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Wegbereiders: Roma en Sinti in Nederland en Tsjechië over het profijt van onderwijs, 1950-2020

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Summary

Preface

A considerable part of the European Roma and Sinti live on the margins of societies without any prospect of better living conditions. With low educational attainment levels, most of them have little chance of moving up the social ladder. From 1950 onwards, access to education for people from lower socio-economic classes improved throughout Europe, but Roma and Sinti in particular have hardly benefited from this. The main question in this book is why so few Roma and Sinti have succeeded in moving on to higher education in the past seventy years. This main question has been divided into several sub-questions. To what extent was this influenced by their history and its effect on their social position? Are the educational disadvantages and lack of social advancement of Roma and Sinti in Western Europe comparable to those in Eastern Europe? What has changed since the 1950s? Is there a growing participation in education among the younger generations of Roma and Sinti? What factors can explain why Roma and Sinti benefited so little from improved access to education? What is the opinion of Roma and Sinti themselves on this topic?

In order to answer these questions in depth, this study was limited to Roma and Sinti in two countries with different post-war histories: the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. This study is based on specialist literature, reports, newspaper articles, images and discussions with experts. The main source of this study however consisted of 51 interviews with Sinti and Roma. These were biographical interviews with a reasoned selection of Dutch and Czech Roma and Sinti: men and women from all over both countries, and belonging to three age categories (between the ages of twenty and forty, between forty and sixty and over sixty). The older respondents in the Czech Republic had attended school during the communist era, and those in the Netherlands had travelled around with their families in caravans. To find contacts and respondents, I initially used the snowball method and when the snowball method no longer yielded new respondents, I searched in a structured way for additional respondents.

The Roma and Sinti population in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands consists of different groups. Estimates about numbers vary. In the Netherlands there are, in the first place, 3,500 Sinti and Roma who belong to families who have lived in the Netherlands for generations and who now largely live on caravan sites. Secondly, there are about 3,000 'General Pardon' Roma, named after the way in which this Yugoslav group obtained residence permits in the late 1970s. The third group, the 'Balkans-Roma' came to the Netherlands in the 1990s, as refugees from the war in former Yugoslavia. They came individually or with a family and are relatively well integrated into the Nether-

lands. Estimates of their numbers vary widely, between 500 and 12,000. The fourth group consists of the 'New Roma', who came from 2004 onwards from the various Eastern European countries, after these joined the European Union. There are no reliable figures on the number of New Roma in the Netherlands.

In the Czech Republic, the Roma population is more homogeneous. Ninety per cent of the estimated 250,000 Czech Roma belong to the *Rumungre*. After 1945, their family had moved from the Slovak part of Czechoslovakia to the Czech regions because of greater employment opportunities. The remaining 10 per cent are Vlachian Roma, originally from Wallachia, present-day southern Romania, where they had lived in a situation comparable to slavery until the middle of the nineteenth century. In this study the different groups are represented as much as possible.

This study focused on four hypotheses, based on factors that may have played a role in the lack of social advancement. First of all, the influence of the marginalized starting position of Roma and Sinti and the undermining effects of stigmatization were examined for both countries. A second factor that can impede social progress is the survival strategy that people in long-term poverty may develop. Third, chances of successful school careers for children from low socio-economic backgrounds are generally low and this might have had an effect also on Sinti and Roma. In the fourth place, a lack of motivation on the part of the parents might have had influence. The influence of these factors on the low educational level of Roma and Sinti and the differences and similarities between the two countries were examined.

The history behind a marginalized starting position

The marginalized social position of Roma and Sinti has a long history. In the fifteenth century so-called 'gypsies' arrived in the regions that are now the Czech Republic and the Netherlands. They were welcomed as pilgrims. By 1500, stereotypes about 'gypsies' had developed: both negative stereotypes about laziness, parasitism and crime, and positive ones about adventurousness, musicality and sensitivity to the supernatural. 'Gypsies' increasingly suffered persecution. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, this resulted in a first genocide, characterized by manhunts and mass executions. By 1750, all 'gypsies' in the Dutch Republic had been expelled or murdered. In the Czech Republic, under Habsburg rule, the 'gypsies' who had escaped persecution were forced to settle. After the abolition of slavery in Wallachia in the mid-nineteenth century, the Vlachian Roma moved away to several countries in Europe, including the Netherlands, where they started to travel around.

The second genocide followed in the Second World War. Of the approximately 6,500 Czech 'gypsies', fewer than 900 survived. Slovak 'gypsies' were victims of restrictive measures and forced labour, but they were not en masse deported to extermination camps. In the Netherlands, after a raid in May 1944, 245 'gypsies' were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Only thirty of them survived. The persecutions in the Second World War caused deep trauma, but in the post-war decades there was hardly any rec-

ognition of the suffering of Roma and Sinti, in both countries. In communist Czechoslovakia, in the commemoration of the Second World War, no attention was paid to the persecution of minorities, until the 1990s. In the Netherlands, it also took until the 1990s for the Sinti and Roma to express their grief, not because it was forbidden, but because the memories of war suffering were too painful, and there was little attention for their suffering. On in 1995, it was revealed that the film still of the girl with the white headscarf between the wagon doors of a departing deportation train in Camp Westerbork, internationally known as an iconic image of the persecution of the Jews, was not a Jewish girl, but a Sinti girl.

In the post-war decades, travel was restricted. In 1958, in Czechoslovakia, the Roma who lived a migratory life (10 per cent of all Roma there), were forced to settle by law. In the Netherlands, the Caravan Act of 1968 made it virtually impossible to move around freely with a caravan, and Sinti and Roma, as well as the 'travellers', or caravan dwellers, were accommodated in large regional caravan sites, separated from residential areas by major thoroughfares, railways and canals. A large part of these caravan site residents became dependent on social benefits. Settlement in the large camps did not lead to integration, but rather to greater social isolation and impoverishment. In 1975, the larger sites were in part dismantled and people moved to smaller, less isolated sites.

In Czechoslovakia, the communist era was characterized by a significant level of social security. The main pillars of the assimilation policy aimed at Roma were permanent housing, compulsory education and compulsory work. A few Sinti and Roma rose to the middle classes, but most stayed lower working class.

Segregation and the undermining effect of stigmatization

After the fall of the communist regime, a large proportion of the Roma in the Czech Republic became highly segregated, and their living conditions deteriorated seriously in 1990s. The rapid and hard transition from a planned economy to a market economy caused massive unemployment and severe poverty among the Roma in industrial areas. The Roma, who were skilled workers, moved to regions with more employment. The underprivileged now live in so-called 'socially excluded localities'. These can be a city district, a street or part of it, or a large, dilapidated apartment building. Because of the hopeless situation there, these locations are popularly called ghettos. Three-quarters of the Roma in such localities receive social security benefits.

In the Netherlands, the smaller caravan sites are embedded in residential or industrial areas, with access to amenities and education. The Sinti and Roma who live there have a preference to live somewhat separated from the rest of society. Those who chose to live in houses are generally better educated and integrated, and less recognizable as Sinti and Roma. The same goes for the Balkans-Roma. The General Pardon Roma also live in houses but they are largely socially isolated. If there is segregation of Roma and Sinti in the Netherlands, this is largely a choice. For Roma in the Czech Republic, it is not.

The discrimination and racism suffered by Roma had a debilitating effect on their so-

cial mobility. In communist Czechoslovakia discrimination was prohibited. After the Velvet Revolution prejudices about Roma resurfaced: in the 1990s, 93 per cent of the Czech population felt that Roma were lazy and prone to parasitism. Authorities and politicians make racist statements openly.

In the Netherlands, racism was and is less virulent than in the Czech Republic. Roma and Sinti stand out less and opportunities for passing as non-Roma are greater than in the Czech Republic. Nevertheless, Roma and Sinti in the Netherlands feel negative prejudices are still strong. Sinti and Roma often hide their origins, for example when applying for a job or at work.

The survival strategy of people in long-term poverty

Poverty forced the Roma in the Czech ghettos to adopt a survival strategy based on reciprocal support. This mutual loyalty makes it difficult to save money. Roma who live in excluded localities have hardly any contact with people outside the ghetto. They lack a network to get out of poverty and do not have the money to build a network. The extreme poor are even beyond the reach of NGOs. It is almost impossible to attain a good education in such living conditions.

In the Netherlands, poverty is less, so there is less need for such a survival strategy. There are more opportunities for achieving a good starting position on the labour market for Roma and Sinti in the Netherlands, than for those in the Czech Republic. Apart from the New Roma, Roma and Sinti in the Netherlands have more chances of building a network, although most have small networks.

Fighting crime has received increasing emphasis in government policies for Roma and Sinti in both the Netherlands and the Czech Republic. The focus of government policy is not on combating poverty, but on fighting antisocial and criminal behaviour. In the Netherlands it also aims to encourage people to go to school and find work. In the Czech Republic, however, the prevailing opinion is that the Roma lack the attitude that is required to secure a position in post-communist neoliberal middle class society. The long-term poverty of Roma is seen as their own fault, and structural poverty reduction would make no sense. The government has little understanding for the lack of chances to escape life in the socially excluded localities. Therefore, it is more difficult for the Czech Roma to achieve social advancement.

The chance of educational success

Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and especially children with low-qualified parents, are less likely to move on to higher secondary education. The parents of both the Dutch and Czech respondents had a low level of education. The respondents had extremely poor prospects of obtaining diplomas that would offer good job perspectives. Parents were largely illiterate, and only some attended special education

and completed primary school. Only a few obtained a diploma in secondary education or higher.

In general, the Czech education system offers more opportunities for overcoming educational disadvantages as it provides for a compulsory pre-school year, a later selection moment for secondary education (at fifteen years of age instead of twelve in the Netherlands) and more opportunities for progression from lower to higher types of education. The chances of a good education for Roma in the Czech Republic are diminished because a large number of them are placed in schools for children with mental disabilities. Today, this is true for still 25 per cent of Roma children. If they do go on to mainstream education, it is often to a segregated school with bad education.

Until the late 1970s, Sinti and Roma children in the Netherlands were only offered special education. After that, they attended regular primary schools with generally good quality education. Nevertheless, it was only from 1990 onwards that the chances for Roma and Sinti to move on to higher education increased; the main reason for this was that the compulsory education law was only strictly enforced for Roma and Sinti children from then on. Compulsory education for Roma in communist Czechoslovakia led to a modest number of highly educated people from the 1960s onwards. Despite the socio-economic problems in the Czech Republic since 1990, more Roma have attained higher levels of education in the past seventy years than in the more wealthy Netherlands.

In both countries, absenteeism is high among Roma and Sinti, especially among children over the age of twelve. Parents and children believe that secondary education is not for them. For parents, school is pre-eminently part of the non-Roma and non-Sinti world. In their view, the aim of education is to impose on their children the norms and values of the dominant society, and children see the pursuit of good school performance as a form of forced assimilation. Nevertheless, after seventy years of participation in education, there appears to be a modest but increasing level of educational attainment. In the 1950s, when the oldest respondents went to school, Roma and Sinti children grew up in a largely illiterate environment. Now the grandparents of the children that go to school have themselves been educated.

Motivation by the parents

Motivation of children by parents is an important factor in achieving success in school. Most Roma parents do not encourage their children because they attach little value to education. Sometimes participation in education is even discouraged as parents are afraid of losing their child via assimilation and that contacts with other children should be avoided. In the case of daughters over the age of twelve, fear of the loss of chasteness plays a role, and in the case of sons, it is disdain for education. Highly educated Roma and Sinti have more contacts with others at school and in their workplace, but in their own circle, they are seen as betraying their roots.

In the Czech Republic, the high unemployment rate among Roma plays a role. Parents do not think that a good diploma will lead to better job prospects. In both coun-

tries, most low-educated respondents did not experience support from their parents, whereas the highly educated did. For the highly educated Roma and Sinti over sixty, a higher level of education was so exceptional that they would never have been able to achieve it without the support of their parents. The generation of respondents aged between forty and sixty had received little in the Czech Republic and in the Netherlands. A remarkable similarity between the two countries is that three quarters of this generation only reached a higher level of education later in life. Most of them had dropped out of school in their teens because they had to contribute to the family income or had children at a young age, and it was only when their own children were a bit older that they re-entered education. The young highly educated, between twenty and forty, were stimulated by parents, and they considered their parents' support to be a crucial factor in achieving a high level of education. In the Czech Republic, this was the case for 80 per cent of that generation of respondents, in the Netherlands for half.

In all generations, Czech parents clearly see education more as a means of social advancement. This is remarkable because the socio-economic conditions in the Czech Republic are worse, the social climate for Roma is less favourable and the education of Roma is of a lower level. Nevertheless, the Czech Roma show more ambition for their children to attain a better social position.

Conclusions

Stigmatization as the main factor in low social mobility

With low education levels and high unemployment it is extremely difficult for Roma and Sinti in the Netherlands and the Czech Republic to climb the social ladder. Segregated housing and poor quality of education in the socially excluded localities in the Czech Republic reduces their chances of social mobility. Even in such disadvantaged living conditions, however, some parents do stimulate their children to progress socially through education. Yet most Roma and Sinti parents do not. In their view, education is part of the non-Roma society which they consider to be hostile and unsafe. Their history of persecution, slavery and exclusion, with the traumatic low point of the genocide of the Roma and Sinti in the Second World War, has built up a deep sense of mistrust against the non-Roma, in the Netherlands and in the Czech Republic. The war trauma was passed on to the younger generations.

Because of centuries of stigmatization, Roma and Sinti developed an aloof attitude and maintained only strictly necessary ties with non-Roma and Sinti. Between 1950 and 1970, much of the labour market opportunities for Roma and Sinti in both countries disappeared. Today there are few jobs for unskilled workers, and education is the key to a better life.

The vanishing effect

The image of Roma and Sinti is determined by those who live in poverty and have low educational levels. There are, however, examples of Roma and Sinti who have climbed up the social ladder, including the highly educated respondents in this study. In the Czech Republic, during the communist era and afterwards, most highly educated people assimilated completely. They did not want to be associated with the poor Roma in the ghettos. In the Netherlands, there were only a handful of highly educated Roma and Sinti. The Balkans-Roma are likely to be better educated, but they too often do not identify themselves as Roma.

It is not known how many highly educated Roma and Sinti there are in the Czech Republic and the Netherlands. Often municipal officials and aid agencies do not know of their existence and, therefore, they are not included in estimates of the numbers of Roma and Sinti in a country. The socially successful are invisible, not only in the figures, but also to the poor Roma and Sinti. I call this the *vanishing effect*: in order to avoid stigmatization, they do not identify as Roma or Sinti. They are invisible to the government, the population at large and their own circle because they do not match the stereotypical image.

The socially successful Roma and Sinti did not want to identify as Roma and Sinti because they feared discrimination. They were also no longer regarded as one of them by the poor, low-educated Roma. Almost all Dutch and Czech highly educated respondents have this experience: because of their education and social position, they were not longer seen as Sinti and Roma by others. They considered this hurtful, but when their non-Roma networks grew, their ties with other Roma and Sinti became looser. The result is that poor, low-educated Roma have hardly any examples of highly educated people in their community and that is why the highly educated could not function as role models.

The trailblazers

The respondents in this study were open to contacts with people from outside their own circle. Such an open attitude is a precondition for willingness to participate in a biographical interview. There are more highly educated Roma and Sinti in the Czech Republic than in the Netherlands and it is easier to get in touch with them. There are more NGOs with education projects where pupils and students can get support. Czech Roma are better organized. There are more self-organizations and there are more nationally known Roma at social and cultural levels. In the Netherlands, highly educated people only sporadically played an influential role as representatives in a self-organization.

Most highly educated Roma and Sinti function as role models in a modest way. They are aware that they act as an example in a small circle. They do not actively propagate their Roma or Sinti identity to the outside world, although they currently certainly do not attempt to hide it. Among the young respondents, however, there are highly educated people who take a more activist stance and insist on manifesting themselves more as

highly educated Roma and Sinti. This happens more in the Czech Republic than in the Netherlands because there are more highly educated people there. It is an active group of young people who maintain close contacts with each other via social media. They have set themselves the goal of showing themselves to be socially successful Roma, not only to their own community, but also to others. This visibility of social success is new: these young Roma and Sinti are the trailblazers. This emerging middle class aims to dispel the stigma of the poor, antisocial, criminal Roma. They deliberately strive to achieve destigmatization and appreciation for the entire group. In doing so, they are aware that it is necessary to be clearly visible as successful Roma.