

Interview with Joakim Eskildsen

Marie Claire Italy, 09/2008

Are you married? Do you have children?

I am married to writer Cia Rinne whom I collaborate with, and who wrote the essays for the Roma Journeys book. We have two children, Seraphin and Luisa.

Have they ever been in a Roma camp?

Our son Seraphin was with us in Hungary last summer when we visited the Roma settlement outside Hevesaranyos where we started the project in 2000. During that year, we spent several months at the house of Magda, an elderly Romni, and when we now returned with our child seven years later, we stayed in the very same house with Magda. Everybody loved Seraphin, and we hardly saw him as there were so many friends he had to play with, and everybody was looking out for the children. Of course, we are visiting our good Roma friends in Finland on a more regular basis, too.

You took pictures of the Roma way of life: where did the idea come from?

Before embarking on the Roma project, we had spent several months in South Africa, and had been thinking a lot about apartheid. When returning to Europe, we realized that we had our own apartheid with the Roma. I guess this was one important aspect. But practically, seeing by chance the village Hevesaranyos in Hungary made me fall in love with the place and the people at once, and from then on, the idea and interest and respect for the Roma people just grew.

What did you find in Roma camps that you didn't expect?

I did not expect to find people who have been hit and beaten by the police, and who do not even know their rights, or maybe they know, but by experience, they know that these rules do not apply for the Roma. We have met many people who have faced so much injustice that I could never imagine that this is what our civilized European law can do to them.

Despite Gypsies being considered a world apart, in every picture, you can feel a sort of deep complicity with the subjects portrayed: was it difficult to get their approval?

Not more than with any other people that you want to get to know. It takes a lot of time to hang around people, and it takes an honest interest before people will open their homes to you. Roma people have experienced so much maltreatment, that naturally, there is scepticism of what the intentions are, but we always showed earlier pictures, and very often people asked us even before we got to ask them if we did not want to stay for some time at their place to take pictures. I guess that the pictures to many were a proof that there was no danger of being used or misunderstood.

You portrayed Roma communities in Greece, Finland, France, (...): which was the kindest? And which was the less kind? And which was the noisiest? And the most tidy?

This is an impossible question for me to answer - in each community, there are so many different individuals, just like with all people. On the whole though, we were always very positively surprised how kind and open people were. Really just a very few times, someone was not happy about us as for instance the "mayor" of a Roma settlement in Northern Greece who was angry that we thought they were Roma. They had decided to call their community "Muslim" since that would give them better human rights in the Greek society (which has to do with Greek policy against the Roma and other minorities).

Generally, most houses are exceptionally tidy and clean, be it in a Finnish apartment block, a French camping van, or in a Russian shack. Many Manouches in France have totally new vans, using three separate bowls for cleaning the dishes, the staircase, and the rest of the van, and even keep the plastic cover on the seats. Roma have been forced to keep very strict cleanliness rules so as not to fall sick, and many Roma still keep these sometimes already out-of-date rules alive to this day (such as not using things anymore that have fallen on the floor or ground). Of course, living in a muddy street makes it much more difficult to keep the house clean.

The most surprising community (or Roma camp) and why?

There has not been any place, I guess, that has not surprised us somehow. For instance Obukhovo near Saint Petersburg, where Hungarian-speaking Roma from the Ukraine live right in the forest in very simple tents, even during the cold Russian winters. They have been coming to Russia since the collapse of Communism to make a living. It surprised us to see how hard the life was for them. One cannot imagine to be living there. Still, most prefer this to being in the village in the Ukraine, where they have a house, but neither work nor food.

Also, Nea Zoi near Athens was a big surprise. Just outside Athens, some 3000 Roma live on an old garbage dump, totally in the hands of the authorities who do whatever they like to them. About every two months, their barracks are bulldozed by the municipality who in doing so, acts illegally, but since many Roma do not know their rights, and nobody protects them, this crime towards them can continue - all just next to Athens, the so-called cradle of Western civilization.

Maybe the biggest surprise is non-Roma often believe that the Roma like to live this way, and that it is part of their culture... Nobody wants to live like this, and it is not part of any culture, but the result of 500 years of anti-Roma legislation and separation. Another surprising community was a rich community in Russia, who had cleaners in their house, and whose children play chess and the piano. If only the Roma are given the same rights and opportunities as everyone, they manage very well.

In which Roma settlement could you imagine to live?

I could imagine living in Hevesaranyos. We had such a great time there while staying there altogether four months in 2000. It is a very pleasant place.

Do you remember the first time you saw a Rom?

In Denmark where I grew up, there was not a clearly visible Roma population at the time, so the first time I meet a Rom was in 1990 in France where I was bicycling. A Roma family camped next to a lake in the Pyrenees. I did speak some words with them before I continued. I must have met Roma earlier, too, but this was the first time that I realize that these were Roma.

Why did you alternate black and white pictures with colour pictures in "The Roma Journeys"?

I started to work mainly with black and white, and am now mainly doing colour works. I felt that the book needed this difference in language to make a better rhythm, and also, I like the more abstract entrance to each country (the book starts each chapter with a black and white part). The colour works also look even more colourful in combination with the b/w. There is a special poetic aspect that is unique to b/w, which I love very much. Also it has its own language. I would not have taken any of them in colour, so it was always very clear to me which picture should be b/w and which colour.

My sensation is that the colour pictures are more intense than the others: do you agree with me?

I do understand what you mean. The colour works definitely are the backbone, but the black and white works have their own right. I think I feel freer within the colour images today as I also feel some certain timelessness. When looking at old colour paintings from 500 years back, it is as if you enter that time. But old black and white drawings are much less easy to enter.

What kind of reactions do you want to provoke in people who look at your pictures?

I would very much like that people look at this work very open, and look at the pictures, and read the text before coming with some non-reflected judgements that some people is very fast at. They only want to be confirmed in what they think they know, and this prevents them from seeing what it is about. It is not about poor people, but about a very diversified people who are much richer than most of us in what really matters, like human relationships, not being lonely, and having time for the people who are closest to you. I hope that people will experience all the details, and that this will open up to new questions about oneself and raise the interest to meet the Roma people with a respectful attitude, and maybe to get to know each other more.

Usually, meeting a Gypsy on the street or in a shopping centre provokes a sort of embarrassment, discomfort. After your journeys, what kind of emotions do you feel when you meet one of them?

I do not feel any discomfort when meeting Roma in the street or elsewhere, whether we know them or not. Cia speaks many languages, so when meeting Roma from abroad, we usually like to hear how they are and how long they have been there (if they are travelling Roma). Also, we like to hear if people have been good to them. A few times we have had coffee or dinner with Roma families who had come to Finland, and talked about their situation.

You have to remember that the Roma who come from Eastern Europe to the larger cities in the EU are just a tiny part of the Roma population, but unfortunately, for most people they are the only Roma they ever see. We have met them in their homes, been their guests, and know how kind and warm they are, and it is a shame they are pushed out into these living conditions to survive. In fact, what causes us discomfort is the way they are being treated by the majority population and the authorities.

Looking at your pictures, your "lense" doesn't seem to impose any stereotyped vision of the Roma community, but it seems to belong to them without making your presence perceived as a photographer. It seems to me intimate and respectful at the same time: how did you create this kind of contact?

Again, staying with people and getting their trust, and spending lots of time together is one thing. But sometimes, I also just photographed without knowing people for more than some minutes, so it is all about being open and meeting people in an honest way.

Many of your shots recall some renaissance paintings: is there a painter that influenced your art?

I am very interested in the way the painters used the light, how they created very unreal light settings and made it look completely real - like a face for instance, that is lighter than the window which gives the light. That is impossible, of course. I like to work on my pictures in this free way of making images like painters do. I especially like the works of Caspar David Friedrich, many of which are just brilliant.

Which were your aspirations when you were 14 years old?

At the age of 14, I decided to become a photographer. It was while watching my elder brother developing photographs. It was an overwhelming experience to see that you can create your own reality, decide what kind of people, light, weather would be part of that world. I was immediately convinced that this was what I should devote my life to.

A cult movie...

"Andrei Rublev" by Andrei Tarkovsky.