



The Situation of the Yenish and Sinti in Switzerland

Literature Review with a Focus on the History of
Discrimination Against the Nomadic Way of Life

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1 Introduction

This literature review offers a concise overview of the current state of knowledge concerning the situation of the Yenish and Sinti in Switzerland. Based on a legal opinion by Diggelmann et al. (2024), on February 20, 2025, the Federal Council recognized the removal of children by the Pro Juventute foundation between 1926 and 1973 and the prevention of births within the communities of Swiss Yenish and Sinti as crimes against humanity under international law. The two self-organizations “Union des Associations et des Représentants des Nomades Suisses” (UARNS) and the “Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse” had submitted requests to the federal government in 2021 and 2024, respectively, for the recognition of a (cultural) genocide. This prompted the government to commission the corresponding legal opinion. As part of the recognition of the crimes against humanity, the government reiterated its 2013 apology to the Yenish and Sinti, which had been issued to the victims of the so-called “Coercive Social Measures and Placements”.¹

The historical (persecution-) history of the Yenish and Sinti within the territory of present-day Switzerland will first be outlined. The current situation of the Yenish and Sinti will then be presented based on the available sources. Following this, the consequences of persecution will be discussed. Another section will address the role of academic research in relation to the Yenish and Sinti. The literature review ends with a conclusion.

2 Historical and Current Context

Research has documented the roughly 600-year history of nomadic groups within Swiss territory. This history is characterized by exclusion, discrimination, criminalization, and persecution, often perpetrated by governmental and institutional authorities (Egger 1982; Meyer 1988; Huonker 1990, 2014, 2001; Meier & Wolfensberger 1998). The groups known today by the self-designations Yenish, Sinti, and Roma² were historically stigmatized due to their nomadic way of life with terms such as “vagrants” and “gypsies”.

2.1 Developments Before the Founding of the Federal State

Evidence of these groups in Switzerland can be traced back to the 15th century (Huonker & Ludi 2001; Egger 1982). Until the 19th century, many people in Switzerland did not live a sedentary lifestyle. Alongside itinerant laborers or servants, there were family associations that had lived nomadically for generations (Leimgruber et al. 2001, p. 8). The legal status of Yenish, Sinti, and Roma on the territory of present-day Switzerland was precarious, insofar as it can be traced historically. A variety of discriminatory penal codes in poverty law, marriage law, and religious legislation, in force until the mid-19th century, led to the loss or revocation of domicile rights. Affected individuals were stripped of their citizenship and classified as “stateless”. This entailed the loss of the right to receive poverty relief, to settle, to work in trades, to own immovable property (such as land), and even to enter into a legal marriage (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998). Those affected were largely excluded from political, economic, and social life. As a result, many were forced to adopt a nomadic lifestyle. Statelessness and a “vagrant” or non-sedentary way of life were therefore closely and often causally linked (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, pp. 33, 496). This legal framework and judicial practice, which reinforced so-called “statelessness” as a legal status, generated a multigenerational cycle of non-sedentary living and statelessness,

¹ See the official press release by the Swiss Federal Council: <https://www.news.admin.ch/de/nsb?id=104226>

² Contrary to popular belief, the estimated 80,000 Roma in Switzerland do not live a nomadic lifestyle, but are settled. Due to the focus on nomadic lifestyles, this literature review does not specifically address the Roma.

particularly affecting the impoverished population (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, pp. 33ff.). Some individuals had likely never held civil rights; others lost them (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, pp. 33ff.).

The nomadic lifestyle, in turn, was especially rejected by institutions oriented toward control. The partnerships and family bonds of the "Travellers" were permanently threatened by forced separation by authorities, which took various forms, including expulsion in different directions, imprisonment, or child removal. These families were depicted as illegitimate, immoral, and depraved (Huonker 2001, p. 10). Additionally, political decisions from the 16th century can be documented that aimed at the "eradication" of "gypsies" (*Zigeuner*) and "heathens", including the establishment of a permanent constabulary (Landjägerkorps) in 1803 for the expulsion of "vagrants" (Huonker 2001, p. 13). In Zurich, until the end of the 18th century, so-called "beggar hunts" were held, during which "Travellers" were rounded up, mutilated or even executed, or expelled from the country through galley sentences (Leimgruber et al. 2001, pp. 11f.), to name just a few examples.

2.2 Developments after the Founding of the Federal State

With the development of new administrative structures - particularly following the founding of the Swiss federal state in 1848 and the enactment of the "Stateless Persons Act" in 1850 - statelessness was no longer tolerated. Under the control of the Federal Department of Justice and Police, nationwide "vagrant searches" were conducted in which "stateless" individuals were apprehended, interned, registered, and forcibly naturalized, unless they were identified as foreign nationals and deported (Huonker 1990, pp. 57f; Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, p. 495). These forced naturalizations implied a violent imposition of sedentarism by confining individuals to randomly selected municipalities, returning "Travellers" to their places of citizenship, and prohibiting "vagrancy" and the accompaniment of school-age children. These conditions made it extremely difficult to continue the traditional nomadic way of life and also hindered the "assimilation" into the newly imposed sedentary lifestyle (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, p. 496). Due to a lack of jobs and housing, insufficient poverty relief, and the absence of social acceptance in these municipalities, alternatives for surviving as sedentary citizens were often lacking. As a result, many affected individuals continued to live non-sedentary lives (Meier & Wolfensberger 1998, p. 496; Leimgruber et al. 2001). In 1906, the federal government decided to close the borders to what it termed a "class of people" (Menschenklasse) identified as "gypsies" (*Zigeuner*) (Huonker 2001, p. 19). This was intended to prevent Sinti and Roma from entering Switzerland and led to the rigorous expulsion of those already living in the country (Huonker 2001, p. 19). The decree also included a general transportation ban on "gypsies" via ships and trains. While the transportation ban was lifted in 1950, the entry ban remained in effect until 1972 (Huonker 2001, pp. 19, 164). During the Second World War, Sinti and Roma who sought refuge in Switzerland were turned away at the border. In many cases, this led to their murder in German concentration camps (Huonker 2001, p. 164; see also Gautschi 2019).

2.3 "Children of the Country Road" Program by Pro Juventute and Recent History

The expansion of the modern welfare and social state from the late 19th century onward was accompanied by increasing disciplining of people affected by poverty. This disciplining was linked to the enforcement of bourgeois-conservative values, as well as to regulatory and financial interests (Leitungsgruppe NFP 76 2024, p. 7). In this context, according to cantonal laws and provisions of the Civil Code, well over 100,000 children and adolescents were forcibly placed outside their families up until 1981 by order of the authorities (Gautschi 2022; Lengwiler et al. 2013). This also included the removal of children from Yenish families.

The more recent history of the Yenish and Sinti - particularly in the context of the systematic child removals by the state-subsidized “Children of the Country Road” program run by Pro Juventute - is now well documented in historical research (Galle 2016; Leimgruber et al. 1998; Lengwiler & Praz 2018, p. 38; Galle & Meier 2010; Germann 2000; Hürlimann 2002; Meier 2003). Between 1926 and 1973, 600 to 900 children were systematically taken from Yenish families - whether they were sedentary or nomadic - and placed in children’s homes, foster families, institutions, or psychiatric clinics (Galle 2016; Leimgruber et al. 1998; Lengwiler & Praz 2018, p. 38). In addition to Pro Juventute, church organizations and authorities also participated in the removals. Recent research shows that Catholic institutions were more involved in the child removals than previously assumed (Hagen 2023, 2025). Estimates now suggest up to 2,000 removals in total (Diggelmann et al. 2024). These removals represent the peak of persecution of the Yenish in recent Swiss history. The declared goal of the policy was to “eliminate the nomadic lifestyle” through the external placement of children (Eidgenössische Kommission gegen Rassismus 2024, p. 5). Various academic works emphasize that in the case of the child removals of Swiss Yenish families, a convergence of social, economic, welfare-policy, and racially ethnicizing motives played a role (Lengwiler 2018, p. 161; Germann 2000; Galle 2016). Racial motives are particularly emphasized. For example, Lengwiler (2018, p. 161) compares the removals from Yenish families with similar measures taken against Indigenous families in Australia or Canada, or in La Réunion by French authorities. Leimgruber et al. also repeatedly emphasize that the highly influential director of the program, Alfred Siegfried, even after World War II explicitly relied on a racist conception of humanity, referencing scholars who were considered forerunners or supporters of Nazi ideology (Leimgruber et al. 1998, p. 152). They describe Siegfried’s actions as “persecution” (Leimgruber et al. 1998, p. 33) and identify the core injustice in the “indiscriminate application of measures to an entire population group arbitrarily defined by those in power” (Leimgruber et al. 1998, p. 154). In their foundational study on structural racism in Switzerland, Mugglin et al. (2022, p. 39) explicitly frame the child removals for the first time as an instance of structural, racist violence against the Yenish and Sinti. Further measures included birth prevention policies, which to this day remain insufficiently researched. It is known that former Yenish individuals who had been forcibly placed were often, as adults, declared legally incapacitated based on psychiatric reports and institutionalized with the aim of preventing or hindering their reproduction (Galle 2016b, p. 247). On the same psychiatric basis, marriage bans were issued (Diggelmann et al. 2024, pp. 24ff.; Galle 2016, p. 247). Additionally, three forced sterilizations of Yenish women have been documented (Galle 2016). This area clearly requires further research. Additional analyses highlight antiziganist continuities in police discrimination, beginning with the creation of “gypsy registries” (*Zigeunerregister*) in 1911 and continuing to this day in the form of racial profiling of Roma, Sinti, and Yenish at stopping and transit sites (Mattli 2019; Jain 2019). It has been shown that police departments in certain cantons - such as Zurich - maintained special registries of Swiss Yenish and Sinti into the 1990s (Mattli 2019). Ettinger’s (2013) study documents the continued presence of antiziganist stereotypes in coverage by major Swiss media outlets.

2.4 Socio-Political Developments since the Dissolution of the “Children of the Country Road” Program

Following media investigations by the magazine *Beobachter*, the “Children of the Country Road” program was dissolved. This triggered a series of slow but notable developments. In 1986, Federal Councillor Alfons Egli issued an apology in the Swiss Parliament on behalf of the federal government for its involvement in the program. Between 1988 and 1992, the government provided compensation payments capped at CHF 20,000 per individual case. In addition, affected individuals were granted access to their personal records (Meier 2003).

At the political level, Switzerland ratified the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in 1998. Under this framework, the "Travellers" are recognized as a national minority (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2016, p. 115). Since 2016, the relevant groups in Switzerland have been officially referred to by their self-designations Yenish and Sinti. These include both sedentary and nomadic members of each group (Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft, 2021, p. 164). A key objective of the Framework Convention is the protection of national minorities, recognizing that their protection is essential for stability, democratic security, and peace in Europe. It obligates member states to guarantee legal equality and to take measures that promote full and effective equality between minorities and the majority population in all areas of economic, social, political, and cultural life. This includes promoting the conditions that allow minorities to preserve their culture - of which the nomadic way of life, alongside language, is a core element.³ Since 2012, Switzerland's Culture Promotion Act (Article 17) authorizes the federal government to implement measures that support the nomadic way of life.⁴ In 1997, the federal government established the "Stiftung Zukunft für Schweizer Fahrende", based in Bern.⁵ The foundation advocates for the creation of sufficient permanent and temporary halting sites, regularly evaluates the availability of such sites, works to combat discrimination, and supports projects to preserve the cultural identity of the Yenish and Sinti. In response to various parliamentary initiatives, the Federal Office of Culture established a working group tasked with developing an Action Plan⁶ (Aktionsplan) containing recommendations for the federal government on how to improve the structural conditions for promoting the nomadic way of life and the culture of the Yenish, Sinti, and Roma. However, the work on this plan appears to have stalled since 2018. In the context of recognizing crimes against humanity, the federal government has announced its intention to work with the Yenish and Sinti to further clarify the need for reappraisal.⁷

2.5 Current Situation of Nomadic Yenish and Sinti

The continued marginalization of nomadic Yenish and Sinti in Switzerland is most evident in the lack of adequate stopping and halting places (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021). Of the approximately 30,000 Yenish people living in Switzerland, only around 2,000 to 3,000 still pursue a nomadic lifestyle. Additionally, there are several hundred Sinti, most of whom also travel.⁸ The relatively small number of still-nomadic people is a consequence of past persecution (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021, p. 4).

Typically, these groups travel from spring to autumn, and need a permanent residence for the winter months. These permanent places - referred to as "Standplätze" (permanent sites) - serve as official domiciles. They are usually occupied by caravans or small dwellings, such as chalets or container homes, often constructed by the residents themselves. By registering with the local municipality, the Yenish and Sinti gain legal rights equivalent to those of all other Swiss citizens (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021). According to the most recent report by the "Stiftung Zukunft für Schweizer Fahrende", Switzerland needs 40 to 50 such permanent places. As of 2020, however, only 16 sites were in existence - up from 11 in 2000 (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021, p. 5). In addition to permanent sites, there are temporary and transit sites. The former are intended for use during summer travel.

³ See: <https://www.eda.admin.ch/eda/de/home/aussenpolitik/voelkerrecht/internationale-uebereinkommensschutzdermenschrechte/rahmenuebereinkommen-europarat-schutz-nationaler-minderheiten.html>

⁴ Federal Act on the Promotion of Culture: <https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/themen/kulturfoerderungsgesetz.html>

⁵ <https://www.stiftung-fahrende.ch/de/startseite-1.html>

⁶ Action Plan (Bundesamt für Kultur):

<https://www.bak.admin.ch/bak/de/home/sprachen-und-gesellschaft/jenische-und-sinti-als-nationale-minderheit/aktionsplan.html>

⁷ See the official media release: <https://www.news.admin.ch/de/nsb?id=104226>

⁸ <https://www.voices-ngo.ch/de/regionen/stopp-antiziganismus/#jenische-und-sinti>

Given the lack of sufficient infrastructure, many temporary places are misused as de facto permanent settlements. These sites often lack access to water, electricity, or sanitation. Moreover, some temporary places have been closed in recent years. Between 2015 and 2020, eight were shut down. Transit places are increasingly used by Roma from abroad, which the “Stiftung Zukunft für Schweizer Fahrende” considers problematic due to intergroup tensions and competition for space (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021, p. 36).

Efforts to develop all three types of sites have stagnated for years. Cantonal and municipal governments cite prejudices, lack of public acceptance, and bureaucratic burdens as reasons for their inaction (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021, p. 37). The lack of legal halting spaces is a recurrent issue in political debates and media reporting (Gasparo & Röthlisberger 2021). According to surveys and interviews, the shortage of stopping places poses a direct threat to cultural survival and leads to heightened stress (Rossi 2023, p. 89). In the past, it was possible to stay informally on farmland for a small fee, but today people are restricted to designated official sites. These sites are increasingly used jointly by foreign Roma, leading to space conflicts. The search for a suitable place to stay often consumes large amounts of time and disrupts income-generating activities, which in turn results in financial hardship (Rossi 2023, pp. 88–89).

Due to a lack of scientific research on everyday life at halting sites, the author draws on data from city reports on Bern-Buech, which is a permanent site in Bern City. According to the Bern Directorate of Education, Culture, and Sports, around 120 people lived at the site in 2018, including a third who were minors (Direktion für Bildung, Kultur und Sport, 2018, p. 21). The reports indicate a series of poverty-related challenges, including physical and psychological health problems, above-average rates of disability pensions, frequent illness and school absenteeism among children, limited access to education, high unemployment and reliance on social assistance (36.6% in 2016). Additionally, the report notes intrafamilial conflicts and domestic violence. The 2016 social welfare report mentions that in certain cases, child protection concerns arose and the question of reporting to the KESB (Child and Adult Protection Authority) was raised. Given the historical trauma caused by the removal of Yenish children, authorities refrained from filing such reports (Sozialamt Stadt Bern, 2016, p. 10). It must be emphasized that the cited data is from 2016 and 2018 and applies only to the Bern-Buech site. There is no current data available on other sites.

3 Collective Trauma and Transgenerational Consequences

The latest social science research points to the intergenerational emotional and relational consequences of traumatic child removals in the context of so-called ‘compulsory social measures and placements’ in Switzerland, which also include those in Yenish families (Gautschi and Abraham 2024; Gautschi 2022, 2024; Zöller et al. 2021; Abraham 2023). These include silence about the traumatic past, domestic violence and renewed placements in care. The psychological study by Rossi (2023) and the master's thesis by Horber (2022) point out that the ‘Children of the Country Road’ program and the experiences of discrimination still encountered by older Yenish people today have a traumatic effect and are also passed on to subsequent generations. As a result, the Yenish have developed a cautious attitude, which is also passed on to the next generation. This mistrustful reserve and even isolation towards non-Yenish people is particularly evident in their dealings with the authorities (Rossi 2023, p. 125) and stems from past threats by the authorities. These attitudes were prevalent among the Yenish regardless of whether they had been directly affected by the removal of children or not. Rossi (2023) describes the removal of children from Yenish families as a collective trauma. Lerzer (2022) conducted interviews with six younger Yenish people living a nomadic lifestyle as part of her master's thesis in psychology. Her findings point to the pronounced presence of past child removals among the younger generation as well.

This is reflected in a correspondingly high level of fear and anger towards the authorities and current experiences of discrimination, such as police checks at halting places, violence and antigypsyist discrimination against Yenish children at school. They describe exclusion by other children and refusal of schooling by schools. Hagen (2025) shows that the Swiss Yenish people's current self-image is also shaped by antigypsyism.

4 The Role of Science

Science bears a heavy responsibility for the persecution of the Yenish, Sinti and Roma. It fuelled existing stereotypes and racist hierarchies with pseudo-scientific justifications. Swiss research conducted between the 1930s and 1960s predominantly portrayed “gypsies” as inferior and a threat to the established order, citing “work-shyness”, “immorality” and “magic” as reasons (Huonker 2001, 159ff.). In this context, leading Swiss scientists were in contact with colleagues in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany regarding “eugenics”, “racial hygiene” and “criminal biology” (Huonker 2001, p. 164). The relationship between Yenish, Sinti, Roma and researchers is strained by racist “Gypsy research” (*Zigeunerforschung*). On the part of the Yenish, Sinti and Roma, this relationship is still characterised by mistrust in some cases (Huonker 2001; Gautschi 2019).

In 1990, Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti promised a comprehensive scientific review, but this has not yet been fully carried out. In 1998, Walter Leimgruber, Thomas Meier and Roger Sablonier conducted a study on behalf of the Federal Department of Home Affairs (EDI) based on the Pro Juventute files. The authors emphasised the need for further research. The results of the study led the then president of the Pro Juventute Foundation to apologise to the Yenish in 1998. As part of the National Research Programme 51 “Integration and Exclusion” (NRP 51), three research teams began working on the history of the Yenish people in 2003.⁹ As part of the scientific investigation of the ‘administrative detentions’ (administrative *Versorgungen*) by the Independent Expert Commission (Unabhängige Expertenkommission UEK) (2014-2019)¹⁰ and the National Research Programme 76 ‘Welfare and Coercion’ (NRP 76) (2017-2024)¹¹, no studies were conducted that explicitly addressed the issue of the Yenish and Sinti.

5 Conclusion

The existing literature on the history of discrimination against Swiss Yenish and Sinti people and its intergenerational consequences points to deep-rooted and persistent antigypsyism in Swiss society. Antigypsyism is the specific racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as “gypsies” in the public imagination. This includes, among other things, derogatory and exclusionary practices that reproduce structural disadvantages.¹² Research on “compulsory social measures and placements” has shown that poverty, educational disadvantage and the resulting consequences were reproduced (Ammann and Schwendener 2019). It can therefore be assumed that this is also the case for the Yenish and Sinti. The fact that only assumptions can be made in this regard points to a lack of overall picture of the current living situation of the Yenish and Sinti. Despite increased research in recent years, major gaps remain. This applies to both historical

⁹ A complete list of publications by NRP 51 can be found here: <https://www.yumpu.com/de/document/view/21666873/nfp-51-publikationslistedoc-schweizerischer-nationalfonds-snf>

¹⁰ <https://www.uek-administrative-versorgungen.ch/startseite>

¹¹ <https://www.nfp76.ch/en>

¹² The definition refers to the proposal of the Alliance against Antigypsyism: <https://antigypsyism.eu/reference-paper-on-antigypsyism/>

and social science studies on the current situation of the Yenish and Sinti. Schär and Ziegler called for greater commitment on the part of Swiss universities in this regard back in 2014.

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