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International newsletter of Foyer

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This bimonthly English-language newsletter covers a broad range of Foyer activities.

Foyer International Newsletter - Winter 2014

Welcome to the Winter 2014 edition of Foyer's international newsletter! In this newsletter we are looking into the past and the future simultaneously. We remember a past migration era and celebrate the work done over many decades by dedicated Foyer workers. At the same time, we look at the present and future, tracing new migration trends, and facing structural changes within our own organization.

Two new Foyer publications: *On est là* and *Roma in beweging*

On est là [We have arrived]

They are the true pioneers of Moroccan and Turkish immigration in Brussels: the many men and women who came to Belgium during the 1960s and early 1970s; some of them on their own, in response to Belgium's call for foreign labour, others to join a family member who had gone before.

What they discovered upon arrival was a new universe: a city that had nothing whatsoever to do with the place that they had left behind – and that by now has changed irreversibly again as well.

On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the official start of Moroccan and Turkish migration to Belgium, Foyer asked [Geheugen Collectief](#), an independent centre for historical research, to bring this migration era back to life through the stories of the people who experienced it all first-hand. We interviewed 34 Brussels citizens of Moroccan and Turkish background, as well as nine witnesses who worked closely together with these immigrants. Their stories are sometimes funny, sometimes moving, but always honest and informative. They not only convey facts, but also the intense impressions and emotions associated with arriving and settling in a foreign country.

The book focuses on Brussels and on the arrival and the first few years in the migrants' new home. The eyewitness accounts enable a scientific historical approach, while still resulting in an entertaining book that reads like a novel. [Available in French and Dutch.](#)

Roma in Beweging [Roma on the move]

In early November Foyer organized a book launch and conference on the current situation of Roma in the Brussels Capital Region. According to recent estimates, some 10,000 people of Roma origin now live in Brussels. The EU accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 gave rise to the most recent large inflow of Roma from Eastern Europe. The overall socio-economic situation of Roma in Europe is [worsening](#). This trend has been a major push factor for Roma migration, and not only in Eastern Europe. The crisis in southern Europe – for instance, in the Spanish construction sector – incited many Roma families who had moved there to migrate again, joining family members in Western and Northern Europe.

The book “Roma on the move” documents the evolution of the Brussels Roma population over the past decade and draws up the balance of ten years’ work at Foyer’s Roma and Travellers Service. Even if there are a number of persistent obstacles regarding the integration of people of Roma origin into Brussels society, the overall result is positive and promising.

Foyer’s Roma expert Koen Geurts: “People rarely have a realistic idea of the Roma living here in Brussels. In fact, we cannot talk of the Roma, since there is not just one community, but a variety of groups that differ considerably from one another. This variety of backgrounds results in a variety of occupations, aspirations, mentalities and attitudes toward integration in Brussels or Belgian society.” The book explains the diversity and discusses the various Roma groups in detail. “What all Roma have in common, though, is that they are no longer nomads – with the exception of the western European Travellers – but are looking for a stable and secure place to live.”

Indeed, more than ever before, Brussels Roma - over three quarters of whom come from either Bulgaria or Romania – have their mind set on a long-term stay in Belgium and on integration into schools, the labour market, and society as a whole. Thanks to the efforts of the Roma mediators, Roma have been finding their way into school with ever greater ease over the past few years. Koen Geurts: “People can easily be motivated to send their children to school when positive ties are being made between schools, pupils and their families. Yet the process remains hindered by limited participation in pre-school education, cases of extreme absenteeism, teenage marriages and pregnancies, as well as by the lack of spaces and certain schools’ negative attitude toward Roma.”

Recently, World Bank research has shown that investing in Roma integration is a necessity if Europe wants to safeguard its economic prosperity. At the latest Roma summit (Brussels, 2014) the importance of local-level actors was emphasized, for as Foyer’s work has proven, it is at the level of local groups and individual families that a real difference can be made.

[The book is available in Dutch and French.](#)

Brussels in Dialogue 2014

It is an annual tradition in Brussels: bringing together people of all walks of life who live and/or work in the city, for an open conversation in which they get to know one another and also talk about ways in which life in Brussels could be made (even) better.

“*Grenzeloos*” [“Without Borders”] was the 2014 theme of Brussels in Dialogue’s dialogue week, which ran from 13th until 19th October. Some 800 people participated, at a variety of locations throughout Brussels. See [here](#) for an impression.

In 2014 Foyer, together with the many organizations that make up the Brussels in Dialogue Platform, further diversified its dialogue events and activities, which now take place not just during the annual dialogue week, but throughout the year as well. They involve different partners and have proven to be a particularly useful tool for creating sustainable dialogue among citizens, associations and other actors at the local level.

In the Brussels community of Ganshoren, for instance, passers-by were invited on several occasions to sit down at a table on the pavement and have a chat over a bowl of soup with senior citizens attending a local service centre. Participants not only got to know the service centre but also made contact, often for the first time, with their next-door neighbours.

Each year, Foyer and its Francophone partner [CBA](#) also offer training sessions for dialogue facilitators – thus enabling people to gain a skill that they can use in a variety of professional and personal contexts.

This year’s dialogue week concluded with a party at the BELvue Museum, which is a museum of Belgian history as well as a centre for democracy.

45 Years of Foyer

On 2 December we celebrated no fewer than 45 years of Foyer, counting from the opening of the first local youth centre out of which Foyer eventually grew, as a tree with many branches. The Brussels Kaaitheater was filled to the brim with over 700 people who had come to see a show that

offered a true catalogue of the variety of projects and talents present within all of those Foyer branches.

The women of Dar Al Amal, Foyer's women's centre, presented a theatre play, there were stand-up comedians, youth centre rappers and castellers building human castles, and the Foyer staff choir performed a song written for the occasion. The audience was also treated to a new video documenting Foyer's current work. Finally, no Foyer event would be entirely complete without biscuits and tea offered by Dar Al Amal.

While we are celebrating 45 years of solid work, the wind of change never stops blowing. As of January 2015, some important changes are taking place within Foyer. Two components will leave the organization to be incorporated in other structures: Vormingscentrum, Foyer's vocational training centre, will become part of Groep Intro, a not-for-profit training and job coaching organization. The interculturalization & social cohesion team, as well as the legal advice service, will merge with other integration centres and newcomer reception centres into a government agency. The latter group includes the editorial team of this newsletter, who are thus signing off for the last time, sending you their very best wishes and a few lines of poetry:

*Ah, a blank new page!
In it: sunlight, water, trees,
the paper-makers.*

(after Thich Nhat Hanh)

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