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Why do the doors stay closed to us?

Panu Pulma's study shows how people view the Roma

By Hanna Snellman

Panu Pulma: Suljetut ovet. Pohjoismaiden romanipolitiikka 1500-luvulta EU-aikaan. SKS. 237 s.

In research concerning ethnic minorities it has long been discussed if members of those minorities should finally be given the opportunity to take part in research concerning their own culture.

The debate is especially heated among indigenous peoples. Who the author is determines how something is told.

The choice of author can be influenced by means of research policy - even to the extent that instead of providing funding for domestic researchers, money is sent to areas affected by the study.

Historian Panu Pulma knows the problems concerning international debate and studies on ethnic minorities. In the beginning of his study on Nordic policy concerning the Roma, Suljetut ovet ("Closed Doors"), he laments the lack of a historian among Finland's the Roma, or Gipsy population.

Pulma is not writing the history of the Roma either, but rather the history of the concept of ethnicity and policy concerning the Roma.

He outlines the study using a line in a song by the band Horto Kaalo: "Miksi ovet ei aukene meille?" ("Why don't the doors open for us?").

The international aspect of ethnic policy and changes therein are a major part of Pulma's study. The ethno-political aspect of a Nordic welfare state is especially important for the Roma, since they have a 500-year history of being the target of state policy in the Nordic Countries.

Pulma does not study the Roma themselves, but rather the attitudes of Finns, Swedes, Danes, and Norwegians towards the Roma.

He sees two almost contradictory policies. On one hand, the Roma have been kept outside all government and public institutions, and on the other hand, the government has always tried to (forcibly) assimilate them into society.

On a more personal level, one can think about what kind of a childhood the Roma had in Finland when childhood was a specific target of ethnic policy. Pulma writes an admirable analysis about things that are not pleasant to tell. He does not judge, or go into explicit detail, but lets the analysis speak for itself.

Pulma tells how in the 1750's Roma men and women were forced to help build the fortress of Viapori. The first Roma children were taken into foster care at around that time as well.
The children were separated from their parents in order to rid them of their customs, language, and temperament. Once they grew up, they were obliged to pay back the care they received as children by working for their foster families. At this time it was not only Roma children that were taken from their parents.

Over the centuries there have always been those who have advocated separating Roma children from their nomadic parents. Only thus could they be rid of their tribal customs.

One method for assimilating the Roma into the general populace, proposed in a committee report in 1900, was to set up special Gypsy schools in Sortavala and Jyväskylä for boys and Viipuri and Oulu for girls.

This forced education based on a Norwegian model did not materialise at that time, however. It began in 1948 when the Gypsy Mission, following Norway's example, decided that children's homes and labour colonies should be the core of their efforts.

Child welfare worked as both a financial and social excuse for assimilating Roma children into local culture. The children's homes received government support and the goal of separating the children from their parents was to break traditions going back generations.

Of course the Roma parents also had the option to settle down and end their ancient traditions in fear of having their children abducted by the government.

The end result would be the same from the point of view of the state - a "successful" blending of the Roma into the general population.

From the point of view of the children, parents, and a multicultural Finland, the policy was far from successful, which Pulma also states in his study.

The UN Year of the Refugee 1960 started to slowly change the course of public debate. The Helsinki Lutheran Church newspaper Kirkko ja kaupunki asked in 1964: "Do the Finnish Gypsies live in Apartheid?"

Public debate on policy concerning the Roma caused turmoil in Finland as well. At the same time, Finnish Roma moved to Sweden in large numbers. The Swedish authorities did not consider them Roma, but rather ordinary Finnish citizens moving to Sweden.

The Swedish Roma, on the other hand, took an active interest in the Finnish Roma. For example the Swedish Roma activist Katarina Taikon criticized the children's homes of the Gypsy Mission.

With help of Nordic cooperation, the Roma minority has become accepted, and gradually the forceful blending of cultures was given up.

Now there are efforts to support the language and customs of the Roma.

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