

The Misunderstood

Living with and learning from the Roma, who still endure gypsy stereotypes

by Keith Goetzman

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Telling the entire story of the Roma people would be an epic undertaking. The saga would span centuries and continents, with a splintered narrative tracing a group of nomads as they flee India and spin off into a constellation of distinct communities across Europe and beyond, each one forming its own folkways and lifestyles, all the while hounded by stereotypes, suspicions, and other connotations of the “Gypsy” label so often applied to them. It would involve persecution, discrimination, and genocide, as well as music, acrobatics, and distinctive clothing and handicrafts.

Danish-born photographer Joakim Eskildsen knew little of this sprawling backdrop when in 2000 he decided to photograph Roma communities for the book *The Roma Journeys* (Steidl, 2008). In fact, he professes knowing “absolutely nothing” about the Roma beyond the “horrible, terrible, unhuman” stereotypes he’d absorbed while he was growing up in Denmark. Once he began living among Hungarian Roma with writer Cia Rinne, though, he became engrossed in the Roma people’s “never-ending story.”

“We became so fascinated, so interested” by the Roma world, he says, “and also surprised by all the ignorance” of the non-Roma. “Even our highly educated friends had all kinds of strange stereotypes and funny ideas. It somehow felt that it was impossible to do something superficial.” He and Rinne ended up working on the project for seven years—“the shortest possible time we could even think about”—living in Roma communities in seven countries in a remarkable feat of immersive documentary journalism. Rinne’s linguistic skills helped them forge personal connections and secure revelatory accommodations like a four-month stint sleeping on a grandmother’s sofa in Hungary. The resulting volume is a color-drenched, vivid depiction of a wildly diverse culture that, viewed in full, can’t help but change the way an observer regards the Roma people.

That’s not an insubstantial accomplishment in a world where the Roma are largely regarded with hostility. The eastward expansion of the European Union has brought several million more of Europe’s 8 to 12 million Roma people into the EU fold, and xenophobia is running high in many of the continent’s “old” and “new” countries. In advance of national elections in Italy in April 2008, former prime minister Silvio Berlusconi promised zero tolerance toward “Roma, clandestine immigrants, and criminals,” and since becoming prime minister again he has delivered with a crackdown that involves police raids and relaxed expulsion rules. In Bulgaria and Romania, new EU member nations where Roma are the biggest single ethnic minority, they also constitute most of the jobless. Roma have also been subject to forced evictions in Slovakia, Greece, and Ireland, among other places. At the same time, an advocacy movement is gaining momentum, with organizations like the George Soros-funded European Roma Rights Centre (www.errc.org) pressing individual nations, the European Union, and the United Nations to help the Roma integrate socially. What’s more, Roma arts and culture enjoyed prominent billing at the 2007 Venice Biennale in Italy, where the Roma Pavilion drew more than 20,000 visitors.

Against this turbulent backdrop, *The Roma Journeys* avoids the political fray, save for a cursory foreword by German novelist Günter Grass. The book informs the debate by showing, not telling. Even Rinne’s text, which describes persecution and harassment, does so with an approach that is more documentary than advocacy. Eskildsen, for his part, claims artistic license. “I did not select any of the pictures with an eye toward [making] a story about human rights,” he says. “It was a purely photographic, artistic, personal way of seeing it. Because in a way I feel that’s the only valuable thing we can do—and then somebody else can do something else with the material.” The book has already triggered “quite a lot of discussion,” Eskildsen says, as well as a few pointed questions about whether it reinforces or challenges stereotypes. He readily acknowledges that he and Rinne focused on only one facet of the Roma population.

“What we show in this book could be described as the visible Roma: those who are visible either because they want to be visible, or because they can’t help it—in the countries where they live they could be spotted miles away,” he says. “But there’s at least half of the Roma population living in Europe and other places that is invisible, and this work

doesn't deal with them. That's another story."

Eskildsen and Rinne specifically chose their seven destinations with an eye toward representing many types of Roma, who in fact rarely call themselves by that term but rather identify with subgroups such as the traveling manouche of France, the various castelike trade groups (musicians, horse sellers) of Romania, or the small but distinctive Finnish Roma community with its own dress, dialect, and habits.

Eskildsen and Rinne also went to India, where there are no Roma. "The Roma identity is a European thing," he explains. "Linguistically they think [Romani, the Roma language] originates from India, and that's why we wanted to go there, where it possibly could be their forefathers. Plus, there are groups there that are living in a similar situation today."

They rounded out their itinerary with Hungary, Greece, and Russia, then spent a year producing the meticulously designed book. Only now is Eskildsen beginning to realize the scale of his accomplishment on *The Roma Journeys*—with two young children at home, he knows it may be a once-in-a-lifetime feat. Still, he harbors hopes of one day finding a way to document the "invisible" Roma, and in the meantime is optimistic about what *The Roma Journeys* could do for the proud and storied people it portrays.

"This kind of thing won't make a revolution," he says, "but it could be an eye-opener that this is a very, very valuable culture that we should treasure. The whole world is getting more and more like a single culture, and it adds spice to life that we have different groups and people and culture and language. It all adds up to a more interesting place to be on this planet. If we could turn this negative force against the Roma into speaking about the positive things—there is so much positive and beautiful in their culture—we could all benefit from it."