

The Soul of a Gypsy

Joakim Eskildsen's *The Roma Journeys*

by Edgar Allen Beem

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Fate would seem to have had a hand in leading Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen to the Roma, or gypsies as they commonly called by outsiders. Eskildsen was living in Finland and traveling in Eastern Europe in 2000 when, at the suggestion of sculptor/jewelry designer Zoltan Popovits, he paid a visit to Violet Street, the Roma quarter of the Hungarian village of Hevesaranyos. He fell in love with the bleak yet beautiful little settlement and the colorful people who inhabited it.

At the same time, writer Cia Rinne, who had collaborated with Eskildsen on two previous projects, was staying in Berlin where she had befriended a young Romanian woman of Roma heritage. Back in Finland, when they discovered their common enthusiasm for the Roma, Eskildsen and Rinne began researching Roma history and culture and planning a return to Hevenaranyos. Rinne even learned Hungarian for what would be the first of the many trips together that culminated in the publication of *The Roma Journeys* (Steidl, 2007. \$75 hardcover), an epic 416-page cultural travelogue featuring essays by Rinne, close to 250 photographs by Eskildsen, and a sound collage CD from each journey.

Between 2000 and 2006, Eskildsen photographed Roma colonies in seven countries, shooting both richly textured color photographs and panoramic black and whites. Naturally, whenever he told photographer friends that he was working on a book of photographs of the Roma, Eskildsen got the same response. "Ah, Koudelka! How can you do gypsies?" Josef Koudelka's classic *Gypsies* (Aperture, 1975), of course, was the work that first introduced the great Czech photographer to the West, but, though Joakim Eskildsen ranks Koudelka as "one of my top 10 photographers," he rightly see his own gypsy photographs as very different. "Koudelka's work is highly depressing in a beautiful way," says Eskildsen. "There is a hopeless feeling that is the complete opposite feeling I felt with the Roma."

Joakim Eskildsen's *Roma Journey* photographs are an appreciation and a celebration of Europe's largest minority, the Roma being a marginalized and often oppressed people who first migrated from India as metalsmiths, peddlers, horse traders and musicians. There is a Fellini-esque quality to the way Eskildsen finds the beauty of the Roma even amidst poverty and squalor. "You're so much in contact with the earth and the weather," he says, explaining his enthusiasm for the gypsy way of life. "For me, this is *real* life. I felt myself very much alive and present and extremely good."

Joakim Eskildsen, 36, was born in Copenhagen in 1971, but he spent a great deal of his youth in the countryside. He says he experienced "the same kind of joy" among the Roma that he did visiting his grandmother's rustic farm as a boy. "I have a feeling," he says, "much of what I have been doing in *The Roma Journeys* is connected to a renaissance of my grandmother." Eskildsen first took up photography at 14 when his brother took a photography class and introduced him to the magic of the darkroom. From 1988 to 1992, he learned his craft as an apprentice to Danish Royal Court photographer Rigmor Mydstkov, assisting with shooting and printing of portraits and theater photographs. Eskildsen's own visual interests, however, were elsewhere – in nature and landscape and common people. When he saw a Copenhagen exhibition of work by Finnish photographer Ritva Kovalainen in 1993, he realized "this was my kind of photography" and promptly moved to Finland. There he lived for the next 13 years, studying at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki and learning the art of hand-made photography books.

The Roma Journeys is Eskildsen's first commercially published book. *Nordic Signs* (1995), his "hymn to nature" photographed in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Scotland and the Faeroe Islands, was a hand-made creation, as were *Bluetide* (1997), his evocation of a Portuguese fishing village, and *iChickenMoon* (1999), his exploration of South African village life. Eskildsen has also published several other photography "sketchbooks" in the Opus Series started by Finnish photographer Pentti Sammallahti. *The Roma Journeys* feature photographs of Roma people and settlements in Hungary, Greece, Romania, France, Russia and Finland, as well as India, where Eskildsen and Rinne went in search

of the Roma's roots. The photographs from each place have their own distinct look, from the idyllic closeness of Hungarian village life to the vast, arid openness of life among wandering Indian merchants. Each journey also has its own personal story. In India, for example, both Eskildsen and Rinne had to be hospitalized. They were also detained by police for several days because authorities mistook Cia's name (short for Cecilia) for CIA.

The pair spent weeks, sometimes months, in each place they visited. The time invested shows in the intimacy of both the photographs and the text. "The people I photograph are usually people who I admire and from whom I wish to learn something," Eskildsen writes in a 2003 exhibition catalogue. "I mostly try to live with the people for longer periods of time in order to get a better understanding of everything and to be able to photograph more peacefully." Over the course of seven years, Eskildsen estimates he made close to 30,000 photographs of the Roma. His original dummy for the book featured 500. The panoramic black and whites were taken with a Hasselblad Xpan; the color photographs with a Pentax 6 x 7. Eskildsen made 6 x 7 cm "cards" of each photograph in order to facilitate the editing process, but the exhibition prints run to 75 x 90 cm.

Exhibitions of the Roma photographs are scheduled for Germany and England, but, thus far, there is no U.S. venue. Eskildsen says he might well have continued his Roma journeys to the United States and South America, but the birth of his first child inspired him to settle down and move home to Denmark in 2007. Just as the simple, elemental lifestyle of the Roma reminded him of life on his grandmother's farm, so the strong family bonds, the sense of love and belonging, prompted him to re-examine his own priorities. "The majority of people in these photographs are rich in things we are poor in," says Joakim Eskildsen. "They are close to the people they love and they are not part of the rat race."