

# The fight against the Swiss Yenish and the 'Children of the open road' campaign

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In order to eradicate vagrancy in Switzerland, between 1926 and 1973 children of Yenish origin were systematically taken from their parents and placed with foster families, in homes and institutions. With the support of the authorities and under the auspices of the renowned *Pro Juventute* foundation, the campaign was carried out by the so-called *Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse* ('Relief Organisation for the Children of the open road'). This campaign is nowadays seen as one of the darkest chapters in recent Swiss history, but is little-known outside Switzerland.

Firstly the 'Children of the open road' campaign is described: the aims and the methods, the accomplishment and the institutional network, the extent and the consequences. In addition, due to exceptional access to the files of the *Hilfswerk*, new findings can be presented. Secondly, the political and ideological context is shown. It is demonstrated that the 'Children of the open road' campaign was only the rigorous continuation of an assimilation policy, which started in Switzerland after the foundation of the nation state in the middle of the nineteenth century, and which focused on marginalised people in general. Furthermore, it is pointed out that the aims and methods of the *Hilfswerk* were embedded in a broad scientific discourse about vagrancy and eugenics.

*Keywords:* Yenish (Jenische), Switzerland, Kinder der Landstrasse ('Children of the open road'), gypsy politics, assimilation, vagrancy discourse

## Introduction

On 18 July 1940, Bruno Kern,<sup>1</sup> aged eighteen months, is taken away from his parents' house by the police to a children's home by the order of his guardian, Dr. Alfred Siegfried. When he dies at the age of thirty-four in 1973, he has spent more than thirteen years in various institutions: two years in a children's home, three years in an institution for children with learning difficulties, one year in a psychiatric ward and four years in several closed (youth) custody centres. In the early 1970s he spent another two years in a semi-open asylum for alcoholics

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1. Name changed.

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and other so-called 'old men's asylums'. Bruno Kern spent less than a year of his life not under guardianship.<sup>2</sup>

It is always the guardian and director of the *Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse* ('Relief Organisation for the Children of the open road') who orders the numerous changes of foster families, institutionalisations and even the internment—mainly because of trifling matters—in institutions or prisons. He acts at his own discretion and lets the ward feel his power. 'If you don't behave, I'll have you arrested by the police. Then you'll be locked up again and there will be no one to help you', says a letter sent by the guardian to his 14-year-old ward, who has been trying to resist his ill-treatment.<sup>3</sup>

Bruno Kern never meets his father and only gets to know his mother when he is an adult. On at least one occasion, solely due to a mistake made by his guardian, he meets one of his siblings when he is accidentally sent to the same psychiatric clinic where his brother, previously unknown to him, has also been incarcerated.

In most Swiss cantons local authorities are responsible for social care. Because these bodies accept, or even condone the guardian's decisions, everything is dealt with on a purely administrative level. There are no court orders and due to lack of evidence there wouldn't, in any event, be a case to answer.

From infancy on, Bruno Kern is characterised as psychologically abnormal and, without having committed any offence whatsoever, is criminalised. When he is not locked up in some institution, he is forced to work as cheap labour, naturally under the constant control of his omnipotent guardian. Even when he reaches adulthood he is not released from guardianship. By means of a psychiatric report, he is pressurised into requesting his own incapacitation and incarceration.

In Switzerland between 1926 and 1973, several hundred children suffered the same plight as Bruno Kern. They were all removed from their parents' care by the so-called *Hilfswerk* and there was one principal reason for this: they were from Yenish families.

Time and again, there are reports in the Swiss press about the 'Children of the open road' campaign of the *Hilfswerk*. In addition, there have been a series of autobiographical and academic publications.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, outside Switzerland very little is known about this. New insights finally resulted in academic research within the framework of the National Research Project 51 'Social Integration and Social Exclusion'. This article aims to summarise past

2. The fate of Bruno Kern is extensively covered in Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier (1998: 86–127).

3. Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bern (hereafter BAR), J 2.187 (Akten Kinder der Landstrasse [Pro Juventute]), 324, 29 May 1953.

4. For a survey see Meier (2003, 2005).

and present findings by looking at questions such as who the Yenish are, why and how they were persecuted and what role the *Hilfswerk* played. Moreover, this article sheds light on the particular circumstances that actually led to the politics of forced assimilation. I would claim that the goals of the *Hilfswerk* can only be comprehended by research into the assimilation policy and the scientific discourse of that time.

### The Yenish

The Yenish (German 'Jenische') are a socio-cultural minority in Switzerland and neighbouring parts of Germany, France and Austria. Outwardly visible characteristics are certain common family names and communal citizenships as well as the practice of itinerant occupations such as hawking, tinkering and knife grinding. Additionally, some of the Yenish lead an itinerant life-style. Another distinguishing feature is their group identity, which sets them clearly apart from the settled majority of the population. Following their own traditions and using a special language add to this separation. Though they speak the particular national language, they also use many colloquialisms borrowed from Yiddish and certain Romani words (Michon 1997; Roth 2001: 98–108, 137–73; Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004: 5).

Although the Yenish life-style is similar to that of the Romani, it seems clear today that they are of indigenous origin (Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004: 299–301; Bancroft 2005: 8). Contrary to this, it has also been claimed that the Yenish are of Celtic origin, a sub-tribe of the Roma, in any case an autonomous ethnic group (Huonker 1987: 11–19). Because of their often precarious means of earning a living, many Yenish, even in the twentieth century, lived in poor conditions, literally at the fringes of the settled population.

There is no reliable data concerning the number of Yenish people living in Switzerland today. According to figures published by Yenish organisations,<sup>5</sup> the population is between 30,000 and 35,000. Around 2,000 to 3,000 Yenish are thought to be leading, at least during the summer months, a traditional travelling life-style (Tcherenkov and Laederich 2004: 300). It is unclear, however, whether or not the number of Yenish has declined since the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even though many of their traditional professions—such as basket making, brush making and tinkering—have almost disappeared, this minority has always shown great economic flexibility. Today, instead of fixing pots and pans, some make a living mending cars, dealing in spare parts and antiques, or recycling electronic and computer scrap.

5. There are three Yenish organisations: the *Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse* ('Wheel Association of the Open Road'), which since 1985 has been recognised as a representative by the authorities, the *Naschet Jenische* foundation, and the *Schinagl* association.

Although the majority of the Yenish today lead a settled lifestyle, most people still associate the word 'Yenish' with the travellers' way of life, which, though inaccurate, is also thought to be true of the Romani or 'gypsies' in general (Laederich 2003). What the Sinti, Romani and Yenish have in common, however, is their experience of discrimination and persecution over the past centuries.

### Travellers in the Swiss nation state

Before 1850, travellers suffered from hostility, persecution and expulsion on a regular basis (Huonker 1987; Meyer 1988: 96–118; Meier and Wolfensberger 1998: 369–434).<sup>6</sup> The foundation of the Swiss nation state in 1848 added impact to the policy towards all marginalised groups of people (Argast 2007). Accordingly, an assimilation policy was pursued which was the hallmark of Swiss gypsy policy right up to the 1970s.

In the first instance, all the so-called 'homeless' underwent general selection. In accordance with the Homeless Law ('Bundesgesetz die Heimathlosigkeit betreffend') of 1850, it was determined who should be considered Swiss and who should be naturalised or expelled. To clarify their identity, all homeless people were arrested and detained for several weeks. The local, indigenous travellers, the Yenish, became Swiss citizens, whereas the others were mainly expelled and some even forced to emigrate overseas (Simonet 1953: 511–17; Meier and Wolfensberger 1998: 369–434).

Politically the new citizens had equal rights but they were still deprived of social and economic integration and they were not permitted the right to use common property. The Homeless Law of 1850 comprised regulations which were directly aimed at their way of life (Egli 1997: 109; Leimgruber 1998: 119). It was, for example, forbidden to take children of school age on the road and mobility was further constrained by the fact that expensive licences for travelling professions had to be purchased separately in each Swiss canton. Similarly, other federal or cantonal legislation was designed to assimilate these people by force. This sanctioned persecution of offenders led to social discrimination, which culminated in the criminalisation, not just of specific individuals, but of a whole minority (Egger 1982).

In the years following the turn of the century, several new regulations were introduced which had a major impact on travelling people. In 1887, after the cantons had already decided to pass a general Refusal of Entry for all foreign travellers, the Federal Council followed suit in 1906 as a measure against the so-called 'gypsy plague'. This discriminatory regulation was incompatible

6. The following paragraph is based on Meier (2007: 227–30).

with international treaties and this in turn prompted protests from Germany. Nevertheless, the Federal Council stuck to its former decision. Furthermore, it prohibited the transportation of gypsies on railway trains and ships. In fact, this regulation, which contravened fundamental human rights, was also aimed at travelling people within Switzerland, namely, the Yenish (Egger 1982: 58–70).

In 1909 Switzerland actually took the initiative in an attempt to solve the so-called 'gypsy question' by proposing an international conference. However, the declared goal of a convention about the naturalisation of all gypsies was met with disapproval by the neighbouring states. Therefore the conference never took place (Egger 1982: 63–4).

From around 1912 on, other regulations were directly targeted at the travelling community whose way of life was considered to be in direct opposition to that of the bourgeois order and even as downright depraved.

When the Swiss Civil Code (SCC) came into effect, family and child legislation was introduced and enforced, which, under certain circumstances, allowed severe intrusion into the family sphere and into the rights of the individual. Under the banner of 'child protection', actions could be taken which ranged from what were called 'suitable measures' (Art. 283, SCC) to 'providing for the child' (Art. 284), or issuing a 'care order' (Art. 285). In certain cases, adults could be deprived of their legal rights, for example in cases of alcoholism, depravity or economic failure (Art. 370) or at their own request (Art. 372) (Ramsauer 2000: 37–41; Meier 2005: 172).

Because there were no clear definitions of the circumstances under which these measures might be taken, these new laws, enforced at the discretion of individuals, became an effective instrument with which to act against all kinds of non-conformist life-styles.

As mentioned above, the Swiss government tried to solve the problem of foreign gypsies by issuing refusals of entry, which, in reality, was in breach of international law.

Although the borders could not be closed completely—and some Roma and Sinti did come to Switzerland from time to time—overall, these measures had the desired effect. Even during World War II, gypsies were generally classified as unwanted refugees. The refusal of entry could also be applied to those fleeing the Nazi regime in Germany. Only in 1972 was this general refusal of entry for gypsies abolished, which incidentally had been executed on the basis of appearance only (Huonker and Ludi 2001: 97–100).

### *The Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse*

In the meantime, Swiss gypsy policy concentrated on the local 'gypsies', the Yenish, who were usually called 'Kessler' or 'Spengler' (tinkers), or 'Korber'

(basket makers) or simply 'Vaganten' (vagrants) by the settled community.

In the 1920s they were increasingly targeted. This integration and assimilation policy, which confused social welfare with maintaining a pure and healthy nation, was by no means supported only in right-wing bourgeois circles. At first the Yenish were targeted only in certain cantons, and finally, all over Switzerland.

In 1926 the *Hilfswerk für die Kinder der Landstrasse* was founded in order to eradicate vagrancy. The *Hilfswerk* was part of the Pro Juventute foundation, which was established in 1912. Among the members of the board were several prominent figures from the Swiss political and economic establishment as well as from social welfare circles and the army. The fact that it was at all times presided over either by an acting or a former federal councilor—a member of the national government—shows the importance of the panel (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 146).

Under the pretence of providing help for deprived children of 'vagrants', the *Hilfswerk* now tried to fight 'vagrancy' as an inferior way of life, no longer compatible with modern times. Since previous attempts to settle these people had failed, it was decided that from then on this would be more rigorously dealt with.<sup>7</sup> The declared goal was the extinction of itineracy. The founder of the *Hilfswerk*, Alfred Siegfried, left no doubts about his determination to achieve his goal: 'He who wants to fight vagrancy successfully, must try to break the bonds of the travelling community. As hard as this may sound, he has to tear the family apart. There's no other way.' (*Mitteilungen* Sept. 1943: 4)

By radically changing their social milieu, the children were to be alienated from their 'vagrant' family members to prevent social reproduction of this minority. This meant nothing other than removing the children from their parents' home as early in life as possible. Even if children had been removed from their parents before by welfare organisations or local authorities, the 'Relief Organisation' now tightened this policy and started systematically to remove all children in a family. As the parents were considered to be debauched and unfit to educate their children, their right of custody of their own children was removed with the help of the authorities, according to the relevant sections of the Civil Code. The children were then put under guardianship and placed with foster parents or in homes and institutions. Alienated from their families, they were to be turned into 'useful' and 'settled' members of society. Clearly, the welfare of needy children was not the priority but the enforcement of a policy to stamp out 'vagrancy' by tearing families asunder.

The privately run 'Children of the open road' campaign reached its peak during the 1930s and 1940s and although it lost some of its momentum in

7. Pro Juventute Archiv, Zürich (hereafter PJA), A 30 (Stiftungsrats-Protokolle), 2 Oct. 1927: 3.

later years, the *Hilfswerk* operated until 1973. It was forced to close down after a widely read magazine, *Der Schweizerische Beobachter*, ran a series of articles about the organisation's malpractice, which triggered an outcry of disbelief and disgust across wide sections of the population (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 82–4).

### Preliminary and new findings

There are a number of publications with different approaches towards the *Hilfswerk*. Most notably there is the vindicating account of the campaign by the long-serving director of the *Hilfswerk*, Dr. Alfred Siegfried (1964). In addition to various newspaper articles, several researchers tried to approach the topic on a more scientific level (Gerth 1981; Huonker 1987; Gschwend 2002; Sambuc 2005; 2007).

Due to the highly restrictive access rules, the original files, which are stored in the Federal Archives (Bundesarchiv) in Berne, could only be viewed for a single research study (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998). Furthermore, based on particular files and interviews with people affected, there are unpublished MA theses, submitted to the University of Zurich (Lombardi-Maassen 1982; Renggli 2000; Galle 2002). There are also a number of autobiographies and biographies (Huonker 1987: 136–258; Roselli 1997; Moser 2000a; 2000b; 2002; Wenger 2003) and literary works (Mehr 1987) by people affected by the campaign, which are based on individual dossiers. Finally, the 'Children of the open road' campaign has found its way into films. There are various documentaries, reports and a feature film which deal with the topic.<sup>8</sup>

Thanks to the renewal of authorisation to access the files within the National Research Programme (NRP) 51 'Social Integration and Social Exclusion' by the Swiss National Science Foundation, it has been possible to gain crucial new insight into the workings of the *Hilfswerk*. In particular, after the examination and analysis of all the records, it is now possible to give exact numbers of children affected as well as other aspects of the campaign.

For the first time, we now know how many 'Children of the open road' were actually taken care of by the *Hilfswerk*. In previous publications some authors spoke of 619, others of 800 or even up to a 1,000 cases. After viewing all the dossiers, the exact number is 586 cases, with slightly more girls (300) than boys (286) affected.<sup>9</sup> Most of these children came from the four cantons of

8. The feature film *Kinder der Landstrasse* (1992), directed by Urs Egger, screenplay by Urs Egger and Johannes Boesiger. Zürich: DschointVenture; there are several documentary films on the subject: *Die letzten freien Menschen* (1991) by Oliver M. Meyer, Zürich: FilmArts; *Die Kinder der Landstrasse* (1999) by Laurence Jourdan. arte-Reportagen; several documentaries and reports by the Swiss Television or Hessian Broadcasting and others.

9. Among the files of the *Relief Organisation for the Children of the open road* using up a total of

Grisons (294), Ticino (96), St. Gallen (94), and Schwyz (39). Remarkably, the children came from only a few families or groups of persons, sharing the same family names and communal citizenships.<sup>10</sup> This accounts for the high number of siblings among the 'Children of the open road'. Four hundred and ninety five (84.5%) of them were siblings or have other family ties, as most of the affected families were somehow related to each other. Quite frequently there were members of different generations of the same families. In 96 cases the fathers or mothers had already been wards of the *Hilfswerk* and in five cases, even the grandparents had been.

The number of children cared for rose continuously in the first 15 years after the foundation of the *Hilfswerk* in 1926. After one year 51 children were already in its care. By 1930 the number had risen to 160 and by 1935 to 233. The campaign reached its peak in 1939 with the staggering number of 283 wards. Then numbers started to drop continuously: in the last year of the war there were 221, and by 1950 there were only 150 children left. When the director of the *Hilfswerk* retired in 1959, he passed on 92 wards to his successor, Clara Reust. Up to that moment he had mainly run the organisation with the help of one female assistant and had been the guardian of all but two children. It is difficult to understand how Alfred Siegfried, having many other time-consuming commitments, managed to take care of all his wards and do the work involved. By the mid-1960s the number of wards had dropped below 50 and when the organisation was forced to stop its campaign in 1973 there were 29 children left.<sup>11</sup>

Most of the 'Children of the open road' were taken from their parents' homes and social milieu before they were old enough to go to school. They grew up in foster families, locked up in homes and institutions. Later on they worked as cheap labour force on farms or as domestic helps. Accordingly, the majority of the children grew up without any contact with their parents or siblings, under the thumb of the *Hilfswerk*. As a result, 30 per cent of the children did not attain legal age at 20. 'At their own request' (as it was claimed), or using psychiatric reports, 170 adults were incapacitated and remained under the control of the *Hilfswerk*.

The initial idea of placing the children with foster families could not be realised. Siegfried himself had to admit this fact several times but he blamed a lack of available places as well as the wards themselves because, due to their charac-

32 meters of storage in the Federal Archives in Berne, are files of 195 so-called returnees. These were children with either Swiss parents or a Swiss mother or father resident abroad who were sent back to Switzerland because of hardship or to get an education. They were looked after by the Pro Juventute foundation. Furthermore, there are dossiers of 119 children which were cared for as single cases out of various reasons.

10. It is a Swiss peculiarity that national citizenship is always connected to a cantonal and a communal citizenship.

11. The numbers in this article slightly differ from those given in Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier (1998: 30–2). The latter were mainly based on the protocols of the yearly sessions of the Pro Juventute Foundation Council (PJA, A 30, 1925/26–1972/73).



ters, they were 'incompatible with family life' (Siegfried 1964: 38–40). Of those who were lucky enough to be permanently placed with families, 34, mainly girls, were adopted. Most of the children, however, spent their adolescence in homes.

Eighty-five per cent were in a children's home at least once and 41 per cent saw the inside of a closed youth custody centre. Many were subjected to psychiatric examination and were therefore held for long periods in special institutions for children with behavioural disorders or in psychiatric clinics. Additionally, the 'Children of the open road' suffered from stigmatisation and discrimination, either at school, in their foster families, in the children's homes or at work. In many cases the children were declared mentally deranged or even criminalised (Galle and Meier 2006).

In order to give an impression of what childhood and adolescence for the 'Children of the open road' were like, the different stages in the lives of two brothers and a girl will be outlined below.

### Growing up in children's homes: three 'cases'

The older of two brothers is brought to a Catholic children's home in 1938, together with two of his six siblings. The home, close to the small industrial town of Grenchen in central Switzerland, is run by nuns. One week prior to this, his parents were stripped of their parental rights according to Article 285 of the Swiss Civil Code. His new guardian is the director of the *Hilfswerk*, Alfred Siegfried. He stays in this home until 1947.

Because the nuns can no longer cope with him he is passed on to a family who runs a gardening business. Due to unfavourable conditions and tension between him and the family concerning his work, he is taken to another children's home by his guardian after just seven months. In 1948, he is placed as a farmhand with one of Siegfried's many acquaintances and a year later he is sent to a baker's family as a cheap helper. Because his master is not happy with the ward, his guardian considers locking him up and in 1949, at the age of 16, the boy is transferred to a closed institution where he has to stay for 10 months.

When he is released he is once more given to a farmer. However, after only three months he is locked up at the infamous *Bellechasse* prison because of a minor incident. All in all, 99 'Children of the open road' of both sexes, became familiar with the inside of this prison and reformatory in the Canton of Fribourg. Up to 1964 the ward is locked up an additional seven times in *Bellechasse* without a court order. For his guardian and the authorities his offences of 'being defiant and unreliable' or 'running away from work' are sufficient to order administrative custody of up to two years.<sup>12</sup>

12. BAR, J 2.187, 215; 715; 716; 1126.

The story of his brother starts at the same children's home in Grenchen. He is nine months old. He too, is passed on from one home to another. Altogether he sees the inside of six institutions. One of them is *Bellechasse*, where he meets his older brother. Labeled as a psychopath by his guardian, he is interned in an institution for children with behavioural disorders at the age of eleven and put under observation. The immediate cause was an incident where the boy tore up his rosary after his first communion. In the subsequent report it is stated that he suffers from 'endogenic vagrancy', which cannot be helped through change of social milieu or by special education.<sup>13</sup> Four years later, he is once again subjected to a psychiatric assessment. As a result he is interned in a psychiatric institution for 10 months, where he meets his, up till then, unknown brother, Bruno Kern, mentioned above.<sup>14</sup>

Female wards experience a similar fate. The case of a girl born in 1922 gives a dramatic example of this. In 1926 she is taken away from her parents and put under the custody, and from 1932 the guardianship, of Dr. Alfred Siegfried. After staying with a family who is not pleased with her, she is put into a children's home for eight years. When she gets out at the age of fifteen, she is placed with a family as a domestic help. However, after only four days she is transferred to a closed reformatory. In 1938 she is brought to the Alsatian town of Strasbourg to spend her days in an institution for so-called fallen women.

At the outbreak of the Second World War she and a few other wards are transported back to safety in Switzerland in a cloak-and-dagger operation by their guardian Alfred Siegfried. Because there are no other options, she and the other girls are interned in Bellechasse prison where she spends four and a half years. There is not a single court order for either this internment or her sojourn in a psychiatric clinic and closed youth custody centre; these were purely administrative sanctions issued by the guardian and local authorities. She is only released from her guardianship when she turns 25. However, as the files of the *Hilfswerk* show, she remains under observation until 1954.<sup>15</sup>

Under such circumstances, most of the children never received a normal education. Later in life, having only rudimentary schooling—some did not even complete primary school—they had to earn a living as maids, farm hands or unskilled labourers. Most of them were only able to find work thanks to the booming economy after the war.

### The network of the *Hilfswerk*

The *Hilfswerk* would have never reached its goal without being able to rely on a manifold network. The homes and institutions mentioned above were part of

13. BAR, J 2.187, 215. 14. BAR, J 2.187, 215; 344; 345; 1126.

15. BAR, J 2.187, 158; 575; 576; 1123/7; 1125; Huonker 1987: 149, 162.

it. Compared to other European countries, the Swiss welfare system was, at the time, underdeveloped and to a great degree influenced by private and denominational, mainly Catholic, institutions.<sup>16</sup> In these the *Hilfswerk* found willing executors of its policy, partly for ideological but more often economic reasons. Many foster families and employers, where the wards of the *Hilfswerk* were staying or working for very little money, possibly acted out of similar motives. The *Pro Juventute* foundation was part of the network too, not just because it paid the wages. The *Hilfswerk* acted in its name and was supported logistically. When gathering information about individuals, the *Hilfswerk* could rely on Pro Juventute's large network of administrative offices around the country (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 145–55).

Furthermore, local, regional and national authorities played a greater or lesser role in the enforcement of the *Hilfswerk*'s policy. Alfred Siegfried could never have become the guardian of several hundred children without the approval of the mainly local guardianship authorities. They could hardly cope with their task, and were therefore usually more than happy that the *Hilfswerk* took the problem off their hands.

Finally, the role of the highest Federal authorities in supporting the *Hilfswerk* should not be underestimated. The rather modest yearly subsidies of 15,000 and in later years 10,000 Swiss francs were of less importance than the subsequent legitimisation (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 161–2). Because of this support the 'Children of the open road' campaign was widely perceived as a quasi-governmental campaign. This was of course an advantage for the privately run *Hilfswerk*. When dealing with requests for confidential data from the police and other authorities, they usually received it.

### The extent of the 'Children of the open road' campaign

Even for a country the size of Switzerland, the number of 586 'Children of the open road' might seem rather low, especially because the organisation operated for nearly 50 years. Noticeable is the fact that the campaign focused on a few families in even fewer cantons. This makes it clear that the campaign's impact was after all rather limited even though it was propagated as a national task. As a matter of fact, the *Hilfswerk* did not always succeed in implementing its policy and destroying Yenish families.

There are various reasons for this. Some parents resisted the removal of their children. Some of them changed address to evade the *Hilfswerk* and the authorities. There are several cases on record where the *Hilfswerk* failed to or only after several attempts managed to get hold of the children. From other cases,

16. A survey on the Swiss welfare institutions is given by Wild (1933).

which are not on record, we know that they moved away from areas which were badly affected by the campaign, such as east and central Switzerland.

It must, however, be said that the *Hilfswerk* was not the only institution that removed the children of Yenish parents. The local authorities in various cantons as well as other so-called aid organisations followed a similar course. One of these was the Catholic *Seraphische Liebeswerk*. They, however, refused access to their archives for research. One can therefore assume that there is an unknown number of cases, but the extent is difficult to assess.

### The consequences of the campaign

Even if the scope of the campaign was rather limited, the consequences for those affected by it were devastating. Most ‘Children of the open road’ were deeply stigmatised. The stigmatisation referred to (alleged) individual features such as the shape of the body, looks, sexual behaviour, health, educational and practical performance, the so-called character, (social) behaviour, mental or psychological condition (Meier 2008). However, as mentioned earlier, there are also collective stigmata or what Erving Goffman (1963) called phylogenetic features: ‘gypsy-like’, ‘vagrancy type’, etc. The result of this stigmatisation is discrimination. Countless cases of unequal treatment in foster families, homes, schools, and at work bear witness to this fact. Furthermore, through the sanctions ordered by the guardian and authorities like the internment in institutions, many were not only pathologised but also criminalised (Galle and Meier 2006).

In many cases the *Hilfswerk* succeeded in alienating the children from their parents permanently and in the destruction of all family ties. Additionally, the campaign for the ‘Children of the open road’ not only affected the 586 children and youths. If the parents, siblings and relatives are taken into account, the number of people affected multiplies. Many ‘Children of the open road’ and their families suffered from severe physical and psychological damage. Some suffered or are still suffering today from this traumatic experience and some committed suicide. Even those who have overcome the trauma and have learnt to live with their fate, feel that they have been robbed of their childhood and youth and consider this period of their lives as having had a negative effect on their life in general (Meier 2005: 194). Inarguably, the *Hilfswerk* was experienced as a huge threat by this minority and it still plays—at least for the older generation—an important role in the collective memory.

The exposure of the methods of the *Hilfswerk* in 1972 and the public outcry that followed not only forced the organisation to close down in 1973, but resulted in a solidarisation and politicisation of the affected Yenish minority. They formed interest groups of which the so-called *Radgenossenschaft der*

*Landstrasse* (literally, 'Wheel Association of the Open Road') was officially recognised as a representative by the Federal authorities (Roth 2001: 45–6; Meier 2005). In 1986, as a consequence of the pressure exerted by this organisation, the Federal Council apologised officially for the financial support of the *Hilfswerk* over decades. The extensive records of the *Hilfswerk* were placed in the Federal Archives in Berne in the same year. Those affected were granted access to view their dossiers compiled by the *Hilfswerk* and finally the Swiss government paid out a total of 11 million Swiss francs in compensation. Today the Swiss Federation gives financial support to the 'Future for Swiss Travellers' foundation (*Stiftung Zukunft für Schweizer Fahrende*), founded in 1997 (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 82–4).

### The *Hilfswerk* and public opinion

As much as the methods of the *Hilfswerk* are condemned today, there was little public opposition to them between 1926 and 1973. Although interested lawyers or socially committed members of the public criticised the actions of the organisation or even expressed their disbelief in specific cases,<sup>17</sup> the actual aim of the campaign—the eradication of vagrancy—was never questioned. This is also true of the magazine *Der Schweizerische Beobachter*, which hardly ever criticised the *Hilfswerk*, even though, prior to 1972, the organisation's malpractice had been brought to their attention on several occasions.<sup>18</sup>

There are various reasons for this. For one thing, there were thousands of children born out of wedlock or orphans who shared a similar fate to the 'Children of the open road'. They too were growing up in foster families, homes and institutions or working as farm hands (Schoch, Tuggener and Wehrli 1989). From this point of view the Pro Juventute campaign was not exceptional but just a racially motivated extreme case of an otherwise normal approach to dealing with families and children of certain social classes and minorities (Hürlimann 2002: 124).

Another reason was that there was broad agreement in society about how good Swiss citizens should lead their lives. The *Hilfswerk* could rely on this not only for its fight against so-called vagrancy but there was also support from sections of the scientific community. Especially in the inter-war period, this community led a discourse on eugenic measures (Tanner 2007), which also involved vagrants as a social minority. Not only psychiatrists, but also lawyers, social scientists, social workers and, finally, the *Hilfswerk* itself, all contributed towards this scientific discourse.

17. BAR, J 2.187, 259, 8 Apr. 1960.

18. BAR, J 2.187, 216, 14 Jun. 1946; 201, 17.5.–29 May 1956; 258, 28 Nov. 1956; 381a, 23.9.–26 Oct. 1964; 231, 23 Sept. 1964–25 Nov. 1964; 217, 15 Mar. 1968.

### The beginnings of the Swiss vagrancy discourse

The Swiss vagrancy discourse was mainly shaped by the psychiatrist Johann Josef Jörger, the long-standing director of the well-known psychiatric clinic *Waldhaus* in the canton of Grisons.<sup>19</sup> After many years of research, his first relevant work was published in 1905 in the *Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie*, edited by the infamous Alfred Ploetz, carrying the meaningful title *Die Familie Zero* ('The Zero Family') (Jörger 1905). His second work was dedicated to another 'vagrant family' from Grisons and was published in a commemorative publication for the renowned Swiss psychiatrist, social reformer and entomologist Auguste-Henri Forel (Jörger 1918). Jörger's works tried to prove that the Yenish suffered from a certain hereditary 'deviation from the common family type' and from 'homo sapiens' in general. From his point of view, the Yenish were guided by physical urges rather than conscience and thus belonged to a lower level of civilisation. The results were, Jörger concluded, 'vagrancy, alcoholism, crime, indecency, poverty of mind and insanity, pauperism' as well as extraordinary 'early and strong sexual desire and reproductive instinct' (Jörger 1925: 25).

Following Jörger's publications, which found widespread recognition internationally as well as in Switzerland—his two main works were published in 1919 in a book entitled *Psychiatrische Familiengeschichten* ('Psychiatric Family Stories') with the renowned Springer publishers in Berlin (Jörger 1919)—the original discourse, which had mainly focused on the issue of public order, was increasingly eclipsed by a, in the widest sense, genetic–eugenic one.

Jörger's work also brought a scientific approach to the Swiss vagrancy discourse. His method of genealogical research and family-tree reconstruction became the accepted thing and was used by many researchers up to the 1960s, for example by the notorious Robert Ritter (Hohmann 1991). In particular, Jörger's assumptions of the natural inferiority of the Yenish people, of hereditary weak characteristics, and the bad influence of women as well as a rather milieu-based theory, led to the conclusion of the need for re-education. Jörger also dealt with the question of whether the Yenish were gypsies or a particular ethnic group. He clearly rejected both; for him the Yenish were simply former homeless of different origin.

Jörger's successors as directors of the *Waldhaus* clinic continued his research and published on the subject of the 'vagrancy question'. Doing so, they essentially adopted Jörger's point of view. One of them, Otto Pflugfelder, has to be mentioned especially in this context. He was the director of the *Waldhaus* clinic from 1951 until 1977. For decades he compiled partly monstrous family

19. The following is based on Meier (2007: 234–38).

trees, using different colours, of Yenish and many other families in the Canton of Grisons. These family trees are today kept in the State Archives of Grisons in Chur and are not open to the public. To compile them Pflugfelder also used data from the files of the *Hilfswerk*.<sup>20</sup> Even after the organisation was criticised by the general public, he remained in favour of its practices.<sup>21</sup>

Pflugfelder's successor, Benedikt Fontana, wrote his doctoral thesis on the subject of whether nomadism could be explained as a 'psychopathological phenomena'. Although his results did not confirm his theory, he was in no doubt, that nomadism was a behaviour pattern, which was directly opposed to the Western civilised society and was the trigger mechanism for 'anti-social behaviour', especially petty crime, alcoholism, violence, etc. He explicitly pointed out the 'successful' re-education scheme of the *Hilfswerk*. His medical doctoral thesis was actually based on the *Hilfswerk*'s records and he emphasised—as Jörger had done earlier—the influence of women in breeding new vagrants (Fontana 1968).

Johann Josef Jörger not only had a huge influence on the scientific vagrancy discourse over the decades. Because resettlement or a ban on gypsy marriages was not feasible legally, he promoted the fight against vagrancy by taking away the children (Jörger 1925). Alfred Siegfried was also strongly influenced by Jörger and his scientific method. Particularly in the first decade of his *Hilfswerk* he meticulously collected genealogical data on several 'vagrant' families and reconstructed family trees.<sup>22</sup> All in all, the 'Children of the open road' campaign was in fact nothing more than the nationwide implementation of Jörger's ideas.

### The eugenic discourse and the 'vagrants'

Jörger's works were also cited by some of the protagonists in the lively debate about eugenics in Switzerland (Schweizer 2002). The eugenicists agreed on the target but not on the method. In 1938 an anthology titled *Verhütung erbkranken Nachwuchses* ('The prevention of hereditary diseases in offspring') was published, which contained contributions by some of the leading names in medicine, psychiatry and remedial education (Zurukzoglul 1938). While some called for radical restrictions on marriages and for sterilisation campaigns, others—partly due to religious convictions—supported a welfare approach, in other words care for life or if necessary, internment in so-called 'provisional

20. In a letter to the *Hilfswerk* he wrote in 1972: 'We often worked together with late Dr. Siegfried. We were always grateful to be able to study the files of the *Hilfswerk*.' (BAR, J 2.187, 1218, 1 Jan. 1972).

21. BAR, J 2.187, 187, 24 Oct. 1973.

22. BAR, J 2.187, 1069; 1082–1084; 1092; 1093.

institutions', a combination of mental home and workhouse. Siegfried belonged to the second group.

The vagrants were always part of the eugenic discourse, because many hereditary diseases or hereditary so-called degenerative conditions were assigned to the Yenish people. One of these degenerations was the 'urge to roam the country', which was viewed as a form of wildness and depravity, of psychopathic disorder or a result of mental deficiency. Some of the researchers actually saw the Yenish families as a suitable subject to study the laws of genealogy and the Yenish were explicitly mentioned in connection with sterilisation (Meier 2007: 235). Siegfried, who had converted to Catholicism, was strictly against sterilisation. In a psychiatric report which suggested the sterilisation of one of his wards he made a note saying, 'This is out of the question!'<sup>23</sup>

### The *Hilfswerk* in the focus of scientific research

Interestingly enough, the *Hilfswerk's* systematic method of taking away children was hardly ever echoed in the eugenic debate in Switzerland. However, the campaign for the 'Children of the open road' attracted the attention of scientists from different fields. In 1946 the psychologist Elise Weinberg observed Yenish children over months in homes and conducted several psychological tests. She concluded that most of them were slow, if not outright feeble-minded and reproduced the views promoted since Jörger's days that the Yenish suffered from a hereditary disadvantage. As a psychologist she naturally saw the possibility for improvement by means of educational measures. Overall her findings supported the policy of the *Hilfswerk* (Weinberg 1946). Somewhat more sceptical views were expressed by Walter Haesler in his 1955 doctoral thesis on the 'Children of the open road', which contains a sociological and psychological analysis as well as 16 biographies of Yenish children (Haesler 1955).

As well as vicar Hercli Bertogg, who asked himself 'Why can God allow for the splendid growth of such roadside weed up to the present day?' (Bertogg 1946), lawyers ultimately joined in the discourse. When the Swiss Penal Code, which came into effect in 1942, was drawn up, it was planned to include an article which would generally outlaw begging and vagrancy (Frauenlob 1939). Although the initial plan for such a law was subsequently dropped, many of the cantonal penal codes still contained corresponding regulations. This allowed for actions against the Yenish people. To the lawyer Rudolf Waltisbühl it was evident that the Yenish were a 'bunch of criminals' and therefore he called for imprisonment at the discretion of the court just as with habitual criminals. However, he was rather sceptical about the 'Children of the open road' cam-

23. BAR, J 2.187, 711, 24 Dec. 1947.



paign. Pointing to the method used in Germany, he thought sterilisation to be more efficient than so-called 'milieu therapies' (Waltisbühl 1944: 121).<sup>24</sup>

### Justification and self-promotion of the *Hilfswerk*

The leading role in the Swiss vagrancy discourse was played by the *Hilfswerk* itself and its director Alfred Siegfried. It is noteworthy that Siegfried always kept up-to-date with the current scientific discourse.

In a widely circulated newsletter, the *Mitteilungen*, and in special pamphlets, the ideas and the policy of the *Hilfswerk* were extensively promoted. Programmatic articles and touching success stories were designed to retain the many loyal funders of which a remarkable number were teachers or vicars, in other words trustworthy and respectable people who in return had a strong influence on the community, especially in rural areas.

Siegfried also delivered speeches to care staff and social workers and his lectures and articles not only reached the general reading public but also those working in homes and in the social security and welfare offices.

In return, Siegfried made the extensive records of the *Hilfswerk* available not only to the above-mentioned scientists, but also to students for research at schools for social workers. The result was a number of dissertations which shed a positive light on the policy of the *Hilfswerk* (Meier 2007: 237–8).

Looking back on his 'life-time achievements', Siegfried finally published a book in which he explicitly referred to the works of Johann Josef Jörger, Robert Ritter and Hermann Arnold (Siegfried 1964). He communicated frequently with Arnold by letter.

All this was in order to justify and promote the 'Children of the open road' campaign and its peculiar mix of hereditary biology, genetics and milieu theory. On the one hand, Siegfried was convinced that vagrancy was a result of bad genes in connection with depravity, feeble-mindedness and criminality. On the other hand, he did actually believe in the possibility of re-educating the children to a settled way of life. As it was, however, the actual aim of the *Hilfswerk* was not to help the children but to abolish vagrancy.

The question of whether the Yenish were gypsies or a particular ethnic group, was completely irrelevant for Siegfried, and he hardly ever used the term 'Yenish' himself. As most of the other authors did, he used the terms 'people', 'clan', 'Yenish' or 'gypsy' always in an unreflected, colloquial sense, just like the term 'vagrants'.

24. Waltisbühl apologised to the Yenish for his remarks in 1987 (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 47).

## Conclusion

The declared aim of abolishing vagrancy was upheld until the 1970s, and it has to be pointed out that over the whole of the preceding 50 years, neither the policy of the *Hilfswerk* nor the scientific and public discourse had changed. Remarkably, when criticism towards the *Hilfswerk* first started, it did not originate from scientific quarters or from specialists in social work but from the press and the wider public. This is no coincidence.

It needs to be emphasised once more that the vagrancy policy was executed by a private organisation, which at the same time dominated the vagrancy discourse in Switzerland for decades. Local, cantonal and federal authorities, however, supported and tolerated the work of the *Hilfswerk*. There are various reasons for this, which cannot be discussed within the scope of this article. Surely certain structural deficiencies within the Swiss welfare and social system can be blamed; this is a result of the strong federalism of the Swiss political system.

Only when the refusal of entry for gypsies was abolished in 1972 and after the ‘Children of the open road’ campaign was stopped a year later did the gypsy discourse as well as the gypsy policy in general and the attitudes towards the Yenish slowly start to change. Their organisations are meanwhile supported by the state, and the Yenish have reached the semi-official status of a minority.

Due to its systematic execution, the ‘Children of the open road’ campaign is nowadays even thought of as carrying the hallmarks of cultural genocide (Gschwend 2002: 392). Whatever the case, it is certainly the most distressing single example of discrimination and persecution in twentieth century Switzerland—in the words of Swiss Federal Councilor Ruth Dreifuss ‘one of the darkest chapters in recent Swiss history’ (Leimgruber, Meier and Sablonier 1998: 1).

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