

Portraits Of European Apartheid. Photographs from Seven Years with the Roma
by Ingeborg Wiensowski
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What began as a short visit to Hungary finished seven years later with a prize-winning book documenting the lives of the Roma people, from India to Eastern Europe. The photos are now on display in Germany. And with Berlin planning to repatriate up to 10,000 Roma, they are more than just pretty pictures. It was nine years ago that Danish photographer Joakim Eskildsen and his wife, Swedish writer Cia Rinne, first decided to travel to Hevesaranyos in Hungary to document the life of the Roma people living there. Having just been to South Africa and seen the effects of apartheid firsthand, the couple became interested in what they saw as a form of apartheid in Europe: the way that the Roma -- commonly referred to as Gypsies -- were being treated. And then somehow, that first trip to stay with the friend of a friend's Roma mother in Hungary for four months turned into a seven-year-long project. It wasn't planned that way but as, Eskildsen writes on his Web site, "once we had started we were unable to simply stop. The more we found out about the Roma and got to know them, the more our interest in, and liking for them, grew."

For seven years Eskildsen and Rinna saved up and traveled intermittently through seven countries -- Hungary, India, Greece, Romania, France, Russia and Finland -- sometimes living with Sinti and Roma people for months at a time. The couple would often move in with the Gypsies they met and at times, Eskildsen has said in various interviews, the lack of privacy almost drove them crazy. Eskildsen took pictures and Rinna wrote while they lived in Roma villages, on the edges of cities, in streets, forests and rubbish dumps, and in huts, tents, and shacks.

Looking Beyond Perceptions

Finally in 2008 the couple released a large coffee-table style book, "The Roma Journeys" in which their travels were documented, split into chapters by country. The book attracted attention and won prizes -- this year it was awarded the David Octavius Hill Medal by the German Academy of Photographers and last year it won the Amilcare Ponchelli Award for Best Photographic Book of the Year. Now, the pictures are on display at the Emden Kunsthalle in north-western Germany until Jan. 10 of next year. Looking at the pictures, they seem rich with what one might consider clichés about a Gypsy life. But the photographer himself, who found many surprising examples of Roma lifestyles, from well-off Russian families to those living on a Greek garbage dump, hopes viewers will look beyond their own preconceptions. "I hope that with my photos I can help to break down the prevailing attitudes toward the Roma and to show a more detailed picture," Eskildsen told SPIEGEL ONLINE in an interview. "I think they show a people who are full of the joy of life, despite the racism and all their other problems. And you can feel their pride in the fact that they are not being portrayed as victims again, in tattered clothing with a crying child on their arm. They look at the camera like they are kings and queens, even when they are standing in front of the most miserable background."

Surprised At Injustices

In an interview with the Italian edition of Marie Claire magazine in 2008, Eskildsen talked about how his own preconceptions about the Roma had been changed by his and Rinne's project. "I did not expect to find people who have been hit and beaten by the police, and who do not even know their rights," he said. "Or maybe they do know, but by experience, they know that these rules do not apply to Roma. We met many people who faced so much injustice that I could never imagine that this is what our civilized European law can do to them." The timing of the German exhibition is pertinent -- because next month, it may not just be about the beauty of the pictures, it may also become part of a political debate in Germany. In early December the German Interior Ministry plans to sign a deal with the administration in Pristina, Kosovo, detailing the forcible return of 14,000 Kosovo refugees from their current home in Germany to their homeland. Of these, an estimated 10,000 are Sinti and Roma. Germany had played host to the refugees because of ethnic tensions and instability in the region but now that Kosovo has declared its independence and the situation is more peaceful, the refugees could start returning there. And even though the United Nations agency for refugees, the UNHCR, had recommended that Kosovo refugees be allowed to return home voluntarily, the Interior Ministry was reportedly planning to get permission to repatriate up to 2,500 refugees annually.

A Case Of Historical Amnesia'

In a press release, Ulla Jelpke, the spokesperson for interior affairs for Germany's far-left Left Party, protested against the ministry's intentions. "Kosovo is a land in which minorities are discriminated against and persecuted," Jelpke said. "The unemployment rate among the Roma there is close to 100 percent. The Roma children who have grown up in Germany often can't speak Albanian and have no real prospects in Kosovo. Their deportation goes against basic human rights." "The administration's position is both inhumane and a case of historical amnesia," she concluded, referring to the fact that almost half a million Sinti and Roma were murdered by the Nazi regime during the Holocaust. The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma, based in Heidelberg, also put out a statement protesting the planned deportations. In it they asked the government to "suspend the repatriation agreement with Kosovo and to grant permanent residence to the members of Kosovar minorities, some of which have lived in Germany for more than 10 years. The Central Council of German Sinti and Roma is convinced that the planned deportation of thousands of Roma to Kosovo will result in new and sharp tensions between minorities and Kosovo Albanians that will severely threaten the safety of the families concerned," they wrote.