



Documentary, 118 min, Switzerland, 2023  
OV: Swiss-German, French, German with English, German or French subtitles

Produced by soap factory GmbH  
in co-production with 8horses GmbH  
and SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, SRG SSR

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Swiss theatrical release: August 31st, 2023  
International release: TBA

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## I. SYNOPSIS

Invited by a mysterious friend, a film team sets out on a journey into a hidden Yenish Europe that stretches from dusty banlieus in France to the forests of Carinthia. Told by the voices of young and old Travellers, a kaleidoscopic panorama of their lives unfolds: Diverse people relate to each other, bound together by their love of freedom but also by deep wounds from the past. Their otherness is mirrored and reflected not least in the exchange between the filmmakers and the Yenish.



## II. DIRECTORS' STATEMENT

How do you make a film about people who prefer to remain invisible? How do you approach the fate of a minority when you belong to an oppressive majority? How can an uncommon way of life be portrayed on film without a voyeuristic perspective?

This film would not have been possible without the generous and critical support of a Yenish friend. He, who wishes to remain in the shadows, invited us on a journey into an unknown Europe. He opened doors and led us to places we wouldn't have found. He brought us into contact with people and families that live among us and yet lead different, often hidden lives. Without our friend's encouragement, we probably would not have made this film. We knew about the difficulties of access to the Yenish community that had caused other film projects to fail.

Even despite the generous mediation of our friend, we were met with sceptical questions. Who are you? What are you doing? What is your goal? Getting closer to the Yenish took time and also clarified our intentions. More than six years we spent with them, travelling through Europe, to the forests of Carinthia, to sites in France, in the mountains and valleys of Grisons. Trust grew and friendships developed. Shared experience took the place of assumptions and prejudices. Over time, we developed empathy for why the people we met are invisible on the fringes of society. The longer we went on, the more aware we became that the film would tell an incomplete story if our ignorance, our prejudices, our otherness, and our scepticism were not integral to the film.

Our journey became the common thread. The subtle shifts in mutual perception became the hidden dramaturgy. We let our mystical sense of the Yenish inform the film's creation, not as cultural determination, but as an interpretation of our experience where boundaries of physical space and time dissolve.

The days, the weeks, and the years we spent together resulted not only in several hundred hours of footage but in a closeness and intimacy, a lightness and immediacy, that would have been impossible without mutual familiarity and trust. From the abundance of material we wove a film in which our protagonists recognize themselves. In which they tell their story and feel heard. A film that is not only about the Yenish, but a film that is also about us. The document of an encounter.

*Andreas Müller & Simon Guy Fässler*



### III. BACKGROUND

#### Who are the Yenish?

The Yenish are a group of people with their own language, culture and history. They are members or descendants of a population with a traditionally travelling and probably mostly semi-nomadic way of life. They mainly live in Switzerland, Germany, France and Austria, but also in other parts of the world. Their total number is estimated at several hundred thousand. In Switzerland alone there are about 35,000. The French spelling is Yéniche, the English Yenish; they are sometimes called Gens de Voyage or traveller until today. In Austria the Yenish are also called Karrner, Dörcher or Laninger, in Central Switzerland Fecker, in Eastern Switzerland Kessler or Spengler. Jenisch is the self-designation.



#### The language

An essential common characteristic of the Yenish is the language. Linguistically, it is an idiom whose structure is based on the language of the majority society, with words from Romanés, Yiddish and Romance languages. Large parts of the vocabulary originated from a creative play with words from the surrounding language. Some of the Yenish vocabulary found its way into dialects and even into standard languages. Often Yenish is compared or equated with Rotwelsch, although Rotwelsch was probably only an «invention» by the authorities and never existed as a language. Since 1997, Yenish has been protected and promoted in Switzerland as a territorially non-bound language.

## Professions

Traditionally, many Yenish people are engaged in itinerant and peddling trade, trading scrap metal, antiques and recycling goods in general, the basket trade, fixing stove plates and pans, or working as knife grinders or musicians. Meanwhile, however, Yenish people are working in all kinds of professions.



## Travelling way of life

An important part of the Yenish culture is a travelling way of life. The topic is complex and controversial. The history of the travellers has been a history of exclusion since the beginning. In the late Middle Ages, non-sedentary people were ostracized by the aristocracy. The aristocracy fought nomadism because it was hard to control travelling people – the nomads were considered to be particularly freedom-loving.

The fate of the Yenish in Switzerland is revealing. In the 18th century, the non-sedentary were registered in «rogue lists». In the 19th century, in the course of the founding of nation-states and the ensuing demarcation of borders, settlement in Switzerland was now linked indispensably to the possession of a «Heimatschein» («Certificate of origin»), a kind of residency permit which enabled the official criminalization of the non-sedentary way of life: The cantons set up police corps whose main task was to ward off «foreign beggars». While the applicable laws in Switzerland were different from canton to canton, travellers generally were picked up by cops during «beggar sweeps» and expelled to other cantons. However, there were also many settled Yenish whose «certificate of origin» was not renewed by the



authorities and who were forced to become travellers as a result. Others settled under social pressure, including families of well-known musicians such as the Wasers and Kolleggers. In 1851, the law against homelessness in the newly founded Swiss Federal State was double-edged: Although all Yenish were granted Swiss citizenship, they were also forcibly assigned to a place of citizenship, and the itinerant lifestyle was made a punishable offense. It was therefore also a re-education and disciplinary measure. Many settled down in order not to attract attention and to be able to continue their professional activities. Often, however, these activities required travelling. Thus, many Yenish were forced to live in a gray area on the edge of legality.



### **Persecution and discrimination**

In the 20th century, exclusion, discrimination and persecution increased even more. In Switzerland, Yenish families were persecuted from the 1920s until the early 1970s by the «Hilfswerk Kinder der Landstrasse» (officially posing as a charity to rescue neglected children), which belonged to the Pro Juventute Foundation. The «Hilfswerk», directed by Dr. Alfred Siegfried, pursued the goal of cutting off Yenish children from their origins. With the approval of the government, more than 600 children were taken from their families and placed in foster homes or foster families. Everything Yenish was to be eradicated. Siblings were separated from each other and placed in different families or foster homes, young people were locked up in institutions. Rape, forced deportation to psychiatric institutions and sterilization are well documented. Entire families, from the grandparents to their present-day descendants, were traumatized. Almost every Yenish family was affected by the «Hilfswerk»'s activities. In 1972, the journalist Hans Caprez reported, in the magazine «Schweizerischer

Beobachter», about the removal of children and the inhuman operations of the «Hilfswerk». Eventually, public pressure caused Pro Juventute to dissolve the organisation in the spring of 1973. But there was never any criminal prosecution of those responsible for the misdeeds. Far too little present in the collective memory are the persecutions that Yens endured in the Holocaust. Like the Jews, Sinti and Roma, they were persecuted and deported and killed in concentration camps. Efforts are underway to establish a culture of remembrance of these crimes.

### **Struggle for recognition, associations and organizations**

As a result of the revelation of the crimes committed by the «Hilfswerk Kinder der Landstrasse», the Yenish organization «Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse» was formed in Switzerland which played an important role in the reassessment of the historical events. The recently deceased writer and Yenish activist Mariella Mehr acted as its spokesperson, eloquently addressing the authorities and demanding apologies and reparations. The «Radgenossenschaft der Landstrasse» publishes its own magazine, the «Scharotl».

There are other organizations that work for the recognition of the Yenish as a people with the rights of an ethnic, cultural and linguistic minority. In German-speaking Switzerland, these are the foundation «Naschet Jenische» or the «Fahrende Zigeuner-Kulturzentrum», in French-speaking Switzerland the «Association Jenisch-Manouche-Sinti (JMS)», the «Association Yeniche Suisse», the «Association Mouvement des Voyageurs Suisses (BSR-MVS)» and the «Citoyens Nomades». Albert Barras acts as press spokesman of the travelling people for French-speaking Switzerland. And May Bittel acts already for a long time as an expert for the Travelling People in the Council of Europe. In Switzerland, the Yenish have been recognized as a national minority since 1997 and 2016 respectively.

With reference to Switzerland, the Yenish in Germany and Austria are also fighting for their recognition. In the 21st century, various organizations of the Yenish have emerged in these countries, such as the «Zentralrat der Jenischen Deutschlands», the «Verein der Jenischen in Singen», der «Jenische Kulturverband» and the «Verein zur Anerkennung der Jenischen in Österreich und Europa». In Austria, Romed Mungenast was an important pioneer. The Yenish association «schäft qwant» acts as a transnational association for Yenish cooperation and cultural exchange. In Tyrol, the association «Initiative Minderheiten Tirol» also works to make the Yenish culture and way of life visible.





#### **IV. CREW**

##### **A soap factory & 8horses production**

**in co-production with SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen, SRG SSR**

Produced by	<b>Frank Matter &amp; Simon Guy Fässler</b>
Directed by	<b>Andreas Müller</b>
Co-directed by	<b>Simon Guy Fässler</b>
Edited by	<b>Marcel Bächtiger</b>
Cinematography	<b>Simon Guy Fässler SCS</b>
Location sound	<b>Andreas Müller</b>
Production coordinator	<b>Loredana-Nastassja Fernández</b>
Commissioning editor SRF	<b>Urs Augstburger</b>
National coordination SRG SSR	<b>Sven Wälti</b>
Video Post-production	<b>8horses</b>
Sound mix & design	<b>Patrick Becker &amp; Dominik Avenwedde, Nurton</b>
Titles design	<b>Studio Krispin Her</b>
Poster art work	<b>Alberto Vieceli</b>

Website	<b>Klaus Affolter, bytes &amp; bones</b>
Additional camera	<b>Andreas Müller, Lionel Rupp, Mika Lanz, Silvan Hillmann</b>
Colour grading	<b>Simon Guy Fässler, Roger Somm, Patrischa Freuler</b>
Post-production assistant	<b>Michael Hess</b>
Editing assistants	<b>Fabienne Koch, Vicky Ramsay, Hae-Sup Sin</b>
VFX	<b>emd3000 GmbH, Eugen Danzinger</b>
Trailer	<b>Gisela Weibel</b>

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 Katholische Kirche im Kanton Zürich  
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## V. BIOGRAPHIES

### **Andreas Müller, director**

Born in Winterthur in 1975. In 2002 he graduated with distinction in directing at the ZHdK. His diploma film «Joshua» (2002) won numerous international awards and was nominated for the Swiss Film Award as well as the European Short Méliés d'Or. In 2004 he began to deal intensively with the historical case of Klara Wendel and with the history and present-day reality of the Yenish. This resulted in, among other things, «Ruäch» (2023). In 2012 he founded the Cine-Club Perla-Mode in a collective with 5 artists, which invited the director of the legendary film «Reisender Krieger» (1981) in March 2014. From the conversation Müller had with him at the Cine-Club, the documentary portrait «Christian Schocher, Filmmaker» (2015) was created, co-directed with Marcel Bächtiger. In the works are the feature film project «Die Wahrheit der Klara Wendel», produced by Amka Films, as well as the Fast Track winning project «Doppelgänger» (Doc./Fic.), which he is realizing in a collective with Silvan Hillmann and Emanuel Signer.

### **Simon Guy Fässler, co-director & co-producer**

Simon Guy Fässler works as a freelance cinematographer for fiction and documentaries in Europe and worldwide. As a founding member of the film development and production collective 8horses in Zurich, he directs and produces his own and other people's film projects. He has traveled to all continents for documentaries, gaining insight into many cultures. Feature film projects have taken him to European countries such as Italy, Germany, France, England and Austria. Since graduating from the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, where he studied Visual Communication in the classes of Wim Wenders and Fatih Akin, his base has been in Zurich. His camera work for the feature film «Aloys» by Tobias Nölle earned him a nomination in the competition for Best Debut Camera at the Camerimage Festival – and won him the Swiss Film Award for Best Cinematography in 2017. Simon Guy Fässler is a member of the European and Swiss Film Academies and the Swiss Cinematographers Society. For a complete list of Simon Guy Fässler's work, please visit the corresponding pages on IMDB or Crew United.

### **Marcel Bächtiger, co-author & editor**

Born in 1976 in St.Gallen, Switzerland. 2002 Diploma in Architecture at the ETH Zurich. 2017 Dissertation at the Institute for History and Theory of Architecture (gta), ETH Zurich. Works, researches and publishes where film and architecture meet. Author, director and editor of various documentaries. Since 2014 lecturer of «Spatial Concepts in Film and Architecture», ETH Zurich, since 2019 lecturer at HSLU. Since 2015 editor of the magazine Hochparterre. 2018 Curator of the «Salon Suisse» at the Venice Architecture Biennale.

### **Frank Matter, producer**

Frank Matter, born in 1964, got into filmmaking in 1992. A year later he moved to Brooklyn, NY, where he has been working for many years as a director, producer and writer. After returning to Basel in 2006, he founded the film production company soap factory GmbH (soapfactory.ch). He has produced and directed numerous award-winning films.



## **VI. CONTACT & LINKS**

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### **Trailer Ruäch – A journey into Yenish Europe:**

<https://vimeo.com/813101896>

### **Official Film Website:**

[www.ruaech.ch](http://www.ruaech.ch)