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Roma People: stigmatised, discriminated against and still no homeland

Roma history to the present

is marked by one word: 'persecution'. Though often dubbed as criminal, these isolated people are more likely to be victims of crime¹. Roma people have faced stigmatisation, discrimination and marginalisation for centuries in Europe enduring wars, a lack of cultural understanding, prejudice and hardship. Their history is sidelined within mainstream history. Where discrimination is mostly unacceptable in mainstream society it is accepted vis-à-vis the Roma people. The Nazi genocide climaxed centuries of discrimination, persecution and deportation – and this still continues². With over 500,000 killed, they remain the forgotten victims of the Nazis³ where as survivors they were refused assistance and compensation.

The marginalisation in European society continues⁴, though they have been celebrated in pop culture for their influence on music, as fortune tellers and mystics, or as seductresses, as in Bizet's 1875 opera, 'Carmen'.⁵ In Victorian times, they were romanticised by writers; and scapegoated and criminalised during economic downturns⁶.

Initially accepted and valued in Eastern Europe for their artisan skills and contribution to feudal economies, trade guilds resented them fearing of competition as they did the same work for less money. The authorities, pressured to get rid of the Roma, ordered them to leave these countries under pain of death. Enslaved since the 15th century, they could be bought and sold like animals. Families were broken up for sale and slave-owners could punish, mutilate and even murder their Romani slaves with impunity.

This discrimination cannot be ignored. They are ghettoed by walls with lack of water and electricity in Romania and confined in urban ghettos in Bulgaria. Women are sterilised in Slovakia. Neo-Nazis target them in the Czech Republic. Molotov cocktails are thrown at them in Croatia. Paramilitary militias harass and assault them in Hungary. They suffer daily discrimination in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Moldavia and Serbia. In France, There are hateful calls for their extermination in France and expulsion from Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Though the violence varies, there is one constant: it originates from the same stigmatising representations and over-used stereotypes⁷.

After World War II, many Roma people looked to Australia for a new home bringing with them their culture and skills in boiler making, woodcraft, copper working and horse training. Originally, they did seasonal work on farms, orchards, horse stables or travelling with the fun fairs, putting up the big tops and setting up the rides. Nowadays most Roma people in Australia live and work in the cities and towns. Some have become academics and teachers⁸.

Whilst discrimination is penalised in most places, an exemption is made vis-à-vis the Roma people, e.g., in 2013 when blue-eyed children were taken from their parents on the assumption that they had been abducted. Geneticists are clear that parents with jet-black hair can produce blond children if they have blond ancestors. There are many blue-eyed Sicilians! It has been proven to be without basis and anyone suggesting it today would be ridiculed, if



not arrested⁹. Britain's first professor of Romani Studies, at Greenwich University, Thomas Acton, not a Roma himself, has argued that he knows of no documented case of Roma people stealing non-Roma children anywhere¹⁰. Such allegations have re-emerged in Greece and Ireland as both countries faced economic collapse. The old, tried and trusted ways of distracting anger, frustration and attention are being rolled out again!¹¹

Who are they?

There are about 12 million Romani or Roma people (pejoratively termed 'Gypsies') worldwide. 8-10 million live in Europe making up its largest minority. They are scattered throughout Asia, Africa, North and South America and Australia¹². The name 'Gypsy' derives from a mistake where they were thought to be Egyptian¹³ and referred to as 'pharaoh's people' in some places¹⁴. Linguistic studies and study of historical events point to India as their ancestral homeland. The grammar and vocabulary of their language bear similarities to languages spoken in India around 1,000 AD.¹⁵

Ongoing persecution

Exclusion, prejudice and poverty have continued. Average life expectancy in Europe is 10 to 15 years less than for other Europeans. In Britain, they endure lower life expectancy, and higher rates of infant mortality and adult suicide than other group. They live in fringe dwellings; are denied employment and hospital treatment. Roma children are often forced to attend schools for children with disability. Many live in apartheid-like conditions lacking kitchens or indoor toilets; less than a third have jobs; and illiteracy is rife. With European Union restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians being lifted, Roma are used to fuel immigration concerns. Such fear and hatred is the legacy of medieval fears over dark-skinned nomadic outsiders¹⁶.

Facts should not get in the way of stories of long held prejudices. Stories of child- trafficking or stealing feed into the narratives about an allegedly 'shifty' people. They tap into the old fears of so-called greedy gypsies stealing innocent children. Such scare stories around Europe stoke the fires of living hell for families whose children have gone missing whilst there is no hard evidence of Roma stealing children¹⁷.

Hatred towards Roma people in Hungary results in the children being kept out of mainstream schools because they are classified as mentally 'handicapped'. Attacks on Roma camps by mobs in Italy resulted in the prime minister ordered the fingerprinting of all 150,000 Roma. In Slovakia, with echoes of their recent history, they are segregated behind walls. In France, politicians of all stripes have made the ridiculous claim that a community of 150,000 people is responsible for one in ten crimes in a country of 65 million¹⁸.

Roma communities in Europe continue to be at the lowest rung of the economic ladder with over 75% living below the poverty line¹⁹.

Cause for Optimism

The United Nations (UN), the European Commission (EC), and other international organisations are now pressuring countries to end their exclusionary policies and give Roma people an opportunity to participate more fully in society²⁰. There are efforts being made to resist moving back to an archaic position of blaming Roma for a country's ills as European Union member states continue to respond with a mostly negative perception of Roma, without regard to the reasons why Roma occupy the position of a vulnerable minority. The EC is attempting to consolidate the efforts of its member states into making tangible improvements to the lives of Roma by encouraging the development of *National Roma Integration Strategies*. But there is clear confusion about how best to tackle this complex and politically charged issue²¹.

European Roma have formed organisations such as the Roma National Congress to represent their interests and press for change²².

Conclusion

A more humanised approach would be a start where the criminality of a few is separated from tainting the futures of an entire ethnic group. The media can help here. Certainly more than they have in the past!²³

The National strategies for Roma inclusion presented by EU member-states to the European Commission in 2011 have not improved the misery and racial domination to which Roma have been subjected. Member states still implement strategies of avoidance or even persecution rather than guarantee the fundamental rights for all individuals.

Unlike political institutions, civil society has become involved, bringing some hope and prospects for the future to a whole continent. One organisation is Roma Pride, a movement of self-

emancipation, which brings together Roma leaders and organizations and the rest of European civil society, committed to equality and against the different expressions of racism. The Roma Pride spirit is a spirit of dignity, justice and solidarity that nourishes the numerous initiatives led by civil society throughout Europe. Following a series of racist killings against Roma people in Hungary, the victims and the civil society asked for justice, not revenge. Civil society has reacted to the provocations and threats from neo-Nazis in the Czech Republic with solidarity and call for respect for the rule of law. And whilst the economic crisis exacerbates nationalist hatred and incites some to designate the most fragile ones as responsible for this crisis, when they are actually the first victims of it, Roma Pride calls on all individuals to express their desire to live together in Europe, with their differences in cultures, languages and identities, and experience their solidarity beyond borders. They are determined to show why and how all can live together in a democratic Europe – that is, when racism and nationalism come to an end²⁴.

'We need to respect a long-standing heritage and culture. We need to learn more about marginalised groups, reach out and accept, not base our judgments on ignorance and fear. If we condemn Roma, gypsies and travellers, we are simply keeping the doors open for wider prejudice.'²⁵

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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