

THE ROMA AMONG US WOMEN'S VOICES FROM THE GRASSROOTS

The following appeared on a recent spot on Romanian TV:

- Two dark silhouettes seen from behind while a voice says: “Which one of the two is a Roma?”

The voice continues:

- When it rains, the Roma uses an umbrella...
- When the Roma is hungry, the Roma eats
- When the Roma is thirsty, the Roma drinks
- When it's cold, the Roma wears warm clothes

Romania was carrying out an awareness-raising campaign to show to ordinary Romanians that a people who had lived among them for centuries was just like them, simply human. The same message is equally relevant in practically any other part of Europe, although it may have to be adapted to the context.

There are many myths about the Roma, and just as many fantasies, both positive and negative, and many expert theories. They are both envied for their supposed freedom and reviled for not conforming to the written and unwritten norms of European societies. This brief article isn't meant to go into the historical background of an ethnic group as diversified as the Roma - even their name, language and religious affiliations vary from one region to another. In France, they are officially called “*Les gens du voyage*,” meaning “The Travelling People,” but this is simply a convenient administrative term with no ethnic connotation. They are more commonly called “*Gitans*” or Gypsies.

A few things are certain: they have lived among Europeans for millennia, have been and still are, with depressing constancy, the target of various forms of discriminations, often brutal, the Holocaust being one of its best known manifestations.

I originally wanted to speak with the Roma among us in Geneva and neighbouring France and was struck by their diversity. It quickly became clear that having meaningful interviews would take a lot of preparation. I needed to get to know them better, to ensure that they trusted me, that I could ask the right questions and that they felt sufficiently comfortable to answer them honestly. I met with them several times, we shared drinks and food, but I still felt that I could not do justice to any message they may wish to convey.

Instead, I began getting acquainted with a grassroots organization that has known them for a long time and a French historian who, over the years, had collected testimonies from Roma women. These testimonies reflect their present concerns and their own perception of the lives they lead now, in a Europe trying so hard to be unified and where Roma still remain the ultimate “others” and outsiders.

Following are brief glimpses of what two of these women living in Europe have to say. These narrow windows into their lives were opened by *Claire Auzias* in her book “*Choeur de femmes Tsiganes*.”

I have summarized and translated the original French text. If anything *Ms Auzias'* book illustrates that when searching for ways of helping Roma help themselves, one size will never fit all.

DANA

Dana is 26 and had been living in Geneva for four years at the time she met the author. She is Romanian but speaks French fluently. She is studying *education sciences* at Geneva University.

She ended up in Geneva because when she was young, she always liked the French language and wanted to go to France. Geneva was the next best thing. She has a high school diploma from Romania and studied *library sciences* for two years at Bucharest University while she worked at Romani CRISS, a Roma human rights association.

At the time, she admitted identifying more with the Romanian culture than with the Roma. She has no memory of discrimination from her childhood, except one, although it may not exactly qualify as discrimination and certainly wasn't traumatising: when she was in elementary school, she always tried to work hard on things to avoid having people say, "*Oh, she is Roma, she won't be able to manage in school. She won't make it.*" "*I just didn't want to fit the stereotype, and that explains perhaps my interest in the French language. It helped me avoid the usual label. I realized it much later. I tried hard to be part of the majority culture of Romania. For similar reasons, probably, when I was young, I refused to learn the Roma language my family spoke at home. The only time I was made conscious of the fact I was Roma was in class when I was 12 and there was a census in the country. A man came in and asked 'How many Roma are there in this class?' The teacher said, 'One, over there at the end'; the man repeated, 'Are there any Roma over there?' I said 'No' and he just left.*"

Dana points out that her parents didn't seem to have any interest in her going to school. She realizes that it was one of the benefits of the Communist system. "*The Communist system also provided work for my parents, in a factory. This insertion into the world of work led to their slowly losing a connection with their Roma culture, they spoke the language less and less frequently at home.*"

She feels that Communism is based on equality and solidarity, although she admits that in Romania, it wasn't exactly like that.

It was when she began working with Romani CRISS that she began to value her own culture. "*They gave me a position of Coordinator and that gave me confidence. It's what you call 'positive discrimination.'*" There, she worked on a UNICEF project to ensure children go to school. She worked with parents as much as with children and regrets that insufficient attention was paid to the introduction of Roma culture in the children's school curriculum.

Because of her education, Dana had a foot in both the Western Romanian culture and her own Roma culture. As a result, she had difficulties in adolescence in finding the right balance as a woman, and after a very painful experience, decided to leave Romania. She went to India recently and found an incredible connection with the culture there. She is now at an age when she would like to get married, have her own family, and she knows that she could not possibly spend her life with a man from the Roma community, nor with one from the Western world. She thinks that perhaps India is the answer.

Meanwhile she is studying here, in Geneva, and likes what she is doing. She knows, deep down, that she over-idealizes India. When all is said and done, she knows full well that she could never accept the traditional Indian life of the married woman with her mother-in-law... At 26, she now lives alone in Geneva. It's a choice she assumes fully.

ANGELIQUE

My name is Angélique and I am 38. I was born in Nancy(1) while my family was travelling. Now, we are all in Arles in this neighbourhood. We are all Gypsies in the family. I speak French, the Gypsy language and Catalan. Even though I am of Catalan origin, I don't know Spain at all. I don't even know the Spanish Gypsy language. My children were born here - they're all French. I used to like travelling. It was much better than staying here. We had some 20 caravans; we went from one place to another. We stayed longer if business was good, and if not, we just left.

We went to sell things from door to door and at markets. A caravan is easier to take care of than a house.

I have done a lot of travelling since I was born...

I am not married, I live with a man.

I still had a gypsy wedding when I was 17, with a white dress, a handsome husband and guitars.

Some girls are younger than that. My daughter got married at 16.

I chose my own husband, he is very nice, a real piece of cake!

He runs around, like everyone else. I said to him 'You don't have to need me...'

The old woman had come to make sure I was a virgin when I got married.

We all liked the caravans much more, the men, my husband, all of us.

When we earned 600 Euros, it was all for us.

Here, if you earn that much you have a lot of things to pay, there is nothing left. You have to pay for water, electricity, everything. Before, we only paid for plugging into the electric current. It was great!

It hasn't been the same for the past 3 years.

I don't know how to read or write. It's a problem when I have to fill out papers.

And my youngest, a girl, she is sick, she has asthma, normally, she should go to school in September.

They put her in school all by herself. All the others are elsewhere.

They tried to put her with the others, but it didn't work.

What do I do when they take everything from me?

If I don't want her to go to school and if she has an asthma attack, what do I do?

I am willing to put her in school with the others. I don't like to have her all alone. When she has to go she always cries. We went to the Town hall and ask that they let her go with the others.

All alone, she'll go crazy!

They just said, 'if we can we'll put her with the others, if not we won't'.

That's what they said.

Seen from behind as silhouettes, Dana and Angélique might very well be undistinguishable from any of us; they both drink when they are thirsty and eat when they are hungry.

They are human...

And although they're worlds apart from each other, Dana may hold some answers for Angélique.

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