

MEETING

CSABA BADER

«Do Hungarian Roma share a specific identity ? Let me put it that way : the first and foremost thing we share is poverty! A Hungarian Roma is just like a Hungarian, but much poorer...»

Interview with Csaba BADER, Roma activist, founder of the RomNet network

Mr. Bader, you are the founding President of the RomNet Website, a Web portal that provides news and information about Roma communities in Europe. Could you explain to me why you launched this project?

I started this all because there was no website about Roma topics that was made by and for the Roma people. Our ethno business was mainly done by non-Roma people.

What are the main problems of the Roma community?

Access to the labour market and education. To sum it up, I would say that we have been the biggest losers in the political and economic transition since 1990.

However, there are some Roma people in the state administration, at a fairly high level (like the former Director of postal services)...

Civil service is indeed the only field that remains somewhat open to us. But we are represented only in "decorative" proportions. As you know, to get a top position in a national – let alone European – institution, you need very good political contacts, which we do not have.

Are some prominent Roma intellectuals in a position to use their cultural influence and credit to improve the condition of all Roma ?

The problem is that most of them cannot work in English or French – so they have a tough time making themselves heard outside the Roma political field. In the past, famous artists like Cziffra or Ligeti could be our ambassadors to the greater public... but now we have lost much of our significance in the Hungarian political and cultural life. And the fair representation of Roma people is not monitored closely enough.

Most Hungarian Roma live in Budapest, concentrated in the so-called "Dzsumbuj" (Hungarian word for "big mess") area, spread across the VII, VIII and IXth districts. How do you explain this ?

This concentration was largely spontaneous, as Roma families tried to live close to one another. But now, we are under the threat of a rehabilitation project called "New City" that was recently launched by the Town Hall. They have intentionally let our buildings deteriorate, and now they want to take renovation as a pretext to expel us from Dzsumbuj.

Would you say there are "geographical prejudices" against this mainly Roma district ?

Yes of course. Most people living outside the VIIIth district consider it a dangerous place, populated with Roma criminals and murderers. But they are overlooking the fact that we also have Universities, the former Parliament building, and many other interesting buildings from the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries

Do Hungarian Roma share a specific identity ?

The first and foremost thing they share is poverty! Let me put it that way : a Hungarian Roma is just like a Hungarian, but much poorer.

But aren't there lively traditions, for instance, music ? Typical places for you to meet ?

There were traditional Gipsy bars around here, but they have closed by now. These traditions are getting lost, particularly our music. Roma music can be taught only by the family: this gets more complicated as the children now have to go to school and prefer to get a degree rather than to play the violin !...

So, the Roma community appears to be more divided than united...

You have to that Hungarian Roma actually belong to three different gents : the Olah, the Beas, the Romoungro. Although there has been a lot of ethnic mixing between them, the divides are still to be felt. There is also a huge gap between the Roma from Budapest and those who live in the countryside. The latter are even poorer and more isolated : for them, it is totally impossible to get a job, whereas here we might have a chance to find a tolerant employer or job agency.

Is there a Roma bourgeoisie ?

There exists a very small one, essentially made of Olah Roma who have succeeded in Gipsy commercial business. Most do not have any diplomas and made their money by getting involved in illegal activities. And I must say they rarely pay their tax bills...

How do they spend this money ? Do they build eccentric castles, as the rich Romanian Gypsies do ?

Actually they don't, but they tend to buy very big flats !!

Do they support political initiatives such as your RomNet ?

They don't, because as a Romoungro I belong to a different gent.

Could you tell me about your experience of Europe ? Have you travelled a lot outside of Hungary ?

Of course ! I have been to Paris, Versailles, Padova, Greece, Britain, Amsterdam, Auschwitz, Germany... I've been everywhere ! My diplomas made it possible for me to travel, and thanks to the various stipends I received I was able to seize this opportunity.

So do you feel European ?

At least, I must say I like the idea very much. I fully agree with the European integration process. But I think The EU should not forget that between 10 and 15 million of its citizens are Roma, and almost twice as much from ethnic minorities. If it fails to integrate these people and provide them with opportunities on the labour market, a crisis is looming. You should not forget about what happened in the Parisian suburbs two years ago : I am afraid this could contaminate the whole of Europe if our situation does not improve