THINK ROMA STYLE!
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INTRODUCTION

“I HAVE TWO GOLDEN BANDS ON MY FOREHEAD. ONE OF THEM IS MY GYPsinESS, THE OTHER ONE IS MY HUNGARIANNESS.”
- Péli Tamás, Roma-Hungarian painter

“MY IDENTITY MIGHT BEGIN WITH THE FACT OF MY RACE, BUT IT DIDN’T—COULDN’T—END THERE. AT LEAST, THAT’S WHAT I WOULD CHOOSE TO BELIEVE.”
- Barack Obama, president of the United States of America

“You know, in Roma families the girls start having children at an early age,” a non-Roma classmate knowingly said to one of us during a university lesson one day. He was not aware of the fact that he was talking to a Roma person, a 22-year old woman who had not had a child yet.

Situations like this are common for us, as Roma university students. Oftentimes it happens that people from the majority society “know” what Gypsy culture is like, their views being informed by what they see on the street and by the media. For example, when seeing a Roma girl with a baby on the street or Roma boys fighting each other, one can easily make the generalization that all Gypsies follow this negative example. In our country, these bad examples are in the forefront of people’s minds. Lots of people cannot imagine that someone who does not fit into the above mentioned stereotypes could be from the Roma community. If it comes to light that someone who is in higher education or has a profession is Roma, it is thought that they are “different”, an exception. In reality, there are many “exceptions” because the Roma community is diverse, just like any other national and cultural group.

We do not intend to say that Gypsies are “super” people, without flaws, but we would like to show the other side of the coin. It is easier to draw conclusions from bad examples than discovering the community as a whole, but many people do not have the opportunity to sit down with Roma people and talk with them personally. That is why for this project, we decided to give the opportunity to Roma people to speak about their culture, identity, and community. In order to hear about different perspectives, we have done interviews with several people who work in the field of Roma education
and culture. The chosen interviewees are ordinary Roma people who are working for their community with their heart and soul.

In these pages, you will hear about how these people perceive their Roma identity. For consistency, we asked them all the same basic questions, via email or in person, although sometimes we asked more as well, if one question raised an interesting point about which we wanted to learn more. We asked the interviewees about the role of their Roma identity and culture in their lives, and all of them expressed that they do not have just one identity as a Roma person, but a dual identity as Roma-Hungarian individuals. Although the interviewees talked about times when having a multiple identity is not simple, they all expressed that being Roma makes them no less Hungarian.

We hope you enjoy reading these interviews and learn something new about the Roma community.

ÁGI ZUBOR
KITTI ZSIGMOND
ISTVÁN BORS
This summer I will graduate from Budapest Business University. I study Tourism and Catering. My mother is a traditional Oláh Gypsy woman and my father is a non-Roma Hungarian man. I have a sister. Unfortunately, my mother did not teach us the Romany language, and my family did not practice any Roma customs or traditions. I first met with them when I came to the College. The more I learn about it, the more I like it. My favorite is the traditional Oláh Gypsy folk songs. However, I don’t like to say, „I am Roma”, or „I am Hungarian”, or that I am anything; to me, it doesn’t matter.

Kitti Zsigmond
Student (Roma Jesuit College)

I am 22 years old and I am studying at Eötvös Lorand University. I am participating in a teacher course specialized for English and German language. In my opinion, it is absolutely important to discover ourselves. In my case, it is inevitable to speak about my Christian, Roma, and Hungarian identities. I feel I have to collect as much information about these parts of my whole identity as I can in order to have a clear picture about myself. That is one of the reasons why I decided to live in the Roma Jesuit College, to strengthen my identity since I do not come from a traditional Roma family. However, as a member of the Roma community I feel that I have a huge responsibility to pass on my knowledge and to be an “example” among the Roma and non-Roma society, just to show them that everything is possible if one really wants something. In my opinion, education is the first step in this process.
ISTVÁN BORS
Student
I’m currently a student at University of Pécs Faculty of Business and Economics, and I’m studying Finance and Accounting. The role of my Roma identity in my life is really important. This is why I took part in the project in first place, because I thought (and I still think) that this is a good start to help people see Roma people in a different (better) way then nowadays.

RACHEL MCVEY
Fulbright English Teaching Assistant
Prior to coming to Hungary as a Fulbright grantee, I studied History and Sociology at the University of Pittsburgh with an emphasis on minority movements, during which time I spent two semesters working with Roma/Egyptian communities in Albania. During the 2015-2016 academic year, I have been teaching English at Roma Jesuit College and Romaversitas as part of Fulbright’s Roma Student Initiative.

The students who worked on this project began with the commission to make a follow-up to „Cook Roma Style!”, and the result is the booklet that you have in your hands. As the Fulbright ETA at Roma Jesuit College, it has been a privilege to help these students develop their ideas into a project that contributes something unique to the current discourse on Roma culture. They have put a great deal of work and thought into this project, from conducting and translating the interviews to choosing the design. I am grateful for the openness of all the Roma students and interviewees who were willing to share about such a personal topic as identity with me and with the other non-Roma people who will read „Think Roma Style!”. I hope that these interviews will give readers something new to think about, as it did me.
I am a 52 year old women, and since 2002 I’ve been working as the head of the Roma Studies Faculty. Before this I was working as a teacher at Gandhi Secondary School. I’m one of the four teachers who founded Gandhi. We founded the secondary school in 1992, and I was working as a teacher there for 10 years. My family is a traditional Beás Roma family; I have three sisters, and one brother. I’m the first from my family who’s ever graduated from secondary school, and who has a college degree, as well.
What does your Roma identity mean for you? What effects has it had on your life?

It has had various effects on me. There was a time (when I was teenager) when I accepted being Gypsy, but actually I would have rather been somebody else. Then I realised, that being Gypsy has value because you are a part of another culture, but it is also a very big responsibility. If somebody is persistent and affective, it gives good example. I know that my Gypsiness and my way of life is an example for lots of people, and gives them strength, so I think it is even more important to be myself, good and bad together.

Many times, I have felt, that I am a “pet gypsy”, that people present me as an example of how to be “good”. It was very bad for me for a long time, but then I realized that sometimes I have to bear it in the interest of my community.

Did you grow up with a strong, determined Roma consciousness?

I can’t judge how strong it was. My family never denied that we were Gypsies, but we always tried to blend in with our surroundings. We learned a lot from others, but naturally we lived our own life, spoke our own language, lived our own culture.

Is it ever a challenge to choose between your Roma and your Hungarian identities?

No. There were situations in which one or the other has been stronger, but basically I always find my way. For example, if I am abroad, I feel myself mainly to be Hungarian; if I am in my own community—for example, when I’m collecting [Roma] folk tales, I feel myself mainly to be Gypsy.

What do you think, is the Hungarian Roma culture different from the other European Roma cultures?

I don’t really know the non-Hungarian Roma communities, but I think Gypsy communities in every country each have their own unique character, just like Hungarian culture isn’t the same throughout the whole country. In one place one aspect is stronger, in another place another aspect, but obviously there are many things about which [Roma people] think similarly; for example, in relation to the family, the child’s role within the family.

What do you think, are Roma people keeping their traditions?

Currently in Hungary there are three big Gypsy communities: the Romungro, the Olá, and the Beáš—they are living in the south, in Dunántúl (Somogy, Tolna, Zala, Baranya). This region’s communities don’t really keep the traditions. The language rift is huge here—the older generation is still speak-
ing the language, but the younger generations don’t. But still there are events that they keep; for example, weddings.

IS IT HARDER TO BE SUCCESSFUL AS A ROMA WOMAN?
In a certain way it is. I’m full of complexes; for example, I think that I am worth less then a non-Roma woman, so I work much harder then people usually do to get rid of this feeling and to make them accept me. So it surely makes it harder for me, but this has been my own decision, my own choice, and I’m okay with this.

IS YOUR FAMILY PROUD OF YOU?
Well yes, they are, but most of my family doesn’t understand what I’m doing, what my job is, what did I learn, because they have never done it. They didn’t know what I was doing. They knew I have learned many things, and a lots of things, but they didn’t know what I would do when I finished my studies. Well...my brother and my sisters do understand it, and they are really proud of me.

IF YOU HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SAY ONE THING ABOUT CULTURE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
In my family, family cohesiveness is very important. The word „family” has a deeper meaning than in non-Gypsy communities. Through children, the family becomes an unbreakable unit. There are life-changing situations, like births, weddings, and deaths, that are very important, and each and every family treats them differently. From the past until today, it has been a big tradition to have a vigil when a close family member dies. At this time, the family members and the other relatives come together in order to appropriately bid farewell to the deceased in his or her earthly life. The relatives don’t leave the family members alone in the mourning period, and this is a very strong community and personal value that gives much strength to everyone.
Gyorgy Lakatos grew up in Vácduka and studied Cultural Anthropology at ELTE. He has been working in the field of Roma culture and capacity building for most of his career, and has held positions in the Hungarian Roma Parliament, Romano Kher, and the Hungarian Malta Charity. Currently lives with his wife and three children in Budapest, and directs the Romano Glaszo Human Sounds Art Group, a group of young musicians, singers, and dancers that performs music from many European folk traditions.
WHAT DOES YOUR ROMA IDENTITY MEAN TO YOU? WHAT IMPACT HAS IT HAD ON YOUR LIFE?
My Gypsy identity is part of my life, just the same as how I am a man, a Hungarian, European, a father, and I could go on. I live together with my Roma identity, and along with it, with positive and negative experiences and feelings associated with that identity.

DID YOU GROW UP WITH A STRONG SENSE OF BEING ROMA, EITHER FROM YOUR FAMILY OR FROM NON-ROMA?
In my family, everyone grew up as Gypsy. We spoke the Gypsy language, kept the Gypsy habits, traditions—for us, it was natural. But this kind of consciousness of Gypsy identity was different than that which I had taken from the majority of society. Overwhelmingly, the non-Gypsy part of society viewed Gypsies with contempt and had (or have) bad opinions of Gypsies, and this also affected me. Many times it wasn’t good being a Gypsy among non-Gypsies, but I could not change because it was not my choice; I could not simply transform into „white”. On the other hand, oftentimes non-Gypsy people expected this.

IS IT EVER A CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN YOUR ROMA AND YOUR HUNGARIAN IDENTITIES?
It’s not difficult to choose; I’m at once both Hungarian and Gypsy. I have many identities, I don’t have to choose. Just as I’m both a human and a man, I’m also both Hungarian and Gypsy.

DO YOU THINK THAT HUNGARIAN ROMA CULTURE IS VERY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF ROMA IN OTHER PLACES IN EUROPE?
I think there are differences between the cultures of European Gypsies, as well as similarities. The first similarity (which is not directly a part of Roma culture, but is a part of our life) is the culture of poverty, because a very significant part of Hungarian Gypsies live in immeasurable poverty. But there is also a similarity in the language, because a part of Gypsies still speak the Gypsy language (Romani), everywhere with its own local flavor. There is also a similarity in the behavior resulting from exclusion.
The Hungarian Gypsy culture differs from that of other European Gypsies in the same way that Hungarian culture also differs from other European cultures, because Hungarian Gypsies also have taken on a part of Hungarian culture, when there’s not been a fundamental problem. There can be differences (and at the same time, similarities) in faith, because in Hungary, Gypsy people are mainly Catholic and denominations of Protestant, but because there are so many denominations,
there are really few numbers: Jehovahs Witness, Adventist, Faith Church, etc, while in other Euro-
pean countries, there are Muslims, Orthodox Christians, etc. There are not only denominational
differences, but also differences in the faith in life and practice, as well: whether they go together
to church with the non-gypsies or apart, if they have a church of their own, if they do not attend
different churches.
The traditional dress can also be different, although there are strong similarities, as well. It’s the
same with various folk customs, with holidays observed (Christmas, Easter, birthdays, halal, ect.)

IF YOU COULD SHARE ONE THING ABOUT ROMA CULTURE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
I would share the Romano Glaszo – Human Sounds Arts Group, to be sure. Either that, or the
Budaörsi Study Hall. In the case of both of these organizations, they work together with Gypsies
and non-Gypsies, children and adults, foreigners and Hungarian.
“I was born in Kiskunfélegyháza, on the 7th of February, 1964. I attended elementary and secondary school in my home town and then I went to Szeged to study law at József Attila University, but I finished my studies in Budapest at Eötvös Loránd University. So as far as my profession is concerned, I am a lawyer. After graduation I worked as a lawyer for the Kecskemét city council and then at the city council of Kiskunfélegyháza and some other places. Later I realized what I really want to do, and that is helping my own Roma community. So, I started to work at non-governmental associations. Currently I am the vice-chairman of Kiskunfélegyháza Roma Minority Association. We regularly organize camps for the Roma youth and cultural evenings for the whole Roma community.”
WHAT DOES YOUR ROMA IDENTITY MEAN TO YOU? WHAT IMPACT HAS IT HAD ON YOUR LIFE?
The Roma identity means for me an absolutely strong family bond throughout my childhood. It could be seen in the different family customs and traditions. We always had big celebrations, where the whole family gathered together and enjoyed the time with each other. My brothers got married according to the traditional Roma customs, but my sisters married non-Roma men. When our parents died, the strong Roma traditions passed with them also, and so it is hard to keep this side, the Roma side of my identity.

DID YOU GROW UP WITH A STRONG SENSE OF BEING ROMA, EITHER FROM YOUR FAMILY OF FROM NON-ROMA?
Yes, we had a really big family. I have three brothers and four sisters. As far as profession is concerned, my mother was a housewife and my father was horse chanter—as you know, this is a traditional Gypsy job. As I previously mentioned, I lost a little part of my Gypsy identity when my parents passed away. Until that point I had felt that this was a strong identity of mine, but after them, there was nobody who could represent the different customs as they did, so I was not motivated to practice it again as much as before.

IS IT EVER A CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN YOUR ROMA AND YOUR HUNGARIAN IDENTITIES?
Unfortunately, the Hungarian society does not favor the Gypsy people, even if they are educated enough. That is the reason why not just me, but a lot of Roma people, do not want to embrace their origin. I had negative experiences in connection with my Roma origins in the job market. When my employer realised that I was a Roma person, I was discriminated against.

DO YOU THINK THAT HUNGARIAN ROMA CULTURE IS VER Y DISTINCT FROM THAT OF ROMA IN OTHER PLACES IN EUROPE?
In my opinion, the European Roma culture is basically the same. There may be differences in language dialects.

IF YOU COULD SHARE ONE THING ABOUT ROMA CULTURE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
The love of music and dancing. I would definitely mention a traditional Roma event which took place in Kiskunfélegyháza in 2005, organized by the Roma Council. Everybody enjoyed it from the age of five to the age of seventy.
Zsolt Orsos
Ghandi Secondary School – Social Worker

“I’m 29 years old, and I’m from the Tolna region. I wanted to be everything when I was a child—a waiter, a painter, everything—but my history teacher suggested that I apply to Gandhi because there I would be able to study, there would be many opportunities, and there I could find myself. So, I applied, and I graduated here at Gandhi. I loved this school, I loved my teachers, I met my friends here, and I was first introduced to the Beás language at this school as well. And here I learned to be a social worker. Before this, I was working at the Maltese Charity Service, and now I’ve been working as a social worker here at Gandhi since 2015.”
WHAT DOES YOUR ROMA IDENTITY MEAN TO YOU?
My Roma identity has accompanied me through my whole life. I got it from Gandhi, where I was introduced to the Beás language. I think that language equals culture, and culture equals identity. It plays a role in my life, in my everyday, and it’s really important to me. Probably it is the most important thing for me. I value it, and I think it is a positive thing in life, and I’m trying to help others to see it as a positive thing.

FROM WHO DID YOU GET THIS STRONG SENSE OF ROMA IDENTITY?
I got it from my inner circle mostly, from my teachers, from my family, from my friends in Gandhi, as I have mentioned before, Gandhi was a really important thing in my life.

IS IT EVER A CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN YOUR ROMA AND YOUR HUNGARIAN IDENTITIES?
It has never been a challenge for me to choose between my Roma and my Hungarian identities, because I know that I am a Hungarian citizen, but in my heart I feel that I am Gypsy. So no, it has never caused me a headache to choose.

DO YOU THINK THAT HUNGARIAN ROMA CULTURE IS VERY DISTINCT FROM THAT OF ROMA IN OTHER PLACES IN EUROPE?
Yes, I think that it is different, and it is more likely closed to other cultures. It has its own kind of elements that are unique.

IF YOU COULD SHARE ONE THING ABOUT ROMA CULTURE, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
There are many things I would share with other people, but if I have to say only one thing, then it would be the children’s place in a Roma family. I think that in a Roma family the children are the most valuable members, always, and this is a perspective that everyone should share, in my opinion.
Szilvia Szénási attended Eötvös Lorand University in Budapest, where she studied at the Social Science Institute specialized in Social Work. Currently she works at UCCU Roma Informal Educational Foundation as Director. This foundation was established in 2010 in order to introduce the history, traditions, and culture of Roma people, with the aim to create opportunities for dialogue between Roma and non-Roma young people. The primary target of UCCU is to cut down the stereotypes and misbeliefs against Roma people. The teaching staff of UCCU gives interactive lectures to students from the age of 10 to 19 about the topic of Roma identity and culture.
WHAT DOES YOUR ROMA IDENTITY MEAN TO YOU? WHAT IMPACT HAS IT HAD ON YOUR LIFE? Being a Roma person is an important part of my identity, but the most important thing to be aware of is who I am independently from my origin. When I was a teenager, this identity question made me think about things like, what does it mean to me to be a Gypsy? In which aspects am I different from the non-Roma people? Am I „Other” at all? Who defines it—the majority society, or myself? As a Roma woman, it was my own choice not to follow the traditional lifestyle of a Roma woman but walk in my own way. At that time, this decision had an effect on my relationships with the non-Roma and also my own community. This was a vital event in my life to define and reconstruct my own identity. Having my identity is a journey, and in this exploration the fact that I am Roma person means a strong foothold, belonging to a social group, a family bond, and a linking point to the Roma community.

DID YOU GROW UP WITH A STRONG SENSE OF BEING ROMA, EITHER FROM YOUR FAMILY OR FROM NON-ROMA? I come from a Gypsy musician family, so being a Gypsy was natural for us; we were brought up in this style of life. Most of us from my family learned music. Getting to know the Roma culture played an important role in our family, and music was a significant part of it. We have a lots of relatives, and we used to gather together every weekend to celebrate something or somebody, and music was also there. The musicians got together and had a great time and we children got accustomed to it.

IS IT EVER A CHALLENGE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN YOUR ROMA AND YOUR HUNGARIAN IDENTITIES? I attended an elementary school where there were not so many Roma students; I was the only Gypsy among my classmates. First, they made me feel that I was different, that I belonged to a minority, but after a while they accepted me just as I am. I did my own thing. The situation was similar in high school. In the first year I was completely alone, I had no friends, but after a while they also accepted and liked me. Once my father told me not to forget about the fact that: „You have to know twice as much than the others, you have to be better than the non-Roma people”. My parents brought me up in a really consistent and strict way in order to study well and to be always proud of my Roma origin. I have not separated my identity into Roma and non-Roma parts. I am Hungarian Gypsy, I speak in Hungarian, I celebrate the same holidays as the non-Roma society, and besides that, I also have traditions brought from my family, which I am proud of and will definitely pass along my children.
Do you think that Hungarian Roma culture is very distinct from that of Roma in other places in Europe?

In my opinion, the Gypsies living in different parts of Europe have distinct Roma cultures, but it has the same basis everywhere. Yes, it is different because the given country’s culture has an effect on the Roma society. They speak the country’s language, they live there and follow their religion, etc. At the same time, it is similar because the Roma identity is what binds us and is the linking point between Roma cultures and us, Roma people.

If you could share one thing about Roma culture, what would it be?

The Gypsy music definitely, it was always crucial for me since it expresses the individuality and the diversity of the Roma society.
“My name is Mario Köszegi, or Köszegi Mario, and I’m from Hungary—Pecs. I’m from a really big family. I have seven brothers and sisters—two sisters and six brothers. I’m a university student, I study Geography for my Bachelor’s, and now it’s a break because I’m in Albania volunteering. I’m in the European Voluntary Service since July, and now I have just ten days left.”
HOW DID YOU DECIDE TO GO TO ALBANIA FOR EVS?
In that time I was really busy because I had to do a lot of things. I was in university and I realized I could not finish my university because I had to write my thesis, but I didn’t have enough time. So I had to think of something to have more time to write the thesis—to think, to learn another language. That’s why it was really a spontaneous decision, because somebody asked me, you want to go to Albania? And I said, why not? Maybe a little too spontaneous.

WHAT KIND OF WORK ARE YOU DOING THERE?
It’s a Roma advocacy organization that I’m working for, and we write projects, we apply for trainings, and work with Roma people, but the main focus of the organization is political and advocacy work. You understand? So it’s not a charitable organization, we’re not going to the street to help the people; we help the people obtain their rights, their human rights. And, also, I’m teaching basic English. You know my English level [laughs], but I’m teaching for children. For children, you know? But I think it’s enough, my English level.

RIGHT NOW YOU’RE WORKING WITH A ROMA NGO.
DO YOU THINK YOU WANT TO CONTINUE DOWN THAT PATH IN THE FUTURE?
Yes, I would like to continue. Before I was a volunteer with this organization, I was a volunteer with several organizations that are Roma. I was part of Uccu Foundation, have you heard of it? I was teaching Roma children in an after-school program. I had two years of experience already in this field, so I’m totally sure I would like to continue after I arrive back in Hungary.

WHAT DOES WORKING WITH ROMA NGO’S MEAN TO YOU? WHY DO YOU DO IT?
That’s a good question...you know, I’m from a Roma background so it’s kind of like I have to do it. But I think it’s...it sounds a bit simple, or maybe everyone says the same, but that’s my belief. I have to do it because I’m from a Roma background and I have the chance to help. It wouldn’t be right if I didn’t help because I come from the same background like the most of these people who are living in poverty.
But at the same time, to many outsiders you might seem different from the "typical" Roma. Do you feel that you are different at all?

Yes...it’s not that I identify myself as different; the outsiders identify me as different because I’m a university student. At the university, not everybody can accept me there, you know how I mean? Also in the Roma community, they think I’m too...at a higher level. So it’s a bit of both, if you understand.

When you’re in Albania working with the Roma communities there, do you feel like there’s some kind of common ground between you and the people you’re working with?

That’s the problem. We don’t have connections with Roma people like I want. I was one time in a Roma community here, but not with my organization, I just went alone with a friend because I was curious. That’s why I came here. That was my expectation here, that I would be working with Roma people, but we don’t have so much contact with Roma people here. It’s a big shame, but...for me it’s a big shame.

There are just two Roma people in the organization—me and [another Hungarian volunteer]. In Hungary too it’s like this, it’s happening almost everywhere. In the Roma field, most of the people are just Hungarian. I feel we don’t have a chance to lead our community.

Do you think that Hungarian Roma culture is very different or distinct from Roma culture in other places in Europe?

Yes, as I realized. You know, in Albania the Roma culture is totally different in every aspect. The first thing is religion. I think religion is integral for most of the country. In Hungary, most of the Roma people are Christian; in Albania, most of the Roma people are Muslim. But it’s not just true between Hungary and Albania. In most countries I think the Roma culture is a bit different.

But I was in the Czech Republic, it was very similar to Hungarian Roma culture, and there were a lot of Hungarian words in the Roma language. Like ‘ágy’, ‘sárkány’, and a lot of things, but it was totally interesting to me that there are Hungarian words. I mean, maybe they traveled through Hungary a long time ago, maybe that’s why. So the base of the culture is, I think, everywhere the same. I mean, to like music, to feel this kind of rhythm—it sounds a bit exotic [laughs].

One time when I was in Budapest I heard about this, that the common identity of Roma throughout the world is that we feel that we are outsiders everywhere. And it brings us together. I can’t say it’s true for sure, but I can think about it some more.
“ROMA, THE OUTSIDERS OF EUROPE”—IT’S SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE WRITE, THAT YOU SEE ALL THE TIME. WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS THAT ROMA HAVE BEEN OUTSIDERS IN SO MUCH OF EUROPE?

You know, the discrimination. We have been in Europe for, I don’t know, 500 years? And in none of the countries we can integrate into the society. Maybe it’s both our fault, and the others’ fault. You know, I read yesterday something about it—it’s in human nature to want to be part of something, part of one community. We all the time want to be with similar people. We are totally different than the rest of Europe, in terms of how we look and in terms of the poverty situation. Poverty and Roma are not one and the same, but if someone is not part of the dominate community, if they cannot integrate, then of course they will be poor. It’s this way everywhere in the world. And behavior coming from poverty is the same everywhere—deviance, stealing—it’s the same everywhere. So it’s not especially part of the Roma culture, although most people believe that it is. People believe that we’re born as thieves, as killers, but it’s not true. If we are outsiders, of course we are under pressure.

DO YOU FEEL LIKE THERE ARE TIMES WHEN YOU HAVE TO CHOOSE BETWEEN YOUR HUNGARIAN IDENTITY OR YOUR ROMA IDENTITY?

Most of the time I don’t have to choose; the other people choose who I am, you know? Not me. So in Hungary—obviously not everyone, but most people—decide I am (Hungarian). But inside of me, I don’t want to choose.

IS THERE ONE THAT YOU IDENTIFY WITH MORE STRONGLY?

It depends, because when I was a child I identified myself as Hungarian, because I didn’t have Roma friends. I just hung around with Hungarian friends, I was in a Hungarian school, so I didn’t know anything about Roma culture. But after high school, when I was attending the university, I joined Wlislocki Henrik Szakkollégium. It wasn’t the first year, but the second year of university. I started to understand what is the Roma culture, because that was the first time when I meet intellectual Roma people. It was a really turning point in my life when I started to identify myself as Roma. It was a learning process, and it’s going on now also—not because I can’t accept myself as Roma, but because I still don’t know everything about Roma culture.

That’s really interesting that instead of starting out really connected to Roma culture and kind of growing distant from that as you went to college and got more highly educated, it’s the opposite for you. You actually grew closer to your Roma culture as you grew more educated.
Yes, yes, yes. It can be together. I can be an educated Roma. Ok, so I’m not so educated yet, but this can also be a learning process [laughs].

**IF YOU COULD SHARE ONE THING ABOUT ROMA CULTURE, WHAT WOULD THAT BE?**

It’s a really hard question...it’s not been a long time that I’ve known things about Roma culture, but since I’ve started to know, I’ve been really interested in Roma music, in traditions...I think what I would share with people is that we have to learn about each other. We’ve lived with each other for hundreds of years, but we don’t know—in Hungary, I mean—we don’t know each other’s’ cultures. Most Roma people don’t know what Hungarian culture is, the Hungarians don’t know what Roma culture is. So what I would like to share is to be open-minded, to start to learn about the other’s culture. Yesterday I was reading some of [my flatmate’s] school materials for Romologia, and they said that if you want to live in a community together with similar people, the best thing is cooperation, to cooperate with each other, and cooperation is impossible without getting to know each other. And the worst thing is a competitive situation. If we would like to compete with each other, we have to show all the time that we’re better than the others—both sides saying that—so it’s not good. We have to know that we are totally equal, no one is better than the other.
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