

*Fakse Ladeplads, 24 February 2009*

The experiences of the Roma people depicted in Joakim Eskildsen's book *The Roma Journeys* are beautiful despite being mundane Magda Károlyné in the Hungarian village of Hevesaranyos peeling onions and garlic in her kitchen, letting the skins fall on the floor before sweeping them outside with a broom; snails' shells knocking against one another in boxes on their way to France from Hungary, where the animals were collected by hand in the rain; and Sandrine, a young woman on the outskirts of Paris washing her baby's clothes in a tub brimming with soap bubbles. The experiences of the Roma can also be shocking: the pregnant Yannoula Tsakiri, living in a rubbish tip between Aspropyrgos and Elefsina in Greece, was kicked in the back by a policeman and as a result her baby died; while Dionysia Panayotopoulou, a divorced mother of three girls, explains: This is where my mother disappeared a few years ago. She was run over by a bulldozer while collecting tins."

Between 2000 and 2006, Eskildsen, accompanied by writer Cia Rinne, travelled through Hungary, India, Greece, Romania, France, Russia and Finland, where he photographed the Roma people and the difficult, often appalling conditions in which they live. *The Roma Journeys* is divided into seven chapters representing the seven countries visited, each chapter beginning with an essay by Rinne followed by Eskildsen's photos. The couple acknowledges in the book's introduction that its journeys were "by no means meticulously planned, and were instead the product of a number of coincidences". Günter Grass wrote the book's foreword, in which he laments the "constant persecution, discrimination and systematic annihilation" of the Roma population. With around twenty million members, the Roma is "the single largest minority in Europe and one that none the less does not receive sufficient recognition". For European nations the Roma is an alluring idea – an exotic, mobile, indeterminate people – but an inconvenient and ultimately intolerable reality. For Grass, who founded the *Stiftung zugunsten des Romavolkes* (Foundation for the benefit of the Roma people) in 1997, the Roma is ironically "in a position to teach us how to cross borders, indeed, to abolish borders in and around us and to create the kind of Europe without borders that is not only the subject of empty oratory but an actual state of affairs". The journey through which Eskildsen's vision became a book was at times as impulsive and unpredictable as the experiences he shared with the Roma themselves.

Joakim Eskildsen: As you know, one doesn't see Gerhard so often, so I don't have too many stories to tell, but I've made some notes on a piece of paper to help me remember the main points. Maybe I should start by saying that I studied book-printing and book-making at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki. I graduated in 1998 and before I began the Roma project I actually made three self-published books, so I had an idea of what it takes not just to design a book but to produce one too.

Monte Packham: *When you say "self-published", do you mean you printed them yourself?*

Joakim Eskildsen: Not quite. They were self-published in the sense that there was no publisher behind them. I made all the films myself the old-fashioned analogue way with a repro camera, and then took them to a company that exposed the plates. A professional printer then printed the book. But there wasn't somebody like Gerhard who took responsibility for anything, and we had to pay for it all ourselves. After that we brought the printed sheets home to our apartment, folded them, put them in order, and took them to the bookbinder, where we bound the books with him. So we had our hands in every book, actually touched each book. But for *The Roma Journeys* we realised we didn't want to go down that road again and that we weren't really specialists – although I am proud of what we made back then. In the summer of 2004 I was in a group exhibition in Helsinki, and Ute Eskildsen from the Museum Folkwang was there one day, showing some people around. I thought I'd approach her, as I was looking for someone who could not only publish the book, but who would also understand what it's like to have produced one yourself. Luckily she'd heard of the books we'd made, and I asked her who she thought might be good for the Roma book. "Gerhard Steidl", was her immediate response. I thanked her and asked what I should do next. She said to send her some layout material, just something to look at, and that she'd show it to Gerhard. So I did that, and at the end of 2004 received a telephone call from someone speaking German. At first I thought it was for Cia as she grew up in Germany, and I passed her the phone. "I'd like to speak to Joakim Eskildsen", he said though, so she handed it back to me. "It's Gerhard Steidl. I've seen your material. It's very interesting and I'd like to publish your book." he then said in English. "Wow, great,"

I said – and I could tell he was ready to hang up the phone. “What do I have to do?” And he simply replied, “Call me when the photos are ready.” That took almost two years, until the spring of 2006. I called Gerhard but was worried he wouldn’t remember me, as our first conversation had literally been no more than thirty seconds. He did remember me though and said, “Call me when the layout is ready.” That took until the summer of 2006. I phoned him then and he said, “Good. I will contact you and you will come to Göttingen,” and hung up. A few weeks later I got a phone call asking me to go to Hamburg on a particular day, as Gerhard wanted me to meet Günter Grass. My mouth dropped open when I heard Grass was considering writing a foreword for the book. So I went to Hamburg, spent the night there, and early the next morning walked to the train station where we were supposed to meet. I waited and waited but no one came, so eventually I called Göttingen and was told that someone called Frank was on his way and would contact me. Frank called me shortly afterwards, picked me up, and we drove to Grass’s place where I waited around again – there were lots of people there to see him.

MP: *Was this at Grass’s home?*

JE: No, at his museum in Lübeck. Then Gerhard suddenly entered the room – this was the first time I’d met him. “Hallo, Gerhard Steidl”, he said, and in the same breath, “This is Günter Grass, please show him your book and tell him about your experiences.” It was all very straightforward somehow, no small talk. Grass was keen to hear my stories, his wife Ute too. He showed us around afterwards and then Frank drove Gerhard and me back to Göttingen. We shared a bottle of Grass’s wine on the way and Gerhard said he’d probably fall asleep – he always sleeps in the car – but we started discussing different kinds of paper, and I told him what I had in mind for the book. It was wonderful to hear all his knowledge about paper, very inspiring. When we arrived Frank said to me, “Don’t be surprised if you meet a different Gerhard Steidl tomorrow: it’s rare to see him this calm.” And he was right, the next day Gerhard was unbelievably busy.

MP: *Some say there are two Gerhard Steidls: one with the white lab coat, and one without.*

JE: Aha. I know him very little in this respect, but realised quickly he has much to do and is extremely focused on his work. I stayed in Göttingen for a week, but we only managed to speak on the Friday evening about an hour before I had to leave. That surprised me a little at the time, although it had been very exciting meeting all the other artists and everybody working there. Gerhard looked through the layout and liked what he saw. He only had one criticism, the typographic sections between chapters: “Please think about these pages,” he said. “They need more space, more air. At the moment it looks like a magazine layout.” And he was exactly right. “But it will increase the page count,” I said, “and the book is already at four hundred pages.” He said he didn’t care: “We will make the book we have to make.” After that the texts had to be translated because the book has German and English versions. We also started the colour corrections: things went back and forth with Julia as I had many corrections and sometimes made changes when I shouldn’t have... All in all it took a long time. In June 2007 we returned to Göttingen for what we thought would be to print the book, but it was actually for more colour corrections. At the time there were only a few left to be done, but there was a big problem with the black-and-white pictures. The book is printed in the four-colour process throughout, so the black-and-white images are also four-colour. We made the colour separations with Jonas but couldn’t work out why the black-and-whites weren’t convincing. We tried different things but nothing worked and after a while I thought I’d just let it go – it wasn’t perfect but we felt we couldn’t do any more.

MP: *Were they too red, too green?*

JE: My black-and-white photos have bluish shadows and yellowish highlights. But on the proofs they came out sort of purple, and the relationship between dark and light wasn’t quite right. Jonas and I tried to find a solution but gave up in the end. That evening however, Gerhard had a look and said all the black-and-whites had to be remade in a different way. I would never have asked for this, but they were redone and in the end looked perfect. Now the book was ready to print – that’s when the difficult time for us began. Gerhard said he would most likely print in three weeks and asked me to call him then. So I did and he said, “Probably next week, give me a call then. I called him the following week and he said, “Probably next week.” It went on like this until August, when he said, “There’s no point you calling me every week – call me every two weeks. So I did, but eventually he said, “I’ll call *you* when I know.”

MP: *How long did this go on for?*

JE: Six months.

MP: *Before the book was printed?*

JE: Yes. This was, I learnt later on, one of the longer delays for a Steidl book. Although it wasn't really a delay, because we'd been slow from our side too and made late changes. Nevertheless we didn't have any books for the first two exhibitions. Which didn't bother me and I told Gerhard that – we just wanted the best book under the best possible circumstances. In the end I got a phone call one Friday afternoon saying the book would be printed at six o'clock on Monday morning. "But Monday's in two days! I said. So we packed our things and went to Göttingen on the Sunday. Then there was another delay and we actually only started printing on Tuesday – this was at the end of November 2007. We printed from Tuesday morning until Saturday. Gerhard was very attentive: at the beginning he was by my side on press, checking off every sheet, but there were surprisingly few changes to be made and in the end I did it alone. We printed through the nights: I stayed in the library, sleeping when I could, and went down to press whenever the printers called me. We also printed the cover, for which we used a special paper. When travelling with the Roma I used to carry small sketchbooks with me that got very battered and worn from life on the road. We thought it'd be fitting to have a cover with a similar tactile quality, so we chose a sensitive Hahnemühle paper that shows signs of wear over time. After we left Göttingen the bound books arrived just a week later. I called Gerhard the minute I had one in my hand, and told him how perfect it was: my exhibition prints and the pages in the book were unbelievably close.

MP: *It seems that making books for you is as important as taking the photos themselves.*

JE: Definitely – I visualise my projects as books even before they're half-finished. For me the book is the backbone of the project. Exhibitions are important, but the book always comes first.

MP: *Why so?*

JE: I like the form of the book: that you have a particular order of pages, and texts and images that need to be brought together. And there's always a large number of books printed which means you can share them with more people, it becomes a democratic thing. People often ask me if they can buy one of my prints but they tend to back off once I tell them the price. So I say, "Just buy the book! It's got hundreds of pictures! Buy *two* books, so you can cut up one and frame the photos!" I feel a book is something familiar, something homely, something that belongs to you like your toothbrush or your shoes. A book is intimate: an intimate object for its owner and an intimate home for the images it contains. The Roma Journeys contains two hundred and seventy-four photographic plates. Many of them depict not only the Roma, but also the objects practical, religious, sentimental – that surround these people and with which they surround themselves. Of the hundreds of objects represented, I count only one book. There is a television in Magda Károlyné's house in Hevesaranyos, Hungary. Covered in imitation wood veneer, it is a large outdated model on which sit a cardboard tray filled with eggs, two figurines of the Virgin Mary, and a plastic doll in a red floral dress. In Frépillon, France, a woman called Romni stands outside a dilapidated caravan. She holds a metal teapot in her left hand and a baby's bottle in her right. Around her, on filthy carpets placed on the ground, lie an empty detergent bottle, an audio cassette, a toy wand, and crumpled clothes. In Kirkkonummi, Finland, Ritva and Henkka Berg fiddle happily with their mobile phones in a landscape illuminated by afternoon sunlight. In Vodstroy, Russia, Zemfira Demonie stands proudly in her living room filled with crockery, cut glass and taxidermied animals including a boar and a wolf. In Transylvania, Romania, a girl wears luminous red ribbons in her black plaits. And in Moldavia, Romania, the young Madalina sits outside before a flaking wall. She wears unwashed pants and a pink knitted cardigan. Her facial expression is inquisitive, vulnerable, opaque. She pulls her knees close to her chest and curls her fingers on her grubby feet. To her right a plant emerges from the dirt; to her left lies an open dictionary.