

'How Long Is the Journey...?'
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EU Antidiscrimination Year 2007 - Thought for the Day:
In Memory of the Roma Holocaust

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How long is the journey from "You know..." to social exclusion, disenfranchisement and, ultimately, devouring?

First of all, let us get the name right.

As is often the case, Gypsy is a label that got stuck by outsiders' reference to a particular group. For example, the Magyars are referred to as Hungarians simply because ages ago they were mistakenly identified with the Huns, which was an already familiar, therefore handy, category at the time. Similarly, when the nomadic groups from northern India - mostly from Rajasthan, where many still live - first made their appearance in Europe, they were thought to be Egyptians. Hence the name Gypsy and its countless versions in various languages such as Cigány, Cyganski, Gitan, Zigeuner, and the list goes on.

Not surprisingly, the insider name for the group is different, and much preferred: Roma (Romany), meaning 'human'.

The Roma have been living in Hungary since the early 15th century. Since they have not been quick to abandon their traditional nomadic lifestyle, their integration into European societies, including Hungarian, has also not been speedy. It has not been without tensions and conflicts either - it is an ongoing, often very painful process, marred by the poison of prejudice and discrimination in Hungary just as much as elsewhere in Europe and indeed around the world.

Some of the Roma in Hungary speak one or more of the Romany dialects, but most of them speak Hungarian, and tend to see themselves as Hungarian. At the same time, their cultural revival in the 1990s, such as the formation of the Roma Parliament and recordings of traditional Romany music among other things, indicates a need to reassert their ethnic identity.

Although trends are changing, many of them have been traditionally working in "show biz" - in the Hungarian Gypsy music industry. Do not rush to the conclusion that Hungarian Gypsy music must then be either authentic Hungarian or Romany folk music or perhaps a combination of both. This is a very common misconception both in and outside Hungary.

As always, it is helpful to distrust labels and take no meaning for granted - especially if they make perfect sense at first glance. The fundamentally string-based, pseudo folk music that you hear, especially in touristy restaurants, films and CDs, is the product of various 19th century composers, and it is Gypsy to the extent only that a lot of the time the musicians playing it have been Romany.

Their own traditional Roma music is more of the vocal and mostly the percussive type, with a colourful variety of instrumentation that reflects in musical terms the region it comes from. In Hungary, it sounds rather different from what is so successfully marketed as Hungarian Gypsy music.

It is hard not to resonate with the soulful glissandi (slides) between the notes, the essentials of the Roma vocals. Most of us instinctively seem to feel the resonance with this music - but often not with the people whose music and tradition it is.

I am looking at the young Hungarian hairdresser in the mirror as she is cutting my hair with flair. She talks to me, with ease and candour, about why she does not like the area where she lives in a small town nearby. "Oh, a lot of Gypsies live there", she says, stabbing the scissors in my wet, dark hair by my temple.

She does not stop to elaborate.

She does not feel the need to explain her comment further.

I am assumed co-opted.

She takes it for granted that I will resonate with her values implicit in the throwaway comment.

I am listening to her, following her rapid movements with the scissors around my face. Her spontaneous expression of everyday racism does not surprise me but makes me speechless

for a while. And, I am thinking, she looks so much like a Roma. And perhaps so do I.

Then I hear the social anthropologist in me ask her the open-ended, non-judgmental question: What sort of neighbours are they?

"Oh", she smiles, "I get on with them very well. But you know..." And she smiles at me again. This one is a very different smile.

How long is the journey from this "But you know" smile... to the 1935 Nüremberg racial laws? The Roma were not mentioned per se but in the interpretation of these laws they were included with the "Negroes" and the Jews as "racially distinctive". Minorities with "alien blood".

The terrible irony of the nonsensical racial purity theory is that Romany being an Indo-European language just like German, English, French and most European languages (except, for example, Hungarian), the Roma are, if anything, as "Aryan" as the Germans themselves. Nonetheless, their marriage to "Aryans" was prohibited, and, like Jews, the Roma were also deprived of their civil rights.

The journey from here to the night of 2nd of August 1944 was swift enough.

That night the Gypsy camp was liquidated in Auschwitz-Birkenau: thousands of Roma men, women, and children were killed in the gas chamber. Many others were murdered before and after that night. 2nd and 3rd of August is the International Roma Holocaust Memorial Day or Porrajmos. The etymology of the word is debated, but widely used to mean devouring, as the Roma sometimes refer to this genocide.

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