" and notes that "it has become a place of pilgrimage for Americans visiting the east of the country". Twenty years later, the experiment continued to fascinate. In 1952, British magazine *Illustrated* put it on its front page.



In 1950, management of the Ungemach model village was placed under the authority of Strasbourg city council. In 1962, the mayor of Strasbourg prolonged the experiment for another 20 years.

National governments were aware of what was happening in the Ungemach model village. Various research institutes and organisations asked to be sent all the statistics available, held by Dachert, about the population living there. The Ministry for Public Health and Population and the National Institute for Demographic Research, INED, also welcomed the experiment and took a keen interest in it. Writing in 1951, INED director, Alfred Sauvy, assured the mayor of Strasbourg that his institute was following "*with great interest the results of this fascinating experiment with eugenic intentions*". Only six years after 1945 and the fall of the Third Reich, with its policies of eliminating the disabled, the mentally ill and homosexuals (being gay was considered an illness at the time), a French government body was taking a position clearly in favour of eugenics.

Although the questionnaires were officially abandoned by the city council in the 1980s, a document found by Paul-André Rosental shows how certain criteria, such as a couple's age and number of children, still influenced the choice of tenants and could earn them a 25% reduction of their rent. Statements from former residents, which we managed to record during our scouting, reveal what it was like to live under daily "pressure" from Ungemach's administrators between the 1920s and the 1980s.

Faced with the truth about the model village at Ungemach, everybody can take a position of outrage at this form of human selection, but we need to go further than that and search the history of eugenics to see how this experiment was allowed to happen and continue for so long without anyone taking offence.



## Director's note

In the 1880s, in Great Britain, Francis Galton, cousin of the great Charles Darwin, set out the basic cornerstones of his own eugenic theory which claimed to be scientific and at the forefront of biological, mathematical and sociological knowledge.

Around that time, the whole world was looking for strong and healthy "supermen" and a number of countries wanted to control their demographics. In the late 19th and early 20th century, certain governments took inspiration from Galton's conclusions and adopted what we call "negative" eugenics to justify brutal family, health and social policies: sterilisation, forbidding certain marriages, etc.

Many industrialists founded company towns for their employees, especially in Western Europe. Ungemach's longevity was only possible because it was often classed as a company town or associated with social housing.

But the 140 houses at Ungemach are a case apart in the history of company towns. Although Dachert advocated policies that were paternalistic and intrusive, he was a "liberalist": he did not restrict the advantages to company employees only, the site was not closed, he did not forbid contact with the outside. In other company towns, for example, residents were only allowed to buy newspapers approved by the boss. There was nothing like that here.

While the French approach to eugenics was unique, seen as "positive" by some, "elitist" by others, the fact remains that it led to people being classed as better or sub-quality humans.

Would we have supported the project too? Would we support it tomorrow if it made a reappearance? Eugenics is infinitely complicated. It still exists in a contemporary form where its "values" continue to influence our individual choices and politics.

In Holland, there was recent attempt to pass a law for obligatory contraception for "vulnerable" women, which means drug addicts, alcoholics and the homeless. In China, they advocate sperm of "high ideological quality", so all donors must be *"supportive of the role of the party leadership, loyal to the party cause and honest citizens"*, as well as free from any genetic or infectious disease and not overweight or bald. This is contemporary eugenics, where we choose our children, not to avoid a disease but to make them more intelligent, stronger, good at maths, and with blond or dark hair depending on our tastes.

The aim of this film is to make us more conscious as citizens about what it is that makes a person and how our definitions of people are increasingly based on biology alone. This film aligns itself with the idea of the complexity of humankind, this diversity, made up of as much originality as there are individuals, which eugenics would aim to eradicate.

## Graphical research

First images produced by Jean-Jacques Lonni, the film's artistic director :



A street in the model village of Ungemach, in 1935, during the Strasbourg exhibition on hygiene. From the 1920s, when this village was built. Today: nothing has changed, the only difference is the presence of cars. (3D animation, 2D painting)



**Life in the village.** Every child is regularly measured and weighed... to provide statistics for the Ungemach experiment.



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