

Europe's most hated people

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The Roma

Every day on my way to work I passed by them. They were sleeping on the cold floor in a corner of the train station: a mother; a father; and two young children in between them. They were still there when I finished work. While I was on my way to a warm apartment, a hot meal and a nice hot shower, these parents would spend another night with their children on a freezing floor. There had been quite some solidarity lately with asylum-seekers who were forced to sleep on the streets. Most of them had found a roof above their heads for the harsh winter nights. But not this family; they could not ask for asylum and a bed to sleep in because they already are European citizens. They are Roma, often called Gypsies or nomads, and are associated with negative stereotypes such as theft, domestic violence, and being slum-dwellers. My first experience with the Roma was about five years ago when I was living in Valencia, Spain. To go to the beach from my place, I had to walk through a dodgy-looking neighborhood that seemed rather to be located in a poor Eastern European country than in a developed country such as Spain. There were many dogs and half-naked children on the streets. The women were often yelling and the men looked at me in a threatening way. I wanted to get out of there as fast as possible. During my time in Spain, many people warned me of the gitanos, who were pickpockets and would threaten me with knives. They never did, however, and I became intrigued by this European minority that seems to be excluded from "European integration," lagging behind while their fellow countrymen are gradually joining European middle class. It is widely known that many Jews died in the Nazi concentration camps, but less known is that also about half a million Roma were gassed. Unlike the Jews, the Roma continue to face serious threats and discrimination especially in Eastern Europe but also in Western Europe. In 2008, young Italian men set Roma camps in Milan, Naples and Sicily on fire with Molotov cocktails. In June 2009, 65 Roma living in Belfast were forced to return to Romania after racist attacks on their houses. These are just the stories that have made it to the news. The only stories I read or hear about the Roma portray them as either criminals or helpless victims. Why does no one wonder who these people are and why they are one of the most hated peoples in Europe? "They prefer to be called Roma. That is how they refer to themselves. There is not even a word in Romani, their language, for gypsy or nomad. These names were made up by others," Biser Alekov of the European Roma Grassroots Organizations Network sighs. "Actually, only a very small minority of Roma are still nomads. Most Roma have settled down." The Roma have their origins in South Asia, from where they migrated to mainly Central and Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages. They developed a nomadic lifestyle as a means of survival, earning money through seasonal agricultural work, repairing items, clairvoyance and door-to-door selling. At the moment, they are the largest ethnic minority in the European Union, with about 10 to 12 million members. There is no exact number available because many of them live and work illegally in other European countries. The Roma have never had an easy time in the countries that became their homes. During the Nazi years, many of them were gassed in the concentration camps and in the communist era, Roma women were forcefully sterilized. But the worst was yet to come. At least during the communist years, the Roma were sometimes given land or social support. After the fall of communism, unemployment and poverty prevailed in the Roma communities. "You can't imagine what poverty engulfed the Roma in my village. After 1991, I rented the village pub and was the only employed Roma. Nobody else had a job. The people began wandering around, looking for work in the towns," Akif, a Roma currently living in Brussels, remembers. Many Roma decided to try their luck in Western Europe. Since the Central and Eastern European countries joined the EU, the economic situation of many of their citizens is gradually improving. The Roma on the other hand continue to face discrimination in education, housing, employment, healthcare and other public services. Although it has been ruled illegal in many Eastern European countries, the practices of segregating Roma children in schools or having separate classes for children with special needs simply because they are Roma has continued. In these "special" schools, they receive poorer education and have very limited opportunities for employment or further education. In Slovakia for example, 80 percent of children in special schools are Roma. When a group of Croatian Roma decided to fight the practice of segregating Roma pupils, they managed to convince the European Court of Human Rights that this was indeed discrimination. Besides urging the Croatian government to respect the principle of equality, the Court also awarded these Roma pupils with \$4,500 each. Yet, many members of the local Roma community did not share the euphoria over this victory. They feared that the situation could get worse for them after the court ruling. Because of the high degree of poverty in Roma communities in Eastern Europe, many live in deplorable conditions. Some feel they do not have another choice than to stay in illegal settlements. Once every so often, the authorities forcibly evict the residents from their makeshift dwellings without offering them adequate alternative accommodations. This of course drives them back on the streets and new illegal settlements arise faster than the bulldozers can destroy them. It is extremely hard for Roma to get out of this vicious circle without a steady job. Saliha, a Roma woman from Bulgaria who came to work in Belgium explains: "Even with higher education, employers prefer Bulgarian applicants without investigating your qualities. When they understand that you are a Roma, they stop to trust you." Akif's childhood dream was to become a police officer. But when he applied after finishing secondary education, he was not hired, unlike his Bulgarian classmates. He was never given an explanation why. Tunde Buzetzky, facilitator for Decade of Roma Inclusion, confirms that there is strong discrimination on the labor market: "If your skin is darker, the available job is immediately gone!" The lack of opportunities in the East convinced many Roma to move to Western Europe. But with the growing numbers of Roma, anti-gypsyism grew in Western Europe as well. In particular, Italy stands out for its anti-Roma attitude. In 2007, the government adopted increased "security" measures against the "nomad emergency." Police was allowed to "collect data," including fingerprinting, exclusively

nomads. Forced evictions without prior consultation or proposing adequate alternatives became more frequent. The strong anti-Roma rhetoric from politicians and vilification in the media further increased the stigmatization of the Roma people, which resulted in various violent attacks on Roma throughout 2008 and 2009. But in other EU countries anti-gypsyism is also growing. Eurobarometer, a public opinion survey, has shown that nearly a quarter of all Europeans would feel uncomfortable living next to a Roma. In Italy this is half of the population. Meanwhile, the European Union is trying hard to integrate Roma issues in its activities and many non-governmental organizations have taken on the advocacy of the Roma. Unfortunately, all these efforts have not resulted in sufficient progress. Grassroots Roma organizations strongly believe that the main reason why these policies have failed is that they were developed without the participation of the Roma. They might be right. The Bulgarian municipality of Sliven has the highest percentage of Roma residents in the country and one of the biggest Roma ghettos with 20,000 inhabitants. It works actively together with Roma NGOs, Roma experts, volunteers and informal leaders on education, housing, health and employment issues. "This place used to be a terrible ghetto, now it's good to live there thanks to the inclusion of Roma in policy-making," Alekov adds. "Another important obstacle is the continued stereotyping. Roma people have been hearing for a long time that they are worthless. They have started to believe this themselves. Good role models are essential to motivate them to fight for a better future for themselves and their children," explains Biser Alekov. He claims that it is only a small percentage of Roma that are thieves, prostitutes or beggars. "There are many Roma all over Europe that are leading or trying to lead a successful life just like other Europeans. Unfortunately many of them hide their Roma background because of the stigma," Alekov believes that if Europeans knew more about these Roma, they would realize that they just want to have a decent job, live in their own house and send their children to school, just like everyone else. His fellow Roma advocate Buzetzky agrees that "although it would be incorrect to say that there are no beggars or petty thieves among the Roma migrants in Western European countries, most of the Roma migrants get legal jobs, send their children to school and have a decent life. There are groups living in illegal camps under dreadful conditions. Indeed in these groups, some people may be engaged in petty crimes." George Soros, whose foundation helps to improve the situation of the Roma people, writes in an article for The Guardian: "The key to success is the education of a new generation of Roma who do not seek to assimilate into the general population, but deliberately retain their identity as Roma. Educated, successful Roma will shatter the prevailing negative stereotypes by their very existence." Fikret and Sevinch are such successful Roma. They moved to Ghent, Belgium, in 1998. Twelve years later, they own a house in a Flemish neighborhood, and have their own retail shop and construction company. They consider themselves successful immigrants but stress that they had to work very hard to get where they are today. "When we arrived, I started to work for Turkish women, to clean for them and to serve them. My husband began work on construction sites. After five years, we received Belgian passports, but we continued to do the same job. However, we enrolled in language courses, because you can do nothing if you do not speak the language. Later I finished a business course where I learned how to set up my own company, how to manage the retail shop, and what documents were needed. That helped me a lot," says Fikret. She explains that the main hurdles to lead a successful life for less fortunate Roma are that they do not speak the language and that they do not know the local rules and regulations of the country they are staying in. They also often do not have the right documents to find a legal job. Mladen and Saliha came to Belgium from Bulgaria in 2007 to offer their son a better education. They are both working as cleaners at the moment but they have many goals and plans for the future. Mladen wants to open a small restaurant offering Bulgarian dishes and Saliha is looking for a job as a lab assistant in the food or chemical industry. They do however still feel it is better to hide their Roma identity for some people out of fear of losing their jobs. They are not alone in this. Many of their fellow Roma keep their ethnic background a secret. They go through life as Bulgarians, Romanians, Slovaks or Kosovars. The family of Assen, who has been living in Belgium for 18 years, has not yet explained to the grandchildren that they are not just Bulgarians, but also Roma. A Roma background should be something to be proud of. The culture is very rich and goes back a long time. Unfortunately, there are many misconceptions. Begging for instance is not part of the Roma culture. Biser Alekov says that "it is a big business and the people behind it are considered as criminals by the rest of the Roma community." It is also commonly believed that it is part of Roma culture to force very young girls to marry older men. Historically, weddings did traditionally occur at an early age, between 14 and 16 for girls, but this is changing among most Roma. Biser Alekov even claims that it is discrimination if authorities do not take action against the criminal act of forcing minors to marry adult men. He claims that in these cases, the argument of "it is part of their culture" reinforces the stigmatization and marginalization of the Roma. In fact, the Roma wedding is full of remarkable cultural traditions. If the parents have not formally agreed to a wedding, the boy "abducts" the girl for a couple of days. When they return, the wedding is celebrated. For the finale of the wedding ceremony, the young couple retires to their room to consummate the union while the guests wait for the result: the blood traces proving that the girl was a virgin. These bloody clothes were traditionally hung on a high place, so everyone could see that the bride was respectable. Today in most cases, only a symbolic form of these traditions is still practiced. Family and community belonging are very important to the Roma. You rarely see old people in retirement homes. Instead, they live with their children and grandchildren. When someone dies, his family stays at his side for three days and three nights. Roma still do not have an easy life in Europe. They are stereotyped as beggars and thieves and are not given equal opportunities because they are "Gypsies." Once they have succeeded in overcoming the obstacles, they feel forced to hide their true identity. However, there is no need to be too pessimistic, as Assen says: "Many will find their way. They will have to work hard on non-prestigious jobs, but if the parents do this work today, tomorrow their children — who are studying and complete local schools — will have more opportunities. That's how it was with other migrants, and that will happen with us too." I sometimes wonder what happened to that Roma family I saw every day in the station. One day they were gone. Have they found their way and has someone offered them a place to stay? Or did they return disappointed to their

home country?