

Finding a place for the Roma in Europe
By Marieke Walsh
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“In the Czech Republic baseball isn’t a sport that is played. And yet they sell baseball bats there. Why? Because its what the skinheads use to beat up the Roma.”

This is one of dozens of stories that Paul St. Clair has heard and he’s hearing more of them, not less. St. Clair helps Roma people file refugee claims when they first move to Toronto. He hears stories like this on a daily basis.

But they are stories, that he says, not enough people know.

St. Clair is among many individuals who work in the Roma community who have heard the stories of discrimination. In Europe and abroad academics, human rights groups, and social workers are working to eradicate the roots of discrimination against the Roma, especially among Europe’s politicians. They believe that only through eradicating this discrimination will social policies aimed at including the Roma meet any success.

But how can you change such a deeply rooted mentality of discrimination? Recently the most widely publicized example of discrimination towards the Roma occurred in September when the European Commission called on France to explain their policies of targeting illegal camps predominantly inhabited by the Roma.

With an estimated population of 10 million people, the Roma are Europe’s largest ethnic minority. While they are historically associated with Eastern European

countries such as Romania and Hungary, large populations of Roma also live in Western European countries.

Historically referred to as Gypsies the Roma have faced centuries of discrimination. During the Holocaust, the Nazis targeted Roma and sent them to death camps where an estimated 500 000 were murdered. Such extreme examples of persecution don't exist today but Roma across Europe still struggle to access basic rights such as healthcare, education and housing.

Discrimination against the Roma persists today because of its historical roots, says Robert Gould, associate director of Carleton University's Center for European Studies.

"It's a very ancient prejudice, and it's a prejudice against a people who look different and who have a different way of life," says Gould. "In Toronto no one notices the 30 000 Roma living there because its so diverse, but in a lilly-white country such as Slovakia, Romania or Bulgaria, they stand out."

This summer's expulsion of thousands of Roma from France shows just how widespread that discrimination is. President Nicolas Sarkozy's government directly targeted the Roma in circulars that called for the demolition of illegal camps and the expulsion of Roma back to Romania and Bulgaria.

The problem was the explicit targeting of Roma minorities over other groups when the camps were being demolished, says Achim Hurrelmann a European politics professor at Carleton University. This targeting breached the European Union's anti-discrimination policies and the free movement directive.

After a very public fight with the European Commission, the EU's executive arm, France changed its policies so that they no longer targeted a specific ethnic group.

Gina Csanyi says what is most concerning to her about the French circulars, is that this case of anti-Roma sentiment doesn't stand-alone. Csanyi is the executive director of the Roma Community Centre in Toronto and herself half Roma. She says Sarkozy is one example in a long line of politicians who use anti-Roma measures to boost their popularity.

In Hungary, Csanyi says Jobbik, a right-wing political party made anti-Roma policies a key part of its election platform and now holds 16 per cent of the popular vote. One of their beliefs, says Csanyi, is that the Roma are inherently criminal and inferior to white Hungarians. They, and the neo-Nazi Hungarian Guard, that is associated with them, are the reason why St. Clair helped fill out immigration papers for an elderly Roma woman last week.

"I had an old lady come into my office from Hungary and when I wrote the refugee claim, it turned out not that much happened to her, you know in comparison to most other Roma. And so I asked her 'why are you coming?' And she said 'it looks like Hitler's coming back.'"

Gould says the comparison to the Nazis is extreme, but doesn't disagree that violence against Roma persists. What he finds alarming is that this violence continues even after joining the EU where one of the institution's core principles is inclusion and non-discrimination.

The historical roots is one of two factors that Gould attributes to the current discrimination, the other is that the dominant ethnic groups in Eastern European countries don't believe that the Roma belong. Even in countries where the Roma have lived for centuries they are still seen as aliens, says Gould. In some countries people believe that "the Roma are an inferior people."

Olivia Chemedi knows that mentality. She lives in Toronto, but grew up in Romania. As a child she says she was taught to avoid the Roma. "The general perception is that gypsies are bad," says Chemedi, "they're second class citizens."

Living in Canada has softened some of her more negative perceptions of the Roma, says Chemedi. But she says she still can't shake the prejudices she was taught and she says people living in Romania have not changed at all.

"We believe that gypsies have tarnished our reputation as Romanians," says Chemedi. "France doesn't want them but we don't want them either."

Changing these attitudes is what's most important says Nele Meyer, the executive officer responsible for Roma issues at Amnesty International's European office. Her organization is working on a number of initiatives to improve access to education and housing for Roma in Eastern Europe, but Meyer says they aren't having as much impact as they could.

"The current situation is a problem of attitude rather than a problem of money," says Meyer. "As long as high-level politicians can express anti-Gypsyism without being held accountable by their own population or by fellow politicians things won't move forward."

Even if European politicians make a commitment to change political attitudes, Csanyi says it will take generations before real, ground level changes are noticed. Csanyi has gone back to Hungary a number of times to help with research projects and monitor elections. But she counts herself lucky that she was born and raised in Canada.

“My experience, when I’m in Hungary, is that I can’t wait to come back to Canada, where I don’t have to deal with the cloud of hate and disgust.”