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# Study on the Current Educational Situation of German Sinti and Roma

Documentation and Research Report

Summary

2011

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## Ten Findings of the Educational Study and Recommendations

An estimated 80,000 to 120,000 Sinti and Roma with German nationality live in Germany today. Their presence in the German-speaking world dates back to the fifteenth century. In 1997 they were recognized as a national minority.

Nonetheless, to date there are no studies that deal with the everyday realities of the Sinti and Roma as they themselves experience, feel, and interpret them.

And even worse: The expulsions from schools and terminations of educational programs that had been brought about by the National Socialists were public knowledge ever since the 1950s, thanks to the *Bundesentschädigungsgesetz*, or West German Federal Indemnification Law, yet they had no consequences with regard to future educational options for the minority. In 1982, in the course of the emergent civil rights movement, Andreas Hundsalz's study *Soziale Situation der Sinti in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [Social Situation of the Sinti in the Federal Republic of Germany], conducted on behalf of the Federal Ministry for Youth, Family, and Health, was published. It was preceded by a study by the same author in 1980, dealing with school-related behavioral characteristics of Sinti and Roma children.<sup>1</sup> Appropriate educational policy measures, however, failed to materialize. They would have been as necessary then as they remain today.

### **Demands by the Council of Europe for Reliable Data on the Educational Situation**

Since 2002 the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has criticized Germany's lack of meaningful data on the general circumstances and educational situation of the German Sinti and Roma. Since that time, the Council of Europe has called for improved knowledge of the realities of their life and education, so that suitable action can be taken to ensure effective promotion of full and actual equality for this national minority.<sup>2</sup>

### **The EU Lays the Groundwork for Effective Training and Access to Career Possibilities**

In April 2011 the EU demanded that its member countries adopt national strategies for integration of the Roma by 2020, and at the same time emphasized the important role of education. *"Therefore we must urgently invest in the*

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1 Andreas Hundsalz, *Zigeunerkinder. Eine sozialpsychologische Untersuchung schulrelevanter Merkmale* [Gypsy Children: A Socio-Psychological Study of School-Related Characteristics], Frankfurt a.M., 1980.

2 See Statement of the Federal Republic of Germany with Regard to the Statement of the Advisory Committee on the Report on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities in the Federal Republic of Germany; in particular, Art. 4, No. 75, and Art. 6, No. 80, Federal Ministry of the Interior, 2002.

[übereinkommen\\_des\\_Europarates\\_zim\\_id\\_23218\\_de.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile](#) (accessed on April 18, 2011)

*education of the Roma children and thus enable them to enter the labor market successfully later on.*<sup>3</sup>

The aim is to ensure that all Sinti and Roma children/youths have access to a nondiscriminatory, high-quality education, vocational training, and unrestricted access to the job market.

### **Goal and Methods**

The guiding theme of the present study was, from the perspective of the minority, to proactively build directly on the European groundwork, close the data gaps, and highlight the need for action with regard to educational policy.

In this way, it was also possible to bridge the “great divide” caused by history “between the fields of science on the one hand and the members of the Sinti and Roma.”

Scientific methods were used to describe, examine, and interpret the everyday realities from a subjective perspective.

In the present documentation and research project, which was initiated and carried out between 2007 and 2011 by RomnoKher, A Center for Culture, Education, and Antiziganism Research in Mannheim, 275 German Sinti and Roma from three generations, predominantly in western Germany, were questioned about their educational situation. For this purpose, quantifiable data were gathered and biographical interviews were conducted. This material was used to describe and interpret developments and experiences relating to personal, generational, and family history with regard to the significance of successful/failed schooling, along with relationships to the majority society, to discrimination, and to intergenerational transmission of traumatic events resulting from the National Socialist policy of extermination.

For the survey, 14 Sinti and Roma agreed to serve as interviewers. In workshops and seminars, they were familiarized with interviewing techniques by researchers, and 275 interviews (of which 261 were included in the analysis) were conducted in 35 widely distributed cities/places. Somewhat more than half of the interviewees are women. More than 40.61% of the interviewees are between the ages of 14 and 25, 42.91% are in the 26-50 age group, and 16.48% are 51 and older. Records, audio files, and transcripts for each interview are available.

The results were interpreted by education researchers, historians, political scientists, educators, sociologists, and civil rights activists from the minority. To include the experiences and skills of the minority organizations, the working group “Education for Sinti and Roma” was established at the RomnoKher. Represented in this working group are seven state associations of Sinti and Roma, two cultural centers that are active nationwide, and two regional

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3 Note from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, and the Committee of the Regions. EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020; KOM(2011) 173 final and absolute, Brussels, April 5, 2011:2. (accessed on April 20, 2011).

information centers. Ms. Petra Rosenberg of the Berlin-Brandenburg Association of German Sinti and Roma was chosen to head the working group for two years.

### **Representativeness of Sample**

If one assumes the total number of Sinti and Roma in Germany to be 100,000, then the sampling ratio was 1:383. The precise figures for the “base” of Sinti and Roma in Germany, in sociological terms, are not known, of course, so that one cannot speak of a representative survey in the strict sense. But the interviews are so widely spread according to social position, gender, age, residential area, and educational situation and so diverse that one can assume with a high degree of plausibility that even if a representative survey were conducted, the image of the minority portrayed here would be only slightly altered (see A. von Plato).

The project on the educational situation of the German Sinti and Roma can be regarded as a pioneering feat in every respect: first, because of the results of this research on their life situation in general, and on their educational situation or the relationship of this minority to the majority society in particular; second, because of the new paths that become apparent by virtue of the collaboration of Sinti and Roma as participants in research.

The study establishes a basis for (educational) policy, as well as for the representatives of the Sinti and Roma (see A. von Plato).

## Ten Highlighted Findings of the Study

(1) 94.64% use the terms “Sinti” or “Roma” to describe themselves.

All the people interviewed, with the exception of one individual in the 30 interviews that were qualitatively analyzed, describe themselves as “Sinti” or “Roma.” The only interviewee who describes herself as a “Gypsy” gives a negative connotation to this term: *“I grew up with it and by now I’ve also come to accept that they call me that. (...) I’m a Gypsy, that’s just how it is, and one has to live with that.”* (Sintizza, age 19)

Some of the individuals interviewed spoke of negative experiences that resulted from their ethnicity becoming known, experiences so profound that they no longer reveal themselves as being Sinti or Roma at all, except within the minority. Even when asked specifically about their ethnicity, they deny it and claim a different ethnic origin, such as India or Spain (see J. Schuch/U. Rüchel). There is great variation, however, in the intensity of the feeling of discrimination when the term “Gypsy” is applied:

- 6.9% allow this term to be applied to them *with qualifications*, if it is obvious that no discriminatory labeling was intended
- 44.44%, depending on the situation, do not admit that they are Sinti or Roma, in order to avoid discrimination
- 20.69% do not acknowledge during the exercise of their occupation that they are Sinti or Roma, in order to avoid discrimination
- 16.09% do not acknowledge when looking for work that they are Sinti or Roma, in order to avoid discrimination

(2) Generally, traumatic experiences become apparent. They are transmitted intergenerationally in the family and are discernible even in the third generation of the 14- to 25-year-olds.

Evident in this context are the intergenerational effects of the history of persecution of the Sinti and Roma, also and most notably in connection with the extermination policy of the National Socialist era. Thus, deep fears and distrust within the family are central themes in the context of the interviewees’ school attendance or that of their parents and grandparents.

The ways of dealing with memories of the history of persecution and the ways of coming to terms with the National Socialist past, both in the families and individually, point to a collective trauma (J. Schuch/U. Rüchel).

Whenever “stories from (family) history” are told, these are tales of suffering from the period of Nazi persecution. Other stories or songs, narratives, and fairy tales, with which other German children—at least, those from middle-class families—grow up, apparently do not exist (anymore) among the Sinti and Roma.

In a generational comparison, an evident connection is revealed between the school attendance of the parents or grandparents and the success in school of the children. The better educated the parents and grandparents were, the greater was the children’s success in school (see A. von Plato).

(3) 81.2% have personal experiences of discrimination.

The experiences in school are to a great extent affected by overt and covert discrimination in the form of everyday antiziganistic name-calling and prejudices on the part of individual pupils. The teachers apparently do not intervene professionally here.

It is alarming that antiziganism obviously is still present, on the part of teachers as well, and is openly articulated in everyday school life.

At the same time, there are individual teachers and schoolmates who act in a supportive way and in some cases have such a motivational effect that they can exert a positive influence on the child's school career (see J. Schuch/U. Rüchel).

- 1.1% furnish *no information* on experiences of discrimination
- 17.6% have *no* experiences of discrimination
- 55.9% feel discriminated against *sometimes*
- 8.4% feel discriminated against *on a regular basis*
- 12.3% feel discriminated against *frequently*
- 4.6% feel discriminated against *very frequently* (see M. Klein)

(4) 53.64% note feelings ranging from "intimidated" to "badly treated to discriminated against" when they have contact with the authorities.

Among the interviewees who mention slight problems or even a "highly problematic" relationship, the responses range from "feel bad" to "feel intimidated," from "stressed" or "can't sleep the night before" to "feel intimidated," "patronized," "not taken seriously," "not taken notice of," "badly treated," "panicky," "treated like dirt," "feel discriminated against," or the like (see M. Klein).

- 6.13% furnish *no information* regarding their feelings when engaging in contact with the authorities
- 40.23% describe their visits to the authorities as "*normal*"
- 13.41% describe their experiences as "*slightly problematic*"
- 40.23% depict their experiences when paying a visit to the authorities as "*highly problematic*"

(5) Only 18.8% of those interviewed have completed a vocational education, in comparison with 83.4% of the majority population in the younger age group.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Comparison figures for the majority population were taken from: Bildung in Deutschland 2010. Published on behalf of the Permanent Conference of the Ministers for Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research. (accessed on April 18, 2011), p. 10; on participation in education, see the data from the 2008 Microcensus, p. 227. (accessed on April 18, 2011).

(6) 10.7% of those interviewed attended a school for children with special needs, in comparison with 4.9% of all schoolchildren in the majority population.<sup>5</sup> Broken down by age group, the following interviewees attended a school for special-needs students:

- 7% of those over the age of 50
- 13.4% of those between 26 and 50
- 9.4% of the 14-25 age group (see M. Klein)

(7) 13% of those interviewed attended no school of any kind, in comparison with probably less than 1% in the majority population. At least 44% of the participants did not graduate from a secondary school of any kind. By comparison, 7.5% of the 15- to 17-year-olds in the majority population have no secondary general school (*Hauptschule*) certificate.<sup>6</sup>

Today, regret is emphatically expressed by the vast majority of those who abandoned their own schooling or vocational education or failed, despite efforts in their own right, to attain the level of education they sought.

Furthermore, especially in the third generation, one observes increasing family support for efforts to obtain an education. This support is associated with a higher level of formal education in the parent generation.

Fears and distrust of the majority society and its educational institutions, however, are still present, and the interviewees perceive their own potential for support with regard to the formal education of the children as being very limited (see J. Schuch/U. Rüchel).

Of those interviewed here, the following attended **no** elementary school (*Grundschule*) at all:

- 39.5% of those over 50
- 18.8% of those between 26 and 50
- 9.4% of those between 14 and 25 (see M. Klein)

It can be unambiguously stated that personal commitment to education has demonstrably increased in the second and third generations.

(8) Only 11.5% attended a secondary school of the *Realschule* type. By comparison, in the majority population more than 30% of those in the 14-25 age group graduated from this type of school.<sup>7</sup>

Broken down by age group, these interviewees attended a Realschule:

- 4.7% of those over 50
- 13.4% of those between 26 and 50
- 12.3% of those between 14 and 25 (see M. Klein)

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5 Ibid., p. 6.

6 Ibid., p. 10.

7 Ibid., Table B3-1A, p. 227 (2008 Microcensus).

(9) Only 6 of 261 interviewees, or 2.3%, attended an academic high school (*Gymnasium*). In the majority population, a total of 24.4% graduated and thus qualified for university entrance, while more than 40% of those between 20 and 25 have the higher education entrance qualification.<sup>8</sup>

- (10) 45.6% are/were unable to get help with homework from family members.
- 8.4% gave no information about family help with homework
  - 46.0% received family help with homework

It is very revealing whenever the interviewees explain why no help with homework is/was provided. Of 93 respondents who listed such reasons, 72 cited the following: *“parents have no formal education of their own,” “have only limited schooling myself,” “too little formal education,” “can neither read nor write,”* or the like. In addition, 18 interviewees expressly mention *“persecution”* or *“ban on school attendance”* in the Nazi era (see M. Klein).

## **Educational Policy Recommendations**

### **Starting Position**

- (1) The dismal educational situation with respect to formal education (secondary school and vocational qualifications) attests to the serious failure of the German educational system.
- (2) The study provides valuable information about the causes of failing educational processes. They point to the great importance of informal education in the setting of the family's daily school routine, from kindergarten through youth and adult education.
- (3) Intergenerational traumatization, present-day experiences of discrimination, and lack of opportunities for participation point to an asymmetrical relationship between the minority and the majority, which presents an enormous obstacle to successful education.
- (4) From the intergenerational perspective, a vicious circle becomes evident: a marginalization and disintegration of the German Sinti and Roma that reinforces itself over decades and continues to take place today as well. Antiziganism plays a significant role in this process.

### **Recommendations**

- (1) Against the backdrop of the persecution of the Sinti and Roma under National Socialism and their continuing marginalization and subjection to discrimination, it is vital to configure a forward-looking minority policy in Germany that complies with European standards for the advancement of Sinti and Roma, a policy that does justice to the actual life situations of the Sinti and Roma.
- (2) The key educational policy recommendation is to anchor in German society sustainable structures of recognition and participation for the Sinti and Roma, in order to initiate and develop successful educational processes with regard to early intervention, education, apprenticeship, and adult education.
- (3) For equality of opportunity for Sinti and Roma, the aspects of antidiscrimination, lifelong support, and overcoming of the distance between educational institutions and the minority are of cardinal importance, and they must be especially taken into account at all levels of promotion of education. Therefore we recommend creation of a national action plan, spanning generations, for promotion of education for Sinti and Roma.
- (4) For preparation of this action plan, an educational commission must be established without delay, involving representatives at the federal, *Land*, and local community levels as well as, on an equal footing, representatives of the Sinti and Roma. In addition, academics, educational experts, social initiatives, and actors such as foundations, for example, can become involved.
- (5) For the national action plan, resources from federal, *Land*, and local community sources and EU funds should be pooled. Effective mechanisms must be created for that purpose.

The national action plan must include at least the following tasks:

- a) Setting up of structural supportive measures at the federal, *Land*, and local levels
- b) Development and implementation of targeted supportive measures to achieve real equality for Sinti and Roma
- c) Visible commitment of individuals in public life on behalf of the Sinti and Roma
- d) Efforts to convince the minority of the benefits of education and bring about an “educational awakening”
- e) Individual promotion of education that ties in with the lifeworld, language, and cultural identities of the Sinti and Roma and ensures them equal educational opportunities in the German educational system
- f) Adult education programs for Sinti and Roma families, to offset inadequate human capital on the part of parents and enable parents and children to make competent educational decisions
- g) Cooperation by the field of educational science and by specialized institutions with educational institutions of the Sinti and Roma

## Authors

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