

Your unknown neighbours: The Yenish people and the Sinti

1. Who they are - a recognised national minority

The Yenish are long-established in Switzerland, throughout the Alpine region, and far beyond. Together with Sinti families, they form a colourful unique people. Depending on the region, they are called *Fecker*, *Chessler* or simply Travellers—and pejoratively “Gypsies”. They are a national minority. According to estimates, there are around 35,000 Yenish in Switzerland, although they are very scattered. The vast majority live settled lives. A minority of around 3,000 people—nonetheless crucial to their collective identity—travel in caravans, at least in the summer months, to pursue their trade and continue their culture. Yenish are of European origin; the Sinti trace their roots to a migration from India. In Switzerland, both communities have long lived intermingled.

2. What they do - from scissor grinders to modern entrepreneurs

Yenish people are all-rounders and survivalists. They practice trades and crafts that are currently in demand, often filling niches that others do not occupy. In the past, this included basket-weaving, textile sales, tinkering with boilers, scissors grinding, rope trading, and often, music. Today their activities have developed: house renovations, recycling, but also graphic designers, filmmaking, accounting, nursing, car sales, and online businesses. Some have even become major entrepreneurs. They are characterized by their craftsmanship and their flexibility on the market. That's why real Yenish people are never unemployed; they simply switch trades. What remains unchanged is their reliance on niche economies and the fact that members of the majority society are their most important customers.

3. What they speak - *Brünlig* and *Jooli* and *Loli*

Over centuries, the Yenish have created their own language: Yenish. The Sinti speak Sintikes, a variant of the Roma language. Yenish has been called the most flowery language in the world, as many words are very vivid and imaginative: *Scheinlig* = the eyes; *Brünlig* = coffee; *Loli* = police officer; *Joli* = wine. The language also borrows words from other languages—even from Hebrew and Celtic. For many Yenish, their language is their last secret; for others it is their most precious cultural asset—proof of their distinct identity as a people. Unfortunately, Yenish is at risk of disappearing among the young generations. Therefore it is so important to care it and pass it on. Just as it is increasingly important to acquire a solid education.

4. Where they travel - the stressful search for places to live

Travelling Yenish and Sinti need space to live. They need sites in winter—where the children can attend school (“Standplätze”)—and summer transit sites (“Durchgangsplätze”). They cannot stay on commercial campsites because they need to carry out their businesses. Yet Switzerland is becoming more and more urbanised. As a result, transit sites are disappearing and spontaneous stops on farmland are increasingly restricted by regulations. As a result, travellers are always under stress in summer, searching for the next transit site. Over the past 15 years, the number of transit sites has dropped by a third—to just over 30 nationwide. At least twice as many are needed. While many in the majority population recognise that these sites are necessary, in referendums many say : “not in my backyard”.

5. Who protects them - Family and friends

In the 20th century, Yenish families were systematically torn apart. They were labelled “vagrants” and their way of life was to be destroyed. This was the explicit aim of the ‘Children of the Country Road’ campaign (Aktion «Kinder der Landstrasse») run by the

state-supported *Pro Juventute* and other organisations. For people who found no protection from the state, the family remains their most important support. Extended families and close friends form the social core of the Yenish and Sinti people. They offer security and cohesion. Spending time with friends and family—ideally around a campfire, even today—and chatting, eating, drinking, and enjoying pastimes such as the traditional throwing game *Bootschnen*, is therefore a key part of Yenish-Sinti culture.

6. What women do - the quiet leaders

Women played a prominent role in the early days of the Yenish culture revival in the 1970s. Women who had been victims of the “Kinder der Landstrasse” campaign and mothers of abducted children were among the spokeswomen of organisations such as the “Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse”, founded in 1975. As in broader society, there is also a tendency among Yenish and Sinti women to retreat into the family sphere. But a closer look reveals that women are still often the ones holding the reins, managing the household finances, and speaking their minds to the authorities. But even today, many are still often victims of state-imposed welfare interventions in their families.

7. What they love - Yenish culture is mobile

Yenish and Sinti have a strong traditional connection to music. There are important Yenish musicians in rural music - such as the unforgettable “Huser-Buebe” - and Sinti musicians in the field of jazz. Instruments like *Schwyzerörgeli*, dulcimer, and violin are especially popular. Art forms that require large equipment or space - like piano playing or sculpture - are more difficult to practice given the space-limited living conditions the Yenish and Sinti face. Still, there are Yenish or Sinti painters, writers and installation artists.

Naturally they often do not want to be reduced to their Yenish identity, they want to be recognised simply as artists. The musician Stephan Eicher, who comes from a Yenish family, is the most prominent example.

8. How Switzerland is becoming more diverse - Yenish, Sinti and Roma enrich the country

In the past, our ethnic groups used to be subsumed under the term “Travellers” (“Fahrende”). Today, they insist on being recognised in their differences as Yenish, as Sinti and as Roma. In recent decades, the number of Roma has grown considerably due to immigration from Eastern Europe and the Balkans; today, it is estimated that around 80,000 Roma of fixed abode live in Switzerland. But belonging to one of these communities often means facing hardship in life and many people therefore hesitate to speak openly about their identity. Coming out is an existential issue for some Yenish, Sinti and Roma; it can jeopardize their position in society. Racial prejudice is still widespread and need to be confronted. The best way are personal encounters between people, on an equal footing, which help to break down stereotypes.

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