

Interview with Cia Rinne on the Roma project

by Krzysztof Słaboń

Pozytyw, Warsaw 2008

Krzysztof Słaboń: *What made you be interested in the Roma?*

Cia Rinne: Before „The Roma Journeys”, we had spent several months in South Africa (to work on the book „ChickenMoon” which was published in 1999). We lived with a black family in a rural area and a township. This was a couple of years after the official ending of the Apartheid era, and people were full of optimism for what the future would bring. We found that the different groups, Blacks, Whites, Indians and Coloured –in South Africa, you had to define yourself according to the colour of your skin –lived totally separate lives, not knowing much about one another despite their physically minor distance. The thoughts this put into motion stayed with us, and upon our return to Europe, we found that here, things were not that different although they might not be as visible and present as they were in South Africa.

It was our friend, the Hungarian-born sculptor Zoltán Popovits, who told us about the little Roma settlement outside Hevesaranyos in Northeastern Hungary. We went there for the first time in 2000, introduced to the place by Zoltán and Zsuzsi, a friend of his who had grown up in the very settlement. We were allowed to stay at the house of Zsuzsi's mother Magda, and spent altogether four months there, sharing the people's everyday, getting to know them, and making friends with many of them.

The more we found out about the Roma through living there and reading about their history and situation, the more we got interested in the situation of the Roma on a whole. We were baffled at the severe lack of knowledge on the Roma which at the same time seemed to be responsible for the survival of old prejudices towards this people. While living for some months in Berlin at the turn of the millenium, I had met a girl from Romania, Aurelia, who had grown up in a Romanian Roma family. When we visited Aurelia and her family in Clejani, we understood that the situation there differed largely from what we had seen in Hungary, that what we had gotten to know was just a tiny piece of the very rich and varied Roma world, and we decided to extend the project further.

KS: *How and what did you prepare to make this material and why did you decide to visit certain countries, not others?*

CR: Apart from reading literature about the Roma, I had to learn the language from the very beginning in Hungary and Romania in order to be able to communicate with the people we lived with. I already spoke Greek and French, and in India and Russia, we travelled with company, and thus had help in translating if needed. So in the case of France, Greece, and Finland, the language skills made it an easy choice since direct communication is certainly more fruitful than the complex translation process, but our main concern was to choose countries in which the situation would differ largely from the other ones. After having gotten to know two very different pictures in Eastern Europe, we were keen to find out about the situation in Western Europe. As we have understood, the situation in Greece is similar to that in Italy and Spain, and France with its different groups of Roma might at the same time shed light on the situation of the Sinti/Manouches of Central Europe, and of the Gitans/Gitanos in Southern France and Spain.

In India, we were trying to find out about the history and cultural heritage of the Roma, and if the situation of the Roma in Western Europe is more neglected than that of the Roma in Eastern Europe, the situation of the Roma in Finland and Russia is even more so, and we found it interesting not merely to travel far, but to also learn about and get to know the Roma in our vicinity. So in Finland, we mainly concentrated on Roma who lived in our town or nearby.

KS: *I am interested in the relation you had with the people you met, lived with. Were particular groups, communities more friendly than others? Have you experienced an unfriendly attitude?*

CR: Generally, all Roma we met were surprisingly open and helpful, and very soon understood that what we were pursuing was of no harm to them. Of course, I first took the time to tell the people we met about our project, an at times very tiring but necessary step. In this, the sketchbooks we had made on the basis of earlier journeys, were a major help. The Roma were very interested in seeing pictures of Roma in other countries, and usually wanted to know a lot about the conditions they lived in. At times, it would almost feel as if we were foremost doing this project for the Roma, as some sort of ambassadors between faraway Roma communities. We would not just have come and started questioning people or taking pictures of them without their knowledge of who we were, what we were doing, and before first getting their approval.

There was one single place from which we were sent away instantly, though in a kind manner. It was a settlement in Western Thrace, where whole communities have decided to shed their Roma identity, and to refer to themselves as „Muslims” instead. Muslims in Western Thrace are the only minority granted the status of such in Greece, and thus have better rights than the Roma, Albanians, or other groups. In another such „Muslim” neighbourhood, we had spent many days, talking to the people, when the mayor of the settlement suddenly appeared and had an angry outburst at our supposedly crazy assumption that these people were Roma, whereas the people around him did not seem to have any problem with their Roma identity.

Other places where we had real difficulties in getting access to the people were such that had been under a lot of media exposure like the so-called „Dallas” settlement in Cluj, where amongst other films had been made, and many journalists had passed through. It would have been the same for us in Clejani, had we not known Aurelia and her family. Understandably, the inhabitants who had possibly put some hope into this sudden interest from the outside world to improve their miserable living conditions, but then disillusioned at the non-appearance of any such measures, had no goodwill left for ever new intruders in their life. We were aware of the possibility that our mere presence might trigger hopes in people that were bound to be disappointed. Therefore, we always tried to make it explicit that we were no helpers, but artists, and that we had no means to change their living conditions. The only thing we could do was to tell about them, and thus try to make people aware of them and their situation. When we stayed and lived with people, we supported them as good we could, and our humble support has in some cases continued even after we have left. With several people, we have kept contact ever since.

KS: *Was there anything that surprised you particularly?*

CR: We were surprised by the horrifying conditions half of the Roma population of Greece – a Western country part of the EU which has made a grand issue of demanding better conditions for the Roma in Eastern Europe – lives in, about the injustices meted out to the Roma by the police and other officials there, and in Russia, likewise. It is a shocking insight that justice is an extremely suspendable concept in the eyes of most officials in all countries when it comes to the Roma, and that we, the majority, hardly ever get to hear anything about this criminality from the side of the states. On the contrary, things are always reversed, the Roma are accused, and the tradition of blaming the Roma is so deeply rooted in people that it takes an enormous effort to fight these old and generally unfounded concepts.

What surprised us even more after seeing all of this, was the incredible hospitality we were met with by the Roma, their helpfulness and ingenious human understanding.

KS: *How did those meetings, acquaintances and the time you spent among the Roma influence you?*

CR: It is a difficult question to answer, but we often thought that we were not doing this merely to learn about, but also from the Roma. To be able to live with people closely over extended periods, you need to put your individual needs and habits aside, and try to be open to the way things are done in the particular environment. In the beginning of each journey, it would be quite hard to adjust to this, and it would take some time of „warming up”, so to say, to be able to

orientate yourself. At times and in some places, it would be an almost unbearable thought to enter a settlement again, where people would gather around you, asking a lot of questions that you would have to answer. Also while living with the people, the lack of privacy would turn out to be the most difficult thing to handle. But always, the people made up for this, we were rewarded manifold with their kindness and the ever-surprising goodwill, and we would return home not only with rich material, a lot of new informations and stories, but also with the heart-felt sensation of having gotten to know and to love these people we stayed with and met. These human meetings would have been worth all of it, and again and again we were reassured in the thought that you can and must never try to judge a person before you have gotten to know him.

KS: You have visited many countries and Roma communities. It is a very unique experience. What do they have in common? What would you call the essence of the "Gypsy soul"? What are the differences between the Roma groups from different countries? Was there something that you observed personally that was interesting, though maybe not so obvious?

CR: This is a tricky question since you might easily be inclined to generalize on the Roma who indeed form a very heterogeneous people, and there is hardly such a thing as a common "Gypsy soul". What you can say though is that the Roma share a common historical, cultural and, for those who speak Romani, a common linguistic background. In every country they live in, they are a minority, and often as such, they are facing certain problems in various degrees. The different Roma groups differ from each other not only from country to country, but even within the same country. Generally it can be said though that the differences between different Roma groups or the Roma of different countries are largely determined by their history in those, and by their present situation. There are also significant cultural differences between different groups of Roma, which is why it is sometimes said that it is in fact misleading to speak of the Roma as if they were a "group".

Then there are aspects of what we personally experienced, although even this might risk to become some sort of banalization of a more complex reality. However, we often felt that people were exceptionally attentive to us, in some places more than others, but in several places in Romania for instance, we were reminded of India where people in a similar way would pay attention to every single move in your face and react to it immediately. People seemed very concerned with the well-being of their guests, and showed an enormous responsibility and care for their guests. In a few places, this went so far that they would not let us take any move on our own, which would become directly limiting to us. Generally, the Roma were quite used to having guests, and were not uneasy by our presence, which made it easier for us, too, to stay with them as we would not have liked being a burden to anyone. People would be very open and understanding towards others, a sensitivity which is probably founded in the circumstance of many generations often living together. The smaller the families get, the more they are content in themselves, and lose the interest in each other, just as has happened in most Western majority societies. When leaving the Roma communities or quarters, we did not seldom feel as if returning from a different world. What was the outside "gadjo" world for them would suddenly feel strangely cold compared to the intensity you experienced while being with the Roma. There would usually be a strong sensation of togetherness while with the Roma, where people would be very aware of each other and where every person counted, whereas elsewhere, you would feel more alone and isolated among people who would probably not care too much about strangers. We often thought that this must be the way the Roma feel when leaving their home and community, a scary world in which people are considerably more cold and careless than what they are used to.

KS: Do the Roma people adopt the specific features of the nations of the countries they live in, like Russians, Finns, and Indians?

CR: Definitely, yes, the Roma have been deeply influenced by the countries they live in, and by their own history in these. It is a common misconception that the Roma have somehow lived „outside society" like independent entities as it were. That is of course not the case. In every country, the Roma have been subjected to the turns of politics in general, and to policies targeted specifically at them. Often, the Roma are said to be the strongest protectors of a country's musical heritage, in some cases they keep languages alive as do the Gitans Catalans in Southern France who speak Catalan, or, like the Kaale of Finland, they cultivate a dress code that has its origin in Finnish countryside fashion a century ago.

KS: *Do the Roma communities you were portraying know each other? Do they stay in touch with other groups? Are they interested in each other?*

CR: The Roma communities generally do not know each other unless they are in the immediate vicinity, or someone has relatives in the other community. The majority of the Roma has been settled for many generations, and most Roma have their social circles in the surroundings they live in. There are a few Roma though who have relatives in other countries that they stay in touch with and visit if possible.

The Roma we have met have been very curious to hear about the Roma of other countries, and often pelted us with questions concerning everything from their living conditions to their traditions, occupations, and language skills.

KS: *Are all the Roma people you have met conscious of the nation they belong to? Do they have knowledge about their history, do they cultivate the culture, and are they proud of being Roma?*

CR: The Roma are of course conscious of their Roma identity. There are some groups though who do not refer to themselves as Roma but as Calé, Gitans, Sinti, or Manouches, for instance. “Roma” is a term that has been adopted as the official common designation for the different groups, and free of the pejorative connotations that are associated to such terms as “Gypsies”, “Zigeuner” and “Tsiganes”.

Most of the Roma do know about their forefathers having come from India, and about their recent history. The traditions vary a lot from country to another, and so does the extent to which the Roma keep them alive. Apart from the few mentioned cases in Thrace, we have not met any Roma who would not have been proud of their identity, or, to put it the other way around, who would have been ashamed of it. It is difficult however both to speak for the Roma, and to generalize.

KS: *Is it important for the Roma to keep photographs? What is their attitude towards old pictures of their ancestors? What do they think about photographing them nowadays?*

CR: The Roma usually keep photographs of family and relatives presented in their home, either as framed portraits, or as single pictures stuck into the frame of other pictures. It was one of Joakim’s interests to photograph these fantastic assemblages, and several of them are included in the book. The Roma we met did not have many such photographs, but treasured them a lot, and we always asked whether they would have any old photographs, which was even more rare. Joakim has a series of photographs of these old pictures held in the hand of the person or a member of the family it belonged to. Once we had explained what we wanted to do, there were very seldom any objections from the people’s side to being photographed.