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Swiss minorities come closer to realising their dreams

A country of four languages and four cultures – that’s the usual way to describe Switzerland, but it’s less than precise. Now, though, the Yeniche and the Sinti are officially listed among Switzerland’s linguistic and cultural minorities. And the Roma are becoming more visible, too.

MARC LETTAU

Suddenly tears started trickling down the cheeks of grown men, who then turned and embraced each other. These men, so visibly moved, belonged to the Yeniche and Sinti peoples and had gathered in Berne for a traditional cultural event. Federal Councillor Alain Berset had been invited to deliver the opening speech. There was an emotional reaction as soon as he uttered his first words: “Dear Yeniche people, dear Sinti people...”.

Nothing remarkable about that way of addressing them, you might think. But for the Yeniche and Sinti who were there on 15 September 2016, it was a

breakthrough: For the first time, they heard a member of the government describe them in terms less vague than the collective term “travelling people”. Berset said: “I acknowledge your demand to be known by your own name and will do all I can to ensure that the Confederation refers to you as Yeniche and Sinti in future.” The Federal Council went a step further just before the turn of the year and explained what it meant by “the promotion of the culture of the Yeniche, Sinti and Roma”. The plan of action put forward may well have been fragmentary, but its choice of words made this a significant event too. Almost casually, the federal gov-

ernment expanded Swiss cultural diversity to include – for the first time in public – not only the Yeniche and Sinti but also the Roma.

Misunderstanding what a minority is

This step is evidence of Switzerland’s continuing efforts to counteract discrimination against minorities. This is something to which it has committed itself, having – in 1995 – ratified the Council of Europe’s Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. Nevertheless, there can – at least as far as the minorities themselves are concerned – be a world

Their long-standing demand for recognition as a national minority is bearing fruit: Yeniche and Sinti representatives in front of the Federal Parliament building in Berne.

Photo: Adrian Moser



of difference between signing a convention and explicitly recognising their identity. As recently as last spring, representatives of the Yeniche and Sinti complained that the authorities were failing to recognise their diversity by casually describing them as “travelling people”. The overwhelming majority have settled, but this does nothing to change their identity as Yeniche or Sinti. Now, though, the Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse, the main umbrella organisation for minorities, some of whom are travellers but most of whom are settled, is full of praise for the Federal Council for having done something that had been long overdue.

The recognition of the minorities makes the relationship between the state authorities and the “gypsies” much less tense than it has been for hundreds of years. The process isn’t over, though. No sooner had the gesture been made than the Radgenossenschaft pointed out that a national minority didn’t really exist if it features nowhere in the teaching materials used in Swiss schools. The Federal authorities are well aware of that, and are doing all they can to drive the process of recognition and reconciliation forward. What makes reconciliation an issue is the fact that, from 1926 until the 1970s, many Yeniche and Sinti suffered at the hands of state and social institutions. Many of their children, for example, were taken away from their families and separately placed with others. The argument used in favour of this policy was that the “itinerants” were trapped in a cycle of “inherited inferiority” that had to be broken.

This aspect of the past, too, is closer to being properly addressed: a law, with the somewhat unwieldy title of “Federal Law on Compensation for Coercive Protection Measures and Foster Care Placements before 1981”, is due to enter into force on 1 April. It will make it possible for victims of coercive protection measures to receive compensa-

One tenth live in caravans

The Yeniche are an ethnic group descended from the marginalised classes in the early modern period who developed their own traditions and their own language. What does the Yeniche language sound like today? It sounds rather like this: “De Oberflotschergaaschi holcht em Fludinaa und linst, dass loori gflotschet wird – denn zum Flotschne biharchts e Fläppe. Wer loori Fläppe biharcht, wird gschräpft.” Which translates as: “The river bailiff goes along the river to check that nobody’s fishing – because you need a licence to do that. If you don’t have a licence, you get punished.” The Sinti, in turn, are a branch of the European Roma. In Switzerland there are strong links between the Yeniche and the Sinti, known as Manouches in French-speaking Switzerland. The Sinti speak their own version of Romany, an Indo-European language. There are estimated to be around 30,000 Yeniche and Sinti, of whom around one tenth still live the travelling life. (mul)

tion payments. A fund of 300 million Swiss francs is being set up for this purpose, and the number of people potentially entitled to compensation makes clear just how deep the wounds inflicted over the course of half a century are: it is estimated at between 12,000 and 15,000 people. They have until 1 March 2018 to submit their claims.

A start may have been made on coming to terms with the past, but the “improvement of conditions for people with an itinerant way of life” and the “promotion of the culture of the Yeniche, Sinti and Roma” that the Federal Council wants to see promise to be a complicated business. For example, far from having more sites available to them, those of the minorities who are still on the road now have access to far fewer of them than they did ten years ago. Progress was promised, but so far the result has been regress. It has been the debate about the lack of sites that has made recognition of the Yeniche and Sinti as Swiss minorities a widely supported cause in majority society. Meanwhile,

the present position and prospects of the estimated 80,000 Roma living in Switzerland are much less clear. They are both the largest of the three minorities and also the least visible. Majority society has largely lost sight of the fact that the Roma in Switzerland can look back on all of 600 years of history. There is evidence from historical documents that they started to arrive there in the early fifteenth century.

Stephan Eicher, for example

The Federal Council’s explicit recognition of the Yeniche, Sinti and Roma comes, no doubt perfectly fortuitously, at exactly the right time. It coincides with a cultural event: the first screenings of the documentary film “Unerhört Jenisch” by Karoline Arn and Martina Rieder are taking place in cinemas. One of the people featured prominently in the film is the singer Stephan Eicher, who manages to fill concert halls in both the German- and French-speaking areas. Eicher has for some time played on his image as a “gypsy” with a suspected Yeniche past. The film shows him tracing his way back to his real Yeniche roots in the Grisons region. It promises to be a mind-boggling experience for cinema audiences. Until now, Eicher’s use of French gypsy motifs and borrowings from the Bosnian gypsy musician Goran Bregović have come across as a rather forced playing with the exotic. When he finds what he’s looking for, though, it becomes clear that he’s not putting on an act, but really is thoroughly at home in this world. And what he has to say is likely to be so perfectly obvious, especially for settled Yeniche and Sinti: acknowledging your roots can overnight change something secretive, shame-ridden and concealed into something authentic.

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