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GYPSY HUNT IN SWITZERLAND

Long pursuit of racial purity

In May this year the Swedish parliament decided to compensate the victims of Sweden's forced sterilisation policy, which was introduced in 1934 and only abandoned in 1975. During the inter-war period, in the prevailing climate of feverish nationalism, policies were introduced throughout Europe to eliminate or control social deviants and foreigners. Under pressure from the new science of eugenics, they reached frenzied heights in Nazi Germany. But they were also pursued in other forms by the Swiss government, which applied them to the Gypsies.

By Laurence Jourdan

"I was taken from my mother at birth. I was put in a home for mentally retarded children, where I first underwent the psychiatric torture inflicted on the children of the Yenish community (1). I was entrusted to the care of Dr Siegfried. The first time I asked him who my parents were, he said 'Your mother's a whore and your father's an antisocial good-for-nothing.' I lived with that for ten years. Until I understood what he meant: my parents were Gypsies."

Mariella Mehr is a Yenish writer who now lives in Italy. For over 25 years she has been writing about the fate of the Yenish Gypsies in Switzerland. From 1926 to 1972 Yenish children were ruthlessly hunted down by the *Oeuvre d'entraide aux enfants de la grand-route* (Association for Assistance to Traveller Children). Like hundreds of others, Mehr was removed from her parents by

force. In her family, three generations were victims of forced sedentarisation: her mother, herself and her son.

Seventy-two years after its foundation, a historical investigation dispelled any ambiguity about the nature of the *Oeuvre*. In June last year Ruth Dreyfuss, a member of the Federal Council, now President of the Swiss Confederation, stated publicly: "The conclusions of the historians leave no room for doubt. The *Oeuvre d'entraide pour les enfants de la grand-route* is a tragic example of discrimination and persecution of a minority that does not share the way of life of the majority."

In the course of almost half a century, more than 600 Yenish children were forcibly taken from their parents by the *Oeuvre*. They were removed from their community and put in foster homes or orphanages. Many were thrown into prison or shut up in mental asylums. They were to be refashioned according to the ideals of a sedentary society. They suffered humiliation, ill treatment and racism. The Yenish were hunted down in German- and Italian-speaking Switzerland, but they were less badly treated in the French-speaking cantons. The *Oeuvre d'entraide pour les enfants de la grand-route*, was set up in 1926 by Pro Juventute, a highly respected Swiss charitable foundation whose stated aim is to "protect children in danger of abandonment and vagrancy". The *Oeuvre's* founder and director, Alfred Siegfried (1890-1972), terrorised Traveller children. The Yenish likened him to Hitler. He hunted down Gypsies with the unflinching assistance of the police and the authorities. Bent on "eradicating the evil of nomadism at its source, i.e. the children, by systematic educative measures," he had a pathological hatred of Travellers, whom he referred to as mentally retarded psychopaths.

The Swiss weekly *Der Schweizerischer Beobachter* brought the scandal to light in 1972. A year later, Pro Juventute was forced to close down the *Oeuvre*. Faced with this black page in its history, in 1987 the Swiss confederation recognised its moral, political and financial responsibility for the campaign. But it was only in 1996 that the Federal Council commissioned a historical study of the period to "determine the aims, structures, funding and activities of the *Oeuvre d'entraide pour les enfants de la grand-route*" and to "elucidate the roles of the confederation and the Pro Juventute foundation". The findings, made public in June 1998, were devastating. In the 1920s the Swiss state set out to combat all forms of marginality. Travellers, described as "social deviants", "good-for-nothings" and "degenerates", were considered by contemporary criminal anthropologists as "congenital vagrants" (2). Their way of life was unacceptable to a bourgeois society convinced that vagrancy leads to crime. They had to be "normalised".

The Yenish, whose nomadism was closely connected with the

way they earned their living, travelled in family groups. For them, the transmission of artisan skills to their children was more important than attending school. The authorities decided to attack their culture and way of life. "Anyone wishing to combat nomadism efficiently must aim to destroy the Travellers' communal existence," Alfred Siegfried wrote. "Hard as it may seem, we must put an end to their family community. There is no other way." The historians concluded that the *Oeuvre d'entraide pour les enfants de la grand-route*, which was supposed to be part of a "policy of social assistance and welfare", was nothing else than a campaign of forced sedentarisation intended to "free society from the evil of nomadic families and groups it deemed to be inferior."

In 1930 the Federal Department of Justice and Police planned the abduction of children over a period of ten years. The Department of the Interior released funds for the operation. According to the historians' report, "between 7% and 25% of the *Oeuvre's* budget was covered by subsidies from the national authorities." This funding continued until 1967. The campaign also received money from private patrons and various associations.

A census of Travellers was carried out at the request of the *Oeuvre*. After having the parents legally divested of their rights, Alfred Siegfried took more than 300 children into care. In his view, the success of his educational endeavours depended on the children's total break with their family surroundings. "Almost every time that as a result of our benevolence or an unfortunate encounter (sic), children who had not yet adjusted or were of unstable character came into contact with their parents," he wrote, "all our efforts came to nothing" (3).

Robert Huber, who was abducted at the age of eight months, met his mother for the first time when he was 20. "The woman before me was a complete stranger. And this woman, my mother, told me I had ten brothers and sisters ... The family no longer existed. None of us knew where the others were ... The Yenish had to do military service. The children were abducted while the men were in the army. When they returned, they found their wives in tears. And if they demanded their children back, they were threatened with prison or internment in a mental hospital." The Yenish were Swiss citizens with all the duties but none of the rights.

This policy was widely supported by the clergy. As the primary purpose was to socialise the children by inculcating the work ethic, they received only a minimal education. For the boys, the only prospect was apprenticeship. The girls were restricted to domestic work. Whether they were entrusted to nuns, sent to work on farms (where they were used as cheap labour) or locked up in penitentiaries, they were daily subjected to ill treatment,

racism and even sexual abuse. Uschi Waser is chair of a foundation called *Naschet Jenische* (Yenish, stand up!). In the space of 18 years she was placed in 23 different institutions. Her case file runs to 3,500 pages. Overwhelmed by its contents, she explains that "Siegfried claimed all Gypsies are liars and thieves ... They don't become liars; they are born that way."

Hereditary inferiority

These prejudices were shared by many Swiss scientists and drove their research. They took shameless advantage of the *Oeuvre's* activities to bolster their theories of the "hereditary inferiority" of nomads. Although it was not standard practice, forced sterilisation also occurred. "Nomadism, like certain dangerous diseases, is primarily transmitted by women," Alfred Siegfried wrote in a 1964 report on the *Oeuvre's* activities. Mariella Mehr describes the methods employed: "When I was three years old, they realised I didn't want to talk. They decided to force me. They used a kind of bath tub ... The patients were made to lie in the tub and covered with a plank so they couldn't get out. Only their heads were above water. They were kept there in freezing-cold water for up to 20 hours." Joseph Jörger, a psychiatrist who was for many years director of the Waldhaus clinic in Coire where many Yenish were interned, was one of the first Swiss ideologists of racial hygiene. According to the historians' report, about a hundred of these victims of science in the service of politics were still in clinics or institutions in 1988.

Since 1987 all files concerning the *Oeuvre's* activities have been transferred from the cantonal authorities to the federal archives in Berne. They are subject to a 100-year ban on publication. Only the Yenish have access to them. Shocked by their contents, which they feared could one day be used against them, the Yenish at first asked for the archives to be destroyed. Then, after the myth of Swiss neutrality had been exposed, they realised the importance of preserving their history. They are also conscious of the damage done to their travelling-based culture by the policy of forced sedentarisation. The Swiss Yenish, whose numbers are estimated at 35,000, now live for the most part in concrete housing blocks. Only about 5,000 still travel the roads.

The *Oeuvre d'entraide des enfants de la grand-route* pursued its activities in the "favourable" period between the wars. In a climate of feverish nationalism, Europe set about upholding moral values and preserving Western culture. Economists were worried by demographic trends, and the elite saw the high birthrate of working-class and "marginal" populations as a threat to the capitalist order. A strong nation could not afford to be burdened by feeble-minded social deviants and foreigners who might hold back its economic development. It was a problem of "social hygiene", and antinatalist eugenics provided the answer.

In 1908 Francis Galton, the British inventor of eugenics, was already advocating the establishment of eugenics societies throughout the world (4). The purpose of the new "science" was to improve the human species by modifying the gene pool. Its proponents advocated the control of reproduction through the sterilisation or castration of those who might "biologically weaken" the race.

In Switzerland, the scientists in charge of the eradication of nomadism were strongly inspired by national-socialist ideology. They helped to establish a policy that ultimately led to the extermination of at least half a million Gypsies during the second world war. Professor Walter Leimgruber, one of the authors of the historians' report, confirms the close collaboration between scientists from Switzerland and Germany: "Swiss and German psychiatrists worked together," he writes, "and Swiss psychiatrists played a large part in drafting the legislation of the Third Reich." The first European law on the sterilisation of the mentally ill was passed in 1928 in Switzerland, in the Canton of Vaud.

This close collaboration is illustrated by the career of Ernst Rüdin (1874-1952), a psychiatrist from German-speaking Switzerland who was director of the Basel University Psychiatric Clinic. In 1933 Rüdin became chairman of Germany's Racial Hygiene Society, which he had helped to found. He advocated the internment of alcoholics and the mentally ill, and eventually joined the Nazi Party. He was one of the three authors of the Law for the Prevention of Hereditarily Diseased Progeny, which was passed in Germany in July 1933 and made sterilisation compulsory for people suffering from congenital mental deficiency, manic-depressive insanity, schizophrenia, epilepsy, hereditary deafness or blindness, chronic alcoholism, etc. This law, under which some 400,000 victims were mutilated, led to the decision of 1 September 1939 on the forced euthanasia of mentally ill patients.

In France, the surgeon and biologist Alexis Carrel, who won the Nobel prize for medicine in 1912, drew up a programme for "hereditary biological aristocracy". The programme was to be implemented via eugenics which, Carrel argued, was essential for the perpetuation of an elite. In his view a race was duty bound to reproduce its best elements (5). In 1941, with authorisation from the Vichy government, he set up the *Fondation française pour l'étude des problèmes humains*, for the purpose of investigating "all suitable measures for safeguarding, improving and developing the French population."

In the 1930s a number of other European countries introduced eugenics legislation. Norway and Sweden passed compulsory sterilisation laws in 1934. A year later, Denmark and Finland

Translated by Barry Smerin

* Journalist. Her report on the persecution of the Yenish children (*Opération enfants de la grand-route*) was recently shown on the Franco-German TV channel Arte.

(1) The three main communities of Gypsies in Central Europe are the Yenish (German speakers said to be of German origin), Sinti and Roma. For further reading, see *Études tsiganes*, vol 8, no 2, Paris, 1996.

(2) Sylvia Thode-Studer, *Les Tsiganes suisses, la marche vers la reconnaissance*, Réalités sociales, Lausanne, 1987.

(3) Alfred Siegfried, *Kinder der Landstrasse*, Pro Juventute, Zurich, 1964.

(4) See Jacques Testard, *Le Désir du gène*, Flammarion, Paris, 1994, p. 38.

(5) See Alexis Carrel, *Man the unknown*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1935.

(6) *The Guardian*, London, 6 March 1999.

followed suit. These laws allowed the sterilisation of the mentally ill, the mentally deficient, epileptics, and patients suffering from hereditary diseases. Parents deemed incapable of raising their children properly could also be sterilised. The mass sterilisation policy claimed 40,000 victims in Norway and 6,000 in Denmark.

In 1921 Sweden had become the first country to establish a state institute of racial biology. It pursued its compulsory sterilisation policy until 1976, as part of a social and racial hygiene programme (6). The victims totalled around 63,000.

In March 1998, after a six-month long investigation, an official committee of inquiry proposed compensation of up to 175,000 Swedish kronor (\$21,000) for the victims. The enabling legislation was passed by the Swedish parliament on 19 May of this year. The surviving victims, estimated at between 6,000 and 15,000, will nevertheless be required to prove they were sterilised against their wishes for "psychological disorders", "epilepsy" or "other forms of mental deficiency". So, if they can overcome the feelings of shame and humiliation that have kept them silent for so long, they will be faced with this further obstacle.
