

# Swiss gypsies relive a painful past

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## Swiss gypsies relive a painful past

The recent Australian government apology to its aboriginal population has shone the spotlight on past wrongs done to many minorities – in Switzerland to its gypsy community. Like Australian Aborigines, Jenisch gypsy children were also removed from their families. The Jenisch community has now been recognised as a minority. But it says it still lacks full rights.

The Swiss gypsy community, mostly Jenisch, but also some Sinti and Roma, have suffered a long history of discrimination, persecution and social problems. The Jenisch faced particular oppression from the local authorities in the 19th century. In 1850 it was decided that they should be forced to have Swiss citizenship. It was thought at the time that this would encourage them to give up their nomadic lifestyle, have a fixed abode and a job.

But the community held on to its traditions and several decades later, Switzerland was among the first countries in Europe to place

restrictions on where they could stay.



Many Jenisch still find it hard to find sites in Switzerland

Other discriminatory measures were also taken. One of the most notorious was the so-called "Kinder der Landstrasse" (Children of the Road) project. Between 1926 and 1972 the private foundation Pro Juventute and some others removed children from their parents and placed them in children's homes or with foster parents. The authorities and society generally turned a blind eye. Many youngsters suffered abuse or maltreat-

ment. A magazine started a campaign against the practice, and in 1973 the programme was officially ended. In 1986 the then Swiss president apologised for the government's support for the project.

A study carried out by the Swiss National Research Programme found that 586 children were recorded as being affected. But the data is not complete – the real numbers could be as high as around 2,000. Pro Juventute was not the only organisation to be involved in the practice, but it is the only one which has opened its archives to researchers.

Former cabinet minister Ruth Dreifuss has tried – in vain – to persuade parliament to act to get Jenisch documents opened up.

While waiting for clarification of the past, the country's community of up to 35,000 Jenisch continues to fight for its rights. The traditional nomadic lifestyle had become more difficult during this era of globalisation. Army reforms mean that the defence ministry will be putting up some land for sale, which could be transformed into sites for gypsies. *swissinfo*

## Nomads in Switzerland?

When we think of nomads, we usually think of Bedouins, or maybe of Native Americans roaming the prairies (remember Winnetou?), or, a bit closer, of Australian Aborigines. In this Helvetia you can read about Swiss nomads, the Gypsies, and their plight. Gypsies have always been marginalized in Switzerland and have never been trusted. This article is not about gypsies, but about a much more mainstream, most respected section of Swiss society. Better roads and better cars and agricultural machinery might have changed this lifestyle, but it still made it into Wikipedia, under the heading of transhumance.

Transhumance means that people do not live at the same place all year round. Farmers in the Valais might live on three or even four levels. They would spend the win-

ter months in their village, let's say on 1300 m above sea level. In May they move up to the Maiensäss for about a month and a half. Then they move back to the village for about a month, to make hay, then



up again to the Maiensäss to make hay there, then down again for the harvest of grain and potatoes in August, then up again and finally down with the cows for winter. The father or an older son might spend all summer even a level higher, on the Alp. *tb*



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