

The Yeniche Case: a Minority Language in Switzerland

I have chosen to answer this question: What does the unity of nation, literature and Language mean after the emergence of nation-states?

Regarding Switzerland, other values than language bring unity among Swiss citizens.

- faith in the official institutions,
- federalism
- respect towards each district sovereignty,
- direct democracy,
- banking system,
- big alimentary stores like Migros and C.O.O.P.
- folklore legends like the story of Guillaume Tell.

Switzerland has emerged as a nation at the beginning with the union of three German speaking districts in the XIIIth century (1291). They were joined gradually by other cantons, speaking German, Italian, Romanche and French. Therefore, four national languages are used actually in the Helvetic Confederation distributed into 26 cantons:

- German (64%)
- French (20%)
- Italian (6%)
- Romanche (0,5%)

A minority language spoken by 30.000 persons, the Yeniche language can be added as a protected language by the Swiss Confederation.

It is amazing to picture such a small country using four languages. How can the unity of the nation be preserved? Four principles are edited:

- each language is equal to the other
- citizens are free to use the language proper to them
- each language has its own territory
- minority languages are protected

1) regarding the first principle, each language being equal to each other, there are three official languages used in the Parliament : German most often, French and rarely Italian. Simultaneous translations are the rule during the

sessions. All federal directives and vote papers are translated into the three languages. Translations in Romanche are only for the Canton Grisons.

- 2) During parliamentary sessions, each deputy speaks his own language.
- 3) Regarding the territories of the different languages, German is the language of north and central Switzerland, French of the west part, and Italian of the South.
- 4) Regarding minority languages the Swiss Confederation encourage Ticino and Grisons to use their own language. But most importantly, Switzerland is the only European country to protect and preserve a declining language: the Yeniche language.

The Yeniche case:

I shall try to answer the second part of question 2: what does the condition of living and writing as the member of a linguistic minority mean today? Do writers working in a minority environment contribute to the development and enrichment of the culture of the majority nation? The Yeniche case seems to be a good illustration of the problems raised by linguistic minority members.

During year 1997, Switzerland signed the European Charter for Regional or Minority language. The aim of the Charter was to protect and promote regional and minority languages, some of them being in danger of eventual extinction. The European council edited this charter during year 1992, considering that the protection of regional and minority languages contributes to the maintenance and development of Europe's cultural wealth and traditions.

They also consider the right to use a regional or minority language in private and public as an inalienable right according to the spirit of the Council of Europe Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedom.

In this context, Switzerland has decided to protect and promote a minority language that is without a territory: the Yeniche language.

Who are the Yeniche?

They are often referred in Switzerland as the Swiss gypsies also called the Blond gypsies. Their appearance does not distinguish them from any other Swiss citizen.

They are nomads wandering through Germany, Austria, France mainly Alsace and Switzerland. Their religion is Catholicism; they have received the Swiss Nationality in

1850. They are 30.000 persons living in Switzerland and speaking the Yeniche language. Most of them have adopted a sedentary mode of life, 3500 are still nomads.

Their professions are essentially craftsmen, basket makers, fairground entertainers, door-to-door salespeople.

Origin and language:

Yeniche origin is uncertain. One has to refer to their language to make hypothesis about their origin. Both are linked. Let us first analyse the Yeniche language.

a) language :

It is a spoken language kept secret for years and years. It has protective qualities. It was used only by Yeniche people and they did not want anyone else to understand it. The first Yeniche dictionary entitled: "Sprachschatz Jenischer in der Schweiz" was published in 2001.

The Yeniche language does not have its own grammar. Yeniche speakers use German grammar. The vocabulary is essentially a mixture of German and Yiddish words. Through Yiddish many Hebrew words are used. Some words are also borrowed from Romani and French language. Still Yeniche language has specific metaphors, proverbs e.t.c.

I am now giving you some examples of Yeniche words borrowed from German language:

Yeniche	German	English translation
Colt	Kalt	Cold
Hoor	Die Haare	Hair
Ya	Ya	Yes
Katz	Die Katze	A cat
Olt	Der Alte	Old man
Olti	Die Alte	Old woman
Schnell	Schnell	Quick
Kess	Käse	Cheese

Some words borrowed from Yiddish:

Yeniche	Yiddish or Hebrew	English translation
Lehm	Lehem	Bread
Dibere	Diber	To speak spoke

Yom olef	Yom alef	Sunday
Yom Bess	Yom Beth	Monday

The days of the week are designated in Yeniche language by the first letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is also referred to by a number, alef being the first one. In Yiddish language, the days of the week are also designated by the Hebrew alphabet letters.

The first day of the week takes place after Shabbat day on Sunday whereas for the Christian calendar, the first day of the week is Monday. For Yeniche people as it is for Yiddish speakers Sunday is Yom Olef, first day of the week.

b) Origin of Yeniche people:

Many hypotheses have been advanced, some of them make sense, and others seem to be mere fantasies

1) First Hypothesis:

Some Yeniche claim they are from Celtic origin. Although some French Yeniche people speak a language close to Welch language, this hypothesis has no scientific basis.

2) Second Hypothesis:

In the Past, Jewish itinerant merchants could have gathered into groups and so they became the Yeniche people. This hypothesis is based on two facts: similarity between Yeniche and Yiddish language and similarity between family names of Jewish and Yeniche people. Actually Yeniche are not Jews but Catholics without any explanation of shifting from one religion to another. So this hypothesis also is not really sure.

3) The third hypothesis makes more sense: after the thirty year war, many regions were devastated. Some people, becoming very poor, could not live any more in their cities. So they went on wandering through Europe and gathered together in groups becoming the Yeniche people. As they worked as door-to-door salesmen, they certainly met many Jews having the same profession. Friendship, marriages among them certainly happened and could explain the Yiddish influence on Yeniche Language.

Swiss debt toward the Yeniche:

Why is Switzerland so concerned over protecting and promoting Yeniche language?

Here is an explanation: starting in 1920, eugenics theory spread all over Europe; they were reinforced later by Nazi theories. Along with Jews and homosexuals, people with a lifestyle centred on travelling were considered as pathological groups. The Swiss Government aimed to completely wipe out Yeniche culture and make them abandon their nomadic life. With the purpose of turning them into a sedentary people, the Swiss Government in 1926 approved a project set up by the children's charity Pro Juventute, entitled "Kinder der Landstrasse (Children of the road). Police seized six hundred babies and toddlers from their mothers without warning and sent them to orphanages run by Pro Juventute, asylums for mentally ill persons. Some of them were handed to foster parents. The separation was total: the families were not informed where their children lived and were actively barred from making inquiries. When these unfortunate children became adults, boys were forced into apprenticeships or towards farms as cheap labour. Girls were sent to convents or worked as servants with poor wages. They were forbidden to marry a Yeniche. This situation lasted 50 years. In 1972 the Swiss weekly "Der schweizerische Beobachter" exposed the Pro Juventute project to a large public. It was a big scandal and the end of this sordid project. In 1988 the Swiss State had formally acknowledged its moral, political and financial responsibility and apologized to the Yeniche. The findings of a report on the whole affair were published only in June 1998. Ruth Dreifuss, President at this moment of the Swiss Confederation made this comment: "the conclusions of the historians leave no room for doubt; Kinder der Landstrasse is a tragic example of discrimination and persecution of a minority that does not share the way of life of the majority."

These revelations had a big impact on Swiss Society. Swiss people were convinced of being much better than their neighbours because of their neutral behaviour during World War 2, and suddenly they discovered the cruelty and inhumanity of one of their institutions. They have been blind for years, although the Yeniche children were among them. Some of them reacted in a good way by a sense of guilt and an urge to repair. Others were angry because the generally accepted image of Switzerland as a morally upright country was no more valid and they continued to be caught in their prejudices.

Nevertheless, the Swiss Government is trying hard to repair. They help the Yeniche who are still nomads by finding location for their caravans. Their children can attend schools when they settle in a place for a while, and when they travel the children

receive by post or by means of computers, lessons and homework. To preserve the Yeniche language, Switzerland has encouraged the publication of the Yeniche dictionary. They encourage Yeniche speakers to transmit their language to new generations. They donate every year one million francs to the foundation: "Assurer l'avenir des gens du Voyage". (Ensure the future for road people).

Allow me to conclude with a personal point of view: I think that when a nation is ready to recognise the mistakes it has made in the past and try to repair them in present and future times, the image of such a nation is a very good image, much better than an idealistic image founded on lies. It was very pleasant to see at the National Swiss Day of the 1st August the Yeniche children being included in the procession and symbolically referred to Switzerland as children of the 27th Swiss canton.

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