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“ON THE SPOTLIGHT:

ROMA IN BULGARIA”

A DISSERTATION FOR GRADUATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

How do we understand tolerance? When do we understand that somebody accepts our difference and uniqueness? Probably only after we had felt what intolerance means. This way we have a basis to compare and to oppose.

My seven years living abroad completely changed my perceptions of self, of the group and of belonging. At my last year I was learning at a master degree level about the “other” in the society. It was bitter-sweet experience – I was the “other”, the “alien”, the one people see and sometimes say “hello” to, but who is never welcome in their hearts because he/she is not “one of them”.

While studying Anthropology, I finally understood why I was rejected, so many years, by practically every one I had met. It wasn't just acquiring a higher degree for better job perspectives, it was a journey towards myself, an exploration of most intimate parts of my soul.

Yes, I became really sensitive when feeling that people treat someone as if he/she is a second-category citizen. I became emotional. Angry. Disappointed and frustrated. It was easy for me to blame the others for not being open-minded. The role of the victim-martyr is always the easiest one to be played.

And then I started finding ways to calm down my soul and to dry my tears. I found remedy in the spiritual literature which talks about karma, reincarnation and re-discovering of the self. It says that people attract energy compatible with their own thoughts. If they want to find the reasons for their misery, they have to search their soul. I exclaimed that I had never been prejudiced about someone and that I am a good person generally. Strangely just how many people think of themselves in these terms. And how difficult it is to admit “I was wrong”...

One day, while doing my job as usual, I was suddenly struck by the sensation that I was not tolerant towards the Roma minority in my own country. What I was feeling for them was fear mixed with suspicion. More often than not, they have played such an irritating role in my life – noisy people who suddenly interrupt my peace and quiet, always begging, always nagging and complaining. Funny how the before mentioned characteristics are the ones I despise most in me. This way, for my perceptions, the image of the Roma people was the cumulative image of my own negative traits. And then I remembered an interview with a 50-year-old Romani woman on the national TV “BTV”, June 2011, in the morning blog.. I realized how shocking it was to find out that she looks, speaks and behaves truly intelligently. She was very concerned about the future of her two children who she educated with the cost of heavy work shifts. I remembered just how much I liked her, how much her rationale resembled that of my own mother. And finally I remembered that I couldn't believe she belonged to the Roma community...

I realized that Roma people and I are on the same side of the coin, we have lived through rejection, discrimination and mistrust towards our personalities. If I am not tolerant towards them, I actually am not tolerant towards me myself...

So I decided to write about this minority in Bulgaria for my dissertation in an attempt to break the existing in the Bulgarian literature stereotypes about the

Roma with the illustration of the vivid living reality. For fieldwork I will use my own living experience and relations with Roma which date back to my first school year in 1990 in Bulgaria in the town of Plovdiv. I want to point out that in this occasion the fieldwork is not outside my usual daily activities, it is part of them.

2. Main part – bombarding the stereotypes with true living examples

Little George

I met him at my first school Day of my entire life – 15th September, 1990 in Plovdiv. Back then, when I was just seven, I wasn't overwhelmed with burdening generalizations about people and situations. I smiled to him, he smiled back. We quickly became friends and both of us appreciated each other's company very much. He was slim, short boy, very sweet and polite. He wasn't the best student in our class, but he worked so diligently and he had homework every time. I remember such details about the homework because I was in charge of checking and announcing the results of the homework of my row of pupils, the middle row. Now I can analyze his widely open with amazement or fear maybe eyes every time I checked his homework. Now I can realize that I was in position to make the teacher put him an excellent mark or a poor one. We weren't stepping on equal grounds and this time not because he belonged to the minority of the country. Simply because these were the rules our teacher had set for us – the best students monitored the writings of the rest of the class. This power division never interfered into our friendship (or at least, this impression I have kept for myself). I never took it personally and never became big headed and he, on the other side, never distanced himself from being my friend.

George and I used to stay after classes on the school yard and play with hours. We would run and chase each other till we would lose our breath, then we would stop for a while and then run again. We played of course with the rest of the class, chasing each other, but the two of us were known as a "couple". The following year, on a boarding school George told his male friends that he secretly liked me and wanted to marry me; they immediately informed the girls, I found out and I became so happy and joyful. Somebody liked me! His parents would invite me at their home every time George had birthday or name day and we would spend blissful hours playing or simply talking to each other our childish thoughts. I remember his mother – she looked so typically her ethnic group – middle-aged, short and plump, and red-haired, with golden teeth and strange Romani clothes, but I never thought of her as being different in a discriminative way, not to mention inferior; she was so good to me, smiling beautifully every time she was seeing me, glad that I helped her little son with the school subjects, always offering me something sweet to bite. She insisted very much on his studying thoroughly and regularly. All this may sound mellow and nostalgic but one thing is for sure – I can hold a grudge against everybody who has insulted me, I was very sensitive and easily flammable child; and George and his mother never behaved badly to me. George never made me cry.

However, we should be very careful when we have to analyze old memories from the past. First of all, many years have passed and everything negative, such as an impression, a situation, has already faded away. It is a survival mechanism to remember the good things and to forget the bad ones. Second, usually the memories connected with the childhood years, unless they are traumatic ones, possess the aura of the idealized past; it's not without a reason that the past is also called "the good old days". Were they really good? Or people need this soft reassurance in order to gather strength and to combat the current difficulties? Or perhaps many people evaluate a

concrete situation or period of their life only after it had already passed. Did I have the consciousness of a balanced, happy child or was I just breathing, studying, growing up every second without much thought around these processes? These are questions which can be answered in many ways. I will let the reader decide for him/herself where exactly the truth is.

I believe that such an innocent relationship between a Bulgarian child and a Romani child is almost impossible nowadays. Let's just think for a while – we were friends in the beginning of 1990s, the atmosphere of communist times was still in the air. Apart from the official political policy of creating “equal” members of the Party, back then Roma people weren't scapegoats for all the ills of Transition, the majority of them had already been settled into permanent residence, they still had their jobs which the Party so generously offered everybody. Their socio-economic situation was slightly worse than that of the majority in the country, but not that miserable as it is now. Finally, both George and I were children brought with the best of the communist ideology, namely the significance of the collective and the acceptance of the other as a brother. Our parents unconsciously taught us such things, leading by their personal example.

But let me put it clearly, socialist Bulgaria was never a materialized heaven on the Earth. Exactly socialism showed us how much corrupted and mean people with power are, how manipulatively “the elites” brainwashed ordinary people with generally appealing statements for equality on all levels, how the citizens of the “modernized” Bulgaria, expecting eagerly “the shining future” became actually subjects without the right of personal initiative and opinion. Probably this explains our friendship with George – both Bulgarians and Roma had no right to object, both of the groups were powerless minority in their own country. George and I were “on the same boat”.

However, the before mentioned assessment of the socialist times seem rather emotional and it is obvious that it is based on impressions rather than facts. I have never lived in a totalitarian country in my conscious years to be able to evaluate the epoch. What I know for those times is from documentaries, articles and movies, as well as from conversations with older people. And when communism came to an end, and we witnessed the same communist leaders to change “color” and to participate once again on the political arena, many people felt betrayed. From the distant year 1989 till now – 2013 many people have been gathering anger towards their greedy political representatives who proved many times they represent only their own materialistic interests.

But let's focus back on the topic: what did socialism do for the minorities in Bulgaria, especially for the Roma minority? Except for the many initiatives which I will mention below, it created dependency syndrome among the Roma population. There are still many Roma people who expect the State to provide for them and feel highly frustrated when this doesn't happen.

For the analysis of the communist policies towards the Roma, I will use the article edited by Haydiniak in 2011 “Migrations, gender and intercultural relations”. According to the author, there was not one communist ethnic policy but several. I will examine the three: the acceptance of the cultural differences, the integration and the assimilation.

Communism entered the political scene with “liberating” mottos. It was promising liberation from every kind of oppression, including that of the majority. A favorable “setting” was created for the development of the minorities' cultures, media and theatres. Minority schools appeared in this first stage of communist rule. There were special quotas in the universities for the regions with numerous

minority citizens. In this first stage of cultural acceptance, there was one specificity – only the ethnic minorities were recognized, not the religious ones. While communism “hesitated” quite a lot in its ethnic policies, it remained true to its negation of the religion. All religions were negated, those of the majority and of the minorities. For religion was seen only in its ideological dimension, not the cultural one.

The second type of communist policy was that of integration. Here the efforts were aimed to modernize the minorities. The “bargain” tradition versus modernity gave birth to impressive social energy with the promises for urbanization, social mobility, both vertical and horizontal, for emancipation of the women, for breakaway of the individual with the patriarchal norms, finally for a life in society, not community. There was no illiteracy any more, intelligentsia was cultivated that came from every corner of the society. The minorities embraced that form of modernization. This abrupt change shook their traditional way of life. Disappointed in the beginning, they quickly after that appreciated the benefits of modernity – the comforts of the urban life, the better education of their children, the opportunities for career path.

The most common communist policy was that of assimilation. For example, the Macedonian identity was denied, the Department of Turkish language was closed down, the newspapers and theatres of the minorities were banned. The culmination of this policy was the renaming of the Bulgarian Muslims and after that of the Turkish people. There was nothing original in it. The policy of renaming was adopted in the first half of the 20th century and the names of some adults were changed 5-6 times. A few surprising elements were found in it – the lack of reason, even a formal one; the methods were aggressive and violent, the , propaganda was massive and brutal and finally, the momentum was bizarre –in the mid 80s, a period of growing concern for the human rights.

The communist rule was interested in imposing the way in which the ethnic differences were determined, but mostly, it was interested in the techniques and procedures for constant control of the individual. The control and the supremacy were the goals, not the means. Every opportunity, which allowed their enhancing, on the one hand, and their deeper penetration in the private life, on the other, was very welcome. And if such an opportunity didn’t exist, it was being created.

To force people to change their own names, even the names of their dead relatives, the brutal interference in this so intimate sphere, was a form of “symbolic rape”. The renaming of an entire community creates the image of a controlling symbolic Father who requires submission and punishes disobedience.

The forceful renaming established two aspects of the communist ethnic policy:

- it definitely abolished the idea of a private sector, unavailable for the authority;
- it constituted the individuals as subjects, not citizens, while at the same time, imposing the responsibility to the state to determine their identity.

These three policies – the acknowledgement, the integration and the assimilation construct in a different way the minority subject. The first one regards the cultural identity as valuable and provides public space for its flourishing. The second one “forgets” about the minority differences in the name of the socialist project and welcomes Bulgarians, Jews, Turks, Armenians and Roma to join the impetus of modernization. The assimilation “sees” the cultural differences but it doesn’t appreciate them. Unlike the policy of the integration, that of the assimilation is not

offered, nor bargained, but rather it is imposed by all means: theoretical, political, symbolic, even by force.

Regardless the obvious differences, the three policies possess a common denominator – the non-participation of the minorities in their determination. When these policies were set, the minorities were invited to adopt them; and this invitation took the form of seduction or sanction.

Equality in exclusion – this paradoxical form of non-participation – gathered together majority and minority: everyone was excluded from the setting of the policies.¹

George and I were “on the same boat”. Moreover, back then, in the 1990s, there was nothing unusual to have good neighborly relations with people who were not your ethnic group. I may idealize some aspects of our friendship but the true fact that can not be challenged is that George was a good-hearted, polite little boy. He had many friends among the class. Our teacher was satisfied with his performance. Back then, he was one of us.

For the purpose of dissertation I have read the books and articles of many Bulgarian anthropologists. They have put much effort and have gone to details in their description of Romani life. However, it is impossible not to observe their generalizations of the Roma, their creating of heavy, stigmatized stereotypes. To illustrate the later, I will use their description of the young Romani boys:

“The boy, the “pride” of every kin is much freer than the girl. If he wishes to study, he may complete secondary school, sometimes he may even acquire high education. The constraints imposed on the boy are only symbolic. He is taught high self-esteem, not only as a man, but also as a future Father and protector of the family prestige. There are many occasions when his aggressive behavior is openly tolerated. When the boy “turns into” man, he is expected to demonstrate man power and domination over the weaker sex. “People say I love my son more...I can not hide that I think more about my son. On the other hand, my daughter has a mother-in-law. I may give something to my daughter when she comes, but to my son it is impossible not to give something...” (Romani woman, 48 years old, Stara Zagora).²”

From the latter, one can assume that all Roma boys are spoilt and aggressive, with high self-esteem, behaving in a way that implies that the world owes them everything. If I had never met George in my life, I would have believed the respected anthropologists Ivanova and Krastev. So would do many other innocent researchers. In this situation, I propose one should choose the true living example instead of the generalized fiction. Some boys are born more active and assertive, sometimes even aggressive. This can be said for all the boys generally. In Bulgaria there are such Bulgarian boys, in other countries, there are too. Another thing which strikes my attention is the invisibility of the anthropologists themselves. Where are they? Why they seem so distant? Why they have chosen not to

be personally involved and just to state general observations standing from very far away position. Definitely they are not foreign observers, their nationality is Bulgarian and they live and work in the country.

Furthermore, I will challenge them with their generalized description of the Romani girls with my own living experience. They say:

¹ Хайдияк, 2011, “Миграции, пол и междукултурни жзаодействия”, Проект GeMIS

² Иванова, Кръстев, 2013, “Циганите/ромите в България – джендър отношения”, “Литера Принт”, Стара Загора

When the girl is being educated, the approach is tough and the requirements are more severe. She lives together with 3-4 generations in one household under the supervision and the control of the elders. The Romani girl is taught to obey her husband, her father-and mother-in-law. The most valued qualities in the girls are submission, industrious nature, goodness, modesty. The girls should be patient, compliant, they should make compromises easily. The female complaining is accepted as a shameful act. A very important aspect of the girl's upbringing is the suggesting of constant feeling of guilt. The girls are raised with the impression that every wrong activity is their personal fault and therefore they must feel guilty and bear the consequences.

After reaching maturation, the life of the girls is under firm domestic control in order to preserve their virginity and in many occasions out of fear of unregulated sexual behavior before the wedding. Usually, the elder brothers or the father are the guardians. "I followed them everywhere: to the store, to the cinema", tells an old Romani man, aged 73, who safeguarded by himself his daughters as he didn't have any sons. Around this age (12) the girls are not allowed to go to school anymore. On the one hand, out of fear not to be "stolen for brides", ("Many candidates wanted her, but she is a little girl, her mother doesn't give her easily", says the grandmother for one of her granddaughters); on the other hand, this is the age when the girl should learn how to be a good housewife, and to prepare herself for marital

life. These girls stay at home and take care of the household. A Romani girl confesses: "I have stayed at home already one year. I want to study, but they don't allow me. I finished elementary school. I stay at home the whole day – I cook, wash, and clean...They

(The Bulgarian children) have the right to choose. We don't have such a right. I wanted so much to study in Stara Zagora. I want to acquire a driving license, I want to drive a car...I didn't study enough English at school...If only I could turn back time..."³

Although the voices of the Roma girls seem to be exposed, they are put under the stereotype "submissive female". Now, let's meet:

Gospodinka

She was at my class through the years 1990-1992 as well. Wild and disobedient, Gospodinka could be much trouble for both the teachers and classmates. She never conformed to any prescribed behavior. She was herself, fearless, naughty and provocative. Probably she felt different in a way but she never showed us that this feeling disturbed her. I guess she possessed fragile sensitivity which she fiercely defended and without any hesitation she was entering into quarrels and disputes. For the latter, she was too hard and noisy to be my friend.

I believe that Gospodinka matured earlier than George. Probably she had been offended by Bulgarians for her ethnic origin, she carried a wounded heart and it was obvious that she had promised herself that this wouldn't happen again. Instead, she was hurting the others. We all know that the attack is the best defense ever. There was so much anger in her deeds. Sometimes as if she was fighting invisible demons in her head screaming she wasn't worthy...We were simply children back then. None of us had the experience and wisdom to hold Gospodinka tight, to calm her down and to whisper softly:" Everything will be

³ Ibid.

alright at the end”. Instead, we distanced ourselves from her which made her even more aggressive. One fact that deserves to be mentioned was that the classmates referred to her with the “Gypsy girl”, while to George with simply “George”. I can imagine how hard it was for the little girl to be the carrier of the reputation of her entire ethnic group. For Roma were better off during socialism in Bulgaria, some of them were very well accepted among the Bulgarians, but still they were perceived as the significant “other”. Gospodinka was so proud and so sensitive at the same time. She was sensing the rejection by the others and her answer to this was to fight. A fight for the sake of fighting. “A rebel without a cause”.

Later on, I heard she left school; not to marry someone; this act was her own personal rebellion against all the power authorities in her life – teachers and parents.

What has happened with this strong, passionate little woman I can only guess. But for one thing I am sure –she would never let anyone hurt and command her again.

The example of Gospodinka is one of many I can describe about the anger the young Roma people express and carry in their souls. I can understand them – they are sick and tired of being rejected every single day, by most of the people they meet in the larger society.

There is this young and dirty Roma boy who begs for money exactly at the centre of the town. While most of the beggars seem poor and miserable and really “beg” the others for little sympathy, that boy looks frightening and he says the words “Give me some money” with severe intonation sounding more like an ultimatum than a begging. One day, after I

have given him something for a hundredth times, I refused to do so and gave him “the look”. The look which clearly showed my opinion for him. I shouldn’t have done this. I truly regretted quickly afterwards when he started cursing me with all the horrible things one can imagine and as if this wasn’t enough, he started throwing stones at me...His aggressiveness towards me is his attempt to regain his position of power. While asking me for money, I virtually represent the power authority from whose consent depends the pocket money of the boy. When throwing stones at me he shows to the society and mostly to himself that he is not merely a receiver of people’s sympathy, he has power; even if this is the power to harm the others.

Many Bulgarian anthropologists have turned the phenomenon of Roma begging into persevering stereotypes:

“The Gypsies say that God had destined them to beg their whole life. She is a Gypsy and it is impossible for her not to beg. If she stops begging, she won’t be a genuine Gypsy” – this is Roma philosophy of life. The begging Roma woman is a typical image of every settlement for centuries. The rest of the population accepts the begging as an element of the nature of the ethnic group. “Always poor, always begging...you can’t even come close to their neighborhoods and not be surrounded by disgusting women and children who handout.” (Cvetkova, 1975)⁴

People forget that to beg is not that easy. First, one has to seem very miserable and submissive for the whole day. He/she should thank eagerly and greet people even if his/her soul doesn’t allow him/her to do so. The act of begging can be seen as a theatre in which the submissive servant is the beggar and the powerful master is the person who gives the money. Probably many people give money not out of

⁴ Ibid.

genuine sympathy for the poor beggar but because they like their virtual position of people with power. Moreover, the stereotypes formed by people from the larger society have played the role of catalyst of their internalization into the Romani soul. They themselves have accepted that a Gypsy who doesn't beg is not a genuine Gypsy! Another striking confirmation of the latter is the negative reply of many interviewed Roma people on the question "Would you put your trust into Romani politician or policeman?" (...)

Young people like that boy

are so damaged emotionally; they should undergo psychological therapy from now until the rest of their lives. These are wretched human creatures who nobody loves. Their thirst for a good gesture, some love, even a kind smile is so immense that I believe that part of the initiatives of the Red Cross should be connected exactly with spreading some warm emotions among the poorest of the poor. The children from the orphanages. My aunt worked in one in Plovdiv, it is called "Maria Luiza"; she was a supervisor there for more than ten years. The two of us are very close and she frequently shared her concerns about the children there with me. I met some of them.

The destiny of these children is so ambiguous. After leaving the orphanage at the age of 18, they either become cruel criminals or exceptional citizens. It seems that the middle road for them is something unknown.

The majority of the children in the orphanage are of Romani origin. Their upbringing lacks essential foundations such as love and kind care. Some experts claim that the children raised in institutions hardly ever manage to cope with life. The "Maria Luiza" orphanage is bombarded with donations on the official holidays and some supervisors say that the children there receive many beautiful clothes and have special dishes which a significant part of the Bulgarian population can not afford. Still, the atmosphere there is very depressing. Not all of the supervisors possess warm, generous heart. Most of them simply fulfill their working obligations. Children know that. Even if nobody reveals it to them directly.

The problem is that these children later on cultivate dependency syndrome. They depend on the state to help them live. Some of them have very dramatic teenage years. The number of unwanted pregnancies, rapes and blood vendettas is really appalling. My aunt says that at the age of 18 whoever returns to the ghetto has no good perspectives for life. She calls the later a "vicious circle". The young Roma woman starts giving birth to many children until the whole situation is totally out of control and some of these children are finally given to the orphanage. In this way, several generations are raised in institutions. But, my aunt explains, if the orphan tries to survive on his own, he can achieve envious results such as working a decent job and being able to pay for accommodation and housing.

There are some occasions in the orphanage when the biological parents take the child from the institution and involve him in criminal activities, the lightest of which is the begging. Some Roma directly sell their children to foreign couples and the sum of the deal is sadly ridiculous.

These realities are not alarming exceptions. During the Transition years they have become profitable business. This situation opposes the existing in the Bulgarian literature stereotypes for the importance of the Romani family and mostly for the importance of the children. The famous academic Jean-Pierre Liegeois (1999) said that when analyzing Roma, we should have in mind that everything gravitates

around the family – a realm of solidarity and labor. Unfortunately, such an idealized vision doesn't meet with the living realities.

Moreover, anthropologists Krasteva and Ivanov (2013) depict the image of the Romani mother-martyr-saint:

The Romani woman is self-fulfilled through the family within the community. Her self-fulfillment is connected to her regulated behavior through the customary norm, with the materialization of the community ideals and values. The social “purpose” of the Romani woman is to get married, to give birth to many children, to raise the children and the grandchildren, to give them her experience and skills, to preserve the ethnicity. She has the subordinated role, while, at the same time, the daily decisions are her responsibility. The woman takes care after the children and the elders, their food and clothing. Her responsibility is the maintenance of the home and the preservation of the culture. It is she who communicates with the people from the community and the macro society. She is always a carrier of the characteristic of the “foreigner” who has to be associated with customary practices and rituals.⁵

Furthermore, the before mentioned Bulgarian anthropologists cultivate an image of a humble goddess who amazes with her self-sacrifice and service in the name of her children: “To be a good mother, to raise my children has always been the most important thing in my life...”⁶ What I frequently see on the streets and parks of Plovdiv are small dirty Roma children dressed in clothes highly inappropriate for the cold weather, sometimes barefoot. And I wonder how it is possible these children to be left on the mercy of God, without a wise female care.

Practically every Roma child I have ever seen in my life is not taken care properly. They are either devoid of love, or of responsible mother care. And finally how it is possible for the Bulgarian anthropologists to build carelessly stereotypes which reinforce the significance of the Roma family when the orphanages of the entire country are full of Romani children who nobody wants? Indeed their work should be seen more as wishful thinking and blissful daydreaming than as a true depiction of the realities on the Bulgarian landscape.

The girl from the orphanage

I met her in the distant year 2000. Both of us worked in the company “Christian of Roma”, Plovdiv. Our job was to stop people on the streets, to advertise them cosmetic products and then to give them the “presents” just for 5 leva a package. We had special bonuses for selling 15 or more packages a day. The two of us were the youngest sellers; both of us were at the tiny age of 15-16 while the other women in the company were grown up mothers at their 30ies-40ies. When I first came there, I was disappointed because nobody paid me any significant attention. I was just one more girl who had to ensure the sales. When the Roma girl from the orphanage appeared in our company, all the women, including our boss cheered up and there was an atmosphere of funny jokes around her. All of them were expecting that she would sell the greatest amount of packages because “she was a Gypsy and Gypsies know about these things”. There were jokes around her and gestures of solidarity by the older women and everything seemed like a good opportunity for her to earn some pocket money; everything seemed nice except for the fact that she wasn't smiling at all at the jokes. On the contrary, she had the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

saddest eyes I have ever seen. Probably she sensed that the attention she was receiving wasn't natural; probably she never wanted for her the role of the clown; or the role of the disadvantaged child. And even if all the working mothers there were eager to express their sympathy for her, she somehow accepted the latter as an insult and closed herself and distanced herself from the others. Except for the first day, when she sold 6 packages (which was a good achievement for a beginner), all the other days, month after month she came back at the company's office with zero realized sales. And finally she quitted the job without any realized profit for herself. She never talked to me. She never opened to anybody in the company. I think she accepted the zero profits as a great personal failure. And she became even sadder. I know the feeling with these kinds of jobs. The products are usually at the worst quality ever, made illegally in a garage. People on the streets who were our target group know that and their reaction to our attempt to sell them the "gifts" varies from uninterested refusal to infuriated curses and comments for our humble personality. The girl met many prejudiced people. People who were completely sure that the products were either stolen, or of very dangerous quality. She was deeply insulted from the latter - she took it really painfully. And then the attitude of the women in the company changed – from enthusiastic supporters of the Romani girl to cruel opponents which made me realize how much right had the girl when she didn't appreciate their special attention. They didn't really care for her. She knew that from the beginning.

The only way to succeed in such a job is to become completely insensitive of the other people's attitude, to adopt flexibility and flattering nature and to believe in you that you and only you are capable of selling a bunch of garbage for 5 levs. The girl lacked self-esteem. She was one frightened child without parents in a world full of hypocrites, liars and cold capitalists.

The living example of that girl challenges the stereotype that the Roma people are crafty merchants who have superpowers to sell generally unsellable goods. It also goes against the perception that the Roma people don't possess consciousness in their attempt to get people's money. It is widely spread the belief that the Roma will do anything for some money. In Bulgarian language we say that "the Roma will buy you and sell you without a blink of his eye". That explains why everybody in the company expected her total success in sales. We were proven wrong.

Another common belief is that the Roma women fortunetellers on the streets are unscrupulous tricksters who use female vulnerability and naiveté to make a fortune:

The fortunetellers

In my life I have met plenty of them and I can give examples for both their positive and negative characteristics. The negative ones easily come to the reader's mind: they frighten you that there is a black magic on you or even better on your whole family, they go into details about all the horrible things which lie ahead of you unless you do something to disenchant. That "something" is usually a significant amount of money which you should give to your "savior". Their ability to "profile" the client is really impressive. More often than not, the "victims of black magic" are insecure, vulnerable people who have been going through some tough times in their lives. Up until there is demand for that service, there always will be supply and this is how the market functions.

To your attention I would like to point a few Roma women who for return of a small amount of money give to the distressed customer what he really needs: hope. Before doing so, I would like to express my concern about the ambiguity of my own perceptions and beliefs. I believe that there are some people who have correct hunches about situations and are able to see into the future. I realize that for the serious reader the latter may seem absurd and ridiculous and I am prepared to carry the repercussions of this. Strangely how, exactly when I am most miserable, as if from nowhere appears a middle-aged Romani woman who looks at me with bright smiling eyes and softly calms me down with the exact predictions I was torturing myself to know. It didn't happen once as a coincidence. It generally happens to me. I won't reveal the exact predictions, because they have significance only for me. I just want to say that at the exact moment hope was inspired and you may even laugh at that, but my general wellbeing improved. The power of thought is a tremendous one. What is important is not that from now on one can sleep better because one knows what will happen in the future. It is not important the prediction itself; the light of hope which such fortunetellers kindle in one's soul costs much more than the cents one gives them for a cup of coffee.

In these situations the fortunetellers and I step on equal ground: I am the provider of material remuneration, they, on the other hand, reign at the spiritual realm; their blessings for a happy life are great illustration of the verbal magic they use.

Magic and Roma go together from centuries. It is not something unachievable by ordinary Bulgarians. It is a craft which can be learned and it requires only clear intuition and good intentions. The rest are numerous superstitious rituals, some of them taken from Bulgarian folklore. I can illustrate the latter with examples of rituals and beliefs from the work of Krasteva (2013):

Widely spread in the daily life of the Roma is the mythological category, namely: the opposition "clean"- "unclean" woman. In some cases the requirement for physiological cleanness (virginity before the wedding, menopause, periods without sexual contacts) equals to spiritual cleanness.

Spiritually "clean" should be the midwife as well. The latter spends 3 nights by the young woman who has given birth to a baby in order to protect her from evil spirits. Only "clean" woman may have contact to the mother and the baby. Again, only "clean" woman cooks for Ramadan Bairam.

According to Roma culture, everything that goes out of the person (urine, menstrual blood, the newly born baby) is unclean. The cleansing happens in or through the earth and the water. The first cleansing ritual for the newly born baby is his/her bathing. The midwife is entitled for the act. She puts in the water salt, "in order not to smell", a metal object, "in order the baby to be healthier than iron", sinets against the evil eye, an egg. The water is thrown on a "clean" place – usually where people seldom walk onto.

In the traditional culture of the peoples, including that of the Roma, there is a special period of time – 40 days in which the woman who has given birth to a child is accepted as "unclean". She is "unclean" both in physiological and spiritual level. She is in a borderline condition between the life and the death. For such occasions the people from the Roma community follow unwritten rules aimed at their protection. For instance, they follow strictly the ban on sexual contacts between the woman and her husband in those 40 days. In fact, this is the only time when the Romani woman can refuse sexual contacts without any severe for her repercussions. During that period the woman is isolated from the others because

she may vile everything she touches. She is not allowed to do the chores at home; she eats separately from the others and no one outside the family is allowed to go to her, because “her breast milk may stop”.

The isolation comes to an end at the 40th day of the birth with a special cleansing ritual. The woman washes herself and wears new clothes. Some of the Romani groups usually go to a church, in the company of the mother-in-law and other women from the family.⁷

If it were only for the fortunetellers, my experience with the Roma people would be painted in positive colors. Unfortunately, I can tell many episodes of unexplainable violence towards me. The latest of which was two weeks ago when I was going back home. Two Romani boys stopped me and asked me for cigarettes. I was going to give them cigarettes but it took me awhile to find the package in my handbag. The next thing I saw was a big knife pointed at me and the boy ordered me to give him all my possessions. He scared me so much that my breath stopped. It was dark and cold outside and there was nobody near by. I started running as fast as I could towards the main road and somehow I managed to stop a passing taxi which took me home safe and sound. For them I wasn't Iliana who actually may say some positive things about the Roma In Bulgaria. I was simply “Bulgarian” – a representative of the nation who discriminates them more than American people have discriminated the black colored Americans during the 1960s; who paints the buildings with statements like “May all Gypsies be turned into soaps!”; whose politicians buy their votes for just two baked sausages and the everlasting promise to take care of their disadvantaged group. It wasn't a violent act against me personally; it was their reply against all the racism they have been facing during the Transition period.

Hasan

His story is a cumulative example of the many difficulties which Roma people in Bulgaria have been facing during the Transition period. He lost his job in the beginning of 1990s together with many relatives of him. For about a decade the only money entering the household were the pensions of his parents and the childcare payments. The extreme poverty made some women in his extended family become prostitutes; others

left their children in institutions. At the same time, Hasan faced barbarian hostility towards his ethnic group, namely in the schools where his children tried to attend, at job interviews where he was humiliated many times. Some bosses have been hiring him for a certain period of time for a ridiculous sum of money which most often than not wasn't paid to him at the end of the month. He told me there are many Roma clans that are not brought together by solidarity bonds and spend their life separately. At my question “Who represents your interests?”, he answered sadly: “Nobody”. “There are very rich Roma people in Bulgaria. People like Tsar Kiro directly finance the main political parties in the country in return of his impunity. He cares only about power and money. If he wishes, he may help so many Romani brothers and sisters. But he doesn't want to do so.”

⁷ Ibid.

His unhappy life moved me very deeply and I made a research about some striking parts of his story. Here what exists in the Bulgarian literature about Romani prostitution:

With the abrupt social and economic changes at the end of the 20th century, the prostitution flourishes. Because of the gender relations in the Roma community, Roma women are potential victims of sexual exploitation. The evaluation of this activity is based on whether it provides the family with large income. More and more often, it is not an object of any critic. Rather, it is accepted and silently tolerated as through it the family is fed and big houses are built. At the same time, the prestige of the pimp increases greatly especially among the young boys and men. As a “real” man the trafficker of women and the pimp can provide his family with easy, rich lifestyle; while the risk of STDs raises immensely among the Roma prostitutions.

In the Roma community a big issue is the forced prostitution. The target group of the victims is young girls under 18 or girls with an unsuccessful marriage. Some of the prostitutions work in Bulgaria, while many others in Western Europe. “Sometimes a pimp has only one or two girls from whom he makes so much money, that he can buy a big house or a sports car and provide everything for his family without to work a single day in his life. And now many girls regard them (the pimps) as successful people. While other girls who are really small, aged 12-13 go to them willingly and ask them to transfer them abroad to prostitute...”(man, 25 years of age).

My knowledge and observations about Romani prostitution is scarce and not at all complete. That’s why I am not in position to question Bulgarian anthropologists Krasteva and Ivanov. I can only wonder the identity of their sources, the exact date and place, which weren’t mentioned in the book.

To prove that Hasan’s story is representative for the miserable situation of many Roma people in Bulgaria, I can illustrate the later with findings about the Roma socio-economic situation during Transition years:

Roma in Bulgaria are faced with numerous social, political, and economic challenges that prevent them from fully integrating into the larger, majority society and taking part actively in politics. As a result, both the quality and the quantity of Roma participation in political affairs is generally low.

Racial prejudice, poverty, low education levels, sub-standard living conditions, Language barriers and other social and economic factors increase the communication and policy gap between the Bulgarian government and ethnic Bulgarians on the one side, and the Roma population, on the other, reinforcing mutual distrust. The obstacles facing Roma are exacerbated by generally poor economic conditions in the country as whole and a political system still struggling to shed the legacy of communism. Despite some attempts on the part of the government, the overall lack of political will has further resulted in Roma issues being inadequately addressed.

The Roma economic situation deteriorated sharply as a consequence of the post-communist transition. Roma unemployment rates in the 1990s skyrocketed far above the country’s average. In 1998, for example, official unemployment among Roma was reputedly between 80 and 90 %, while the average unemployment rate was 16% in Bulgaria. Roma suffer from higher poverty rates as well. Roma are often excluded from formal and official employment rolls, limiting their access to insurance and other social benefits. Job discrimination and low education are two salient causes of Roma poverty. (Michael Brown et al, 2003).

Romani political participation was stifled in the past by constitutional prohibition against the formation of political parties on ethnic and religious bases. Despite the pressing social and economic issues facing the community, mainstream political parties have incorporated limited Roma issues into policy platforms. No Roma-based political parties have achieved measurable success. Some parties have opted to include Roma as their representatives in parliament in order to secure Roma votes. However, openness to Roma issues has been limited at best and, at worst has the potential to jeopardize the political standing of those seeking to address Roma issues.(Michael Brown et al, 2003).

The difficult socio-economic conditions influence Roma in their decision to pursue a decent life abroad.

My experience with Roma abroad

During my stay in Thessaloniki, Greece I was a volunteer of the Hellenic Red Cross for the period 2007-2013 and this activity of mine met me with many Roma people. Just transiting the country or aiming to stay there, the building of Red Cross was the first destination they ever learn while abroad. Because of my Bulgarian origin, I helped there with the translation and I was a mediator between the Bulgarian citizens in need and the Greek authorities. Although I translated in more than 30 occasions, it is the same old story: because of their miserable, unhappy life in Bulgaria, the Roma family (usually they travel with their entire family, including very small children, sometimes newly born) had decided to emigrate abroad and Greece was the first country which came to mind – it is the closest state to Bulgaria. All of them claimed to be promised a good job in Greece. Somehow on their way to the new country, they lost their money or it was stolen by “bad people”, or their luggage was stolen while at the same time the small children were very sick (in some occasions they were immediately taken to a Greek State hospital), the mothers were in despair and felt frightened in the new country and it was the father of the family who was participating in the negotiations with the Greek officials of Red Cross. “We need money, a place to stay and a job” – that was what all of them wanted. Unfortunately, the provisions of Red Cross in its headquarters in Thessaloniki were very scarce. The officials could give some pasta, lentils and cans, as well as some strange clothes and blankets and that was all. I was in the uncomfortable position to explain every time that Red Cross is an institution for emergency situations, not a hotel, nor an employer. Their life stories were really heartbreaking, moreover, they were told with a full of despair voice. Many times I gave them my personal money though I was not allowed as a volunteer to do so. We (the volunteers) were told not to take anything personal otherwise it is impossible for us to really help the patient. But I took it really personal...

The musician

It was the spring of 2013 when I had to translate for him and his family. I remember this occasion very clearly, because it took me afterwards several hours to return to my usual peace of mind. His story was so emotionally involving. He

spent 2 hours in describing details while his main request was the same as the one of all the others: money, shelter and a job.

‘I am a musician, he started, I play classical music. You know how difficult it is to play classical music; it requires both talent and many hours of painstaking preparation. I played in a classical orchestra for my entire life and now they stopped the subsidy for the orchestra and all we the musicians are jobless. What to work, I wonder. The one thing I can do is playing a musical instrument. You know that in Bulgaria the most popular music genre is ‘chalga’. (Chalga is an equivalent of vulgar, elementary music which became popular in the beginning of the Transition period till nowadays. Its “philosophy” is explained by the domination of raw man power, money and silicon artificial beauties; it is by now means qualitative music as the lyrics are vulgar and cynical and the melodies are taken from the Gypsy-Turkish songs.) So when somebody tells you that in Bulgaria reigns the “culture” of chalga, be sure to understand what that implies.

‘I can’t play in the clubs, bars or restaurants... there is no place for me...there is no place for us, the educated, cultural people. That chalga music is everywhere. Nobody wants to listen to classical music...But that’s my entire life...classical music...I have a family for which I carry responsibilities – I have a wife and a small son.’ He was depicting the whole tragic situation of the Bulgarian mentality using literature metaphors as if he was reading a classical masterpiece. His voice was mild and sweet and very sad. He said there was no other way for him and for his family than to travel abroad in the richer Western countries and to play classical music on the streets. Unfortunately, his wife was sick, she had problems with walking. She was very exhausted from the long journey. Then he continued weaving his story hour after hour, provoking nostalgia, regret

and deep concern in me about the future of the Bulgarians as a people. His story put essential questions like “What is the future of the people of quality in a materialistic and cruel society?”, ”Why people who are deeply in love with their country are almost expelled from their own motherland?” His eyes shined intelligently and he was smiling politely. The musician used his mastery of speech in his attempt to negotiate better living conditions for his family. Unfortunately, the Red Cross officials are ordinary people who try to do their job as all the others. They gave him some cans and clothes and said him goodbye. I remained speechless and sentimental after this meeting for many hours. Even if everything he said was chosen deliberately in order to produce this moving effect, it remains poetically said. Little people have the ability to talk like poets.

His example made me realize his symbolic role as the Protector of the family. From his story it became obvious that he was a caring father and a loving husband. None of the existing in the Bulgarian literature stereotypes about the man in the family can be said about him:

Men have greater space for self-affirmation compared to the women in the Romani culture. One of the obligatory characteristics of the man is his high sexual potency. All the men, both young and old, constantly show off with their sexual “conquests” in their family and outside it. The numerous extramarital affairs are a proof of their masculinity. This is not against the customary norm; on the contrary, it enhances the authority, the self-esteem and the prestige among the other Romani men in the “mahala”.

The male infidelity is accepted and tolerated, unlike the female one. “It is something normal that men have mistresses”, (Romani man, Stolipinovo, Plovdiv).

“I am a man. I can sleep with every woman I want. My wife has nothing more to say. If she cheats on me, I will change her for another woman. If she cheats on you one time, she will start cheating again and again...But the shame is all hers!”(Romani man aged 42, Lom). The intimacy issues of the men are well-known in the ghettos, but they are not openly discussed. “ My son-in-law was sleeping with whores, whereas my daughter was taking care of her young family; nowadays the girls walk almost naked and they say that the boys were to blame for the rapes...”(Romani woman, aged 70).

There are many occasions when the man enhances his authority through domestic violence. “In Romani culture the beating is part of the tradition. Very seldom there are only quarrels; almost all the time there is beating”, (Romani man, Stolipinovo, Plovdiv). The Roma community accepts the violent behavior and the male aggressiveness has become the only model of reaction in times of family crisis. “The man never says sorry. The woman forgets about it and it’s OK.”(Romani man, Sliven).⁸

From the latter we witness the creating of stereotypes from a science which is aimed at their questioning and challenging. In order to learn about Roma, I have to deconstruct my knowledge about them. I have to put them on the same ground as me and simply to understand.

I realize that my fragmented experiences with the Roma people are not the best anthropological work. I do know some of them during the described 20 years, but I am afraid I never examined them in-depth. I rather examined their reactions in specific situations. For better achievements, more time is needed. What I offer to the reader is a bouquet of impressions, personally lived which oppose to the existing in the literature stereotypes.

Moreover, for better quality, I as an explorer have to be less emotional and dramatic; I have to be calm, reflective and focused. Because the experiences with the Roma weren’t initially desired, they just happened in my life and now I’m analyzing my own memories, we have to be careful with such memories. First of all, probably I haven’t paid enough attention to some essential details which can become “keys” to understanding the Roma. Probably I remember what I wanted to remember, what I am used to remembering, what I’ve been told to remember. I accept that besides my experience with George at school, I haven’t been neutral while approaching the Roma in my life. Unfortunately, I have always had something on my mind for them from beforehand. I was biased and prejudiced. For the sake of Anthropology I have to “forget” everything I know about them and just listen, watch and participate together with them in their practices. And here comes the biggest disadvantage in my work: the Roma participated in *my* practices, not vice versa. All the described experiences are about reactions of Roma in the world of “gadje” (non-Roma). I talked to George in Bulgarian, we were attending Bulgarian school. I never learned Romanes, except for some words. Again, all the before mentioned experiences are about the struggles of Roma in a world of non-Roma. This summer I tried to approach some of them purposefully for the aim of this academic work. They didn’t accept me at all. They became aggressive. I was from the upper position of an explorer who examines those who don’t belong to his group. It’s irritating for them, I know. Probably I would react the same way if someone from the richer Western countries comes and plays the role of the

⁸ Ibid.

innocent philanthropist who cares. It's a bit hypocritical. If people really cared they would accept the Roma in their own group of people.

3. Conclusion

How to tolerate Roma and accept them? Knowledge is the first answer which instinctively comes to mind. People are afraid of what they don't know. How to gather knowledge when Bulgarian literature is full of banal clichés which only reinforce the existing stereotypes? Moreover, how to overcome the Roma's own internalization of these stereotypes? The "black sheep" of the group behaves as such because everybody expects him/ her to behave like this.

Let's take the segregated schools for example. These are special schools in Bulgaria for Roma students. I have talked to some teachers and they say working in such a school is the worst thing that can ever happen to them. Nobody wants to work there. People go there only because the possibility of unemployment is even worse. I am a teacher as well and I know that students sense the motivation of the teacher. They all know when he/she is glad to be with them and to share knowledge. The Roma students are not less intelligent than their Bulgarian counterparts – they sense the lack of motivation too.

Undoubtedly, the mixed schools are the better option. They cultivate skills to work in a multicultural realm and after that the integration of the Roma students into the larger society would be less painful. But here comes the question: how to persuade Bulgarian parents to enroll their siblings in a mixed school? Very often the school enrollment is a matter of prestige and unfortunately the latter option is not perceived as a prestigious one. I have heard many times this: "He is not a good student at all, he studies together with Gypsy students...". Furthermore, I have read many times that the biggest problem concerning the Roma is their mentality. I will add that the biggest problem is the Bulgarian mentality as well. This summer of 2013 I haven't succeeded in interviewing a lot of Roma people, but I talked quite a lot with Bulgarians about them. The results are as follows: "Roma are unbearable and unsavable...", "They will never integrate into the society!", "They are much inferior than us..." The last statement was said by an educated 28-year old young man who lives near the Romani neighborhood in Plovdiv. I was shocked by the extreme negativity which all the interviewed expressed. Till then, I haven't realized that there was so much hatred in the Bulgarian society. I blamed the foreigners for not accepting their immigrants, but it happened the same situation in Bulgaria. The media, including the social networks boost further the negative image of the Roma. This year my Facebook friends posted multiple times images of dirty Roma with the comment beneath them: "I don't want my future to be decided by people without education!"

The bargain with the Romani votes is another problem. Roma people are ill represented, not to mention they are not represented at all in the Bulgarian Parliament. Roma people haven't cultivated culture of political participation because of their illiteracy and a symbolic role of the scapegoat for all the ills of society. There are documented situations when Bulgarian politicians promise them "not to pay electricity bills at all" in return of their votes. And Roma people vote for the corrupted politicians. And enormous neighborhoods don't pay any bills. But because the companies which are electricity providers are already privatized, the consummated

electricity has to be paid. And it is paid – by the Bulgarian tax payer; which reinforces the Bulgarian hatred towards the Roma. It is obvious that this is a vicious circle. And the biggest responsibility lies on the Bulgarian politicians' shoulders. There isn't a political will in the country. On the other hand, many Bulgarians complain that the state, together with the European Union is more concerned about the Roma minority than the Bulgarians themselves. The membership in the EU provoked much optimism in the years immediately following 2007. There was a perceived boost in the economic performance of the country which unfortunately didn't last long. As a result of the European Union membership a lot of NGOs dedicated to the Roma issues opened doors. Moreover, there are annually large subsidies for Roma integration into the Bulgarian society. The latter initiative has at best poor results as corruption reigns as a great octopus on all levels of government authorities. Many Romani leaders directly benefit from the subsidies which are often used for personal enrichment. Simultaneously, the Western countries aren't enchanted at the fact that many of the Eastern European immigrants which "invade" their civilized countries are of Romani origin. A reaction which clearly shows the cracks into the EU initiative "protection of minorities". We are in front of a multi-faced problem for the integration of Roma within the Bulgarian society and within the borders of the EU itself. There should be top-down approach and a lot of effort and motivation and governments shouldn't expect quick and easy solutions.

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