



# IT'S ABOUT US

20 ANSWERS TO THE QUESTION:  
"WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE WHEN YOU GROW UP?"



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“What do you want to be when you grow up?”



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**Dear readers,**

I believe this book can be a good source of inspiration for all the children in Romania as well as for the adults who hope their dreams will come true. I am glad that we succeeded to show, through this book, so many Roma success stories and so many models to be followed. For all of us these are examples of ambition, perseverance, hard work and accomplished dreams. I am confident that, by reading this book, you will find out and learn a lot of things about those who could be your neighbours, colleagues and friends. I wish you a pleasant reading.

**Edmond McLoughney**  
UNICEF Romania Representative



## **What do you want to be when you grow up?**

I think each one of us had to answer this question at least a thousand times. And the answers, at least in the early years of our childhood, would be suggested by our parents who were either “models” that we wished to copy (I remember talking with my friends and vividly debating whose father was “cooler”) or were trying to guide our steps to paths that would allow us to “do more than they could do”. As the years have passed some of us have changed our initial choices based on what we perceived to be the measure of success as a neighbor, an older friend, a teacher or simply SOMEBODY has entered our lives and made us want something else. Some of us succeeded in becoming what we were dreaming to be when we were young, some are still searching, as Dorothy of The Wizard of Oz, for the reward at the end of the yellow brick road. What I've noticed many times, during the 13 years of intense work within the Roma community, is that these children of ours – and now I'm talking about the Roma children – don't dare to dream. More serious is the fact that on too many cases even those with defined dreams – who want to become lawyers, doctors, artists or police officers (these are the usual choices of children regardless of ethnicity) – are either confronted with realities such as poverty, limited access to education, segregation in schools, discrimination etc., that make them give up on their dream, or get caught up in self-marginalization mechanisms, long carried and internalized stigma like “I don't need education as I'm not going to be a doctor anyway” or “who has ever seen a Gypsy priest”. The following collection of life stories, which I hope you'll read with the same emotion that we experienced while listening to them and writing them down, is trying to provide a collection of such SOMEBODIES we mentioned before to those children who don't trust their own strength enough as to be sure they can one day become what they want to be. Our characters – even if they are not Pirandellian – are in search of some young people who will find themselves in their stories and overcome material needs, discrimination and lack of support from those around them by a drive to succeed at least equal to the one we admire in the 20 actors in this book. Our goal is not, by any means, to show exceptions in the Roma world. Those who were willing to share their life story with the readers of this book are just some of the Roma who are extremely well included in the society and proud to be Roma. We call



them invisible Roma, since they are invisible both for the large majority of the Romanian society as well as for those who are confronted with the same issues they were facing just a few years ago, whether it's poverty or discrimination – or, most often, both. The advice that our endeavor presents the reader with, whether it's a Roma or Romanian child, teacher, activist or *an invisible person*, is to dare to hope that what they want to be when they grow up may come true. The boldness comes with the courage to fight any limits, whether from the outside or self-imposed, that stand between the reality you live in and the reward of getting where you dream to. And when you get there encourage others to discover that we can overcome the limits we think we have if we make the right choices, if we demand to be seen as we really are and, especially, if the ambition we show and the hard work we put in making up for the shortcomings of any kind we might feel!

**Gelu Duminică**

Executive Manager

"Impreuna" Community Development Agency

## **The story of the people around you is also your story**

The project “What do you want to be when you grow up?” first came to life out of the preoccupation of some of our younger colleagues who work with Roma teenagers and children to provide them with some positive models. These young Roma, brought up in a society in which not only the socio-economic realities but also the numerous stereotypes about the Roma drastically limit their expectations regarding their future, sometimes have a hard time finding the motivation to overcome these conjugated obstacles and to believe that the few encouragements they receive are anything but fairy tales. That’s exactly why we chose to present the life stories of some Roma that we first called “successful”, and that we soon discovered were about ordinary people, with jobs, families, educated, who are invisible for the majority around them (a third of which majority state they don’t want to have a Roma neighbor) but also for the young people of the same ethnicity. Therefore we called them “invisible Roma”. This project is part of the attempt to provoke the Romanian public opinion to see the Roma beyond prejudices that was initiated in 2009 by the “Impreuna” Agency. This time, through the collaboration with Unicef, we address mainly the Roma youth, whom we wish the present life stories will give a motivation to continue their education that is stronger than the limitations they are facing, many times, just because they are of Roma ethnicity. A motivation to dream of what they will be when they grow up. We can’t stress enough the importance of role models for the educational, professional and also, in a broader way, social path for the youth; those who are reading this book will have many occasions to remember this truth and to dedicate a thought to their own models, present or past. In a country and a historical moment where examples of “good practices” are frequently ignored or put to silence to make way for what is insistently denounced as false models, the need for benchmarks is not specific to the Roma population or to the young generation. We don’t use the term “benchmark” in its restrictive, elitist meaning, but in a minor registry, where empathy, acknowledgement and modeling rather than constraint play a central part. That’s why the characters of this book are very diverse: Daniela Vaduva was born and is now living in a “traditional” community, wears a necklace of gold coins and says she’s never been discriminated against; Roxana Marin and Marian Ursan are the type of “cool” teachers who fascinate their students and who have an intensely reflexive speech; Oana Parnica wears a leather jacket and becomes

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confrontational when facing racist declarations; Claudia Bulata is childish and studious, proud to be a “smart Gypsy”; Dezideriu Gergely masters the human rights’ activist’s speech, pairing it with a nonchalant attitude towards his own (double!) ethnic belonging; Mioara Ganea is a young, shy school teacher who never hesitated when facing all sort of hardships; Mădălin Mandin, the actor, shares with a smile on his face the discrimination episodes he’s been through; George Rădulescu, former fashion designer and top-model, and currently a sociologist, started his journey determined to prove wrong the stereotype “no one has ever seen a Gypsy priest”; Flori Ancuța Gheorghe is 19 years old and has just graduated from the canto high school; Sorin Sandu, the actor, concerned about the world his daughter will live in, dreams about a Roma Theater; Daniel Ganga, the priest, finds the courage and inspiration to remind the racist teacher that he’s actually a good person, despite his offensive speech; Georgiana Gogor comes from a poor family and yet today she’s a young elegant lawyer grateful for her parents’ great sacrifices to keep her in school; Ion Sandu, a history teacher, talks about the necessity for a consciousness of ethnic belonging and for learning the merged history of Roma and Romanians; George Lacatus, a journalist, talks about his ambition of being more than a brick maker as his kind were, and about the “stupidity” of being racist; Marian Duminica, a border police officer, is “invisible” even for some of his colleagues with whom he shares the same life boat during storms; Luis Turcitu, a student in Journalism, has dedicated himself to poor Roma communities during his study years; Aurelia Dulgheru and Corina Stanciu, medical students, want to change the treatment the Roma patients often get in hospitals; Nicu Ion Stoica, the jurist, now pursuing his second university degree, tells his stories in a manner full of reflections that often hit the nail in the head.

This book has changed many times during the months of its making: it changed, in several occasions, its shape, its characters, its audience and its writing interval. There is, though, one thing that not only has not changed, but even gained in amplitude after each interview – its message: we all stand to gain if we see the people around us for what they are. Back when we first conceived of the project, our intention was to issue an anthropologic research report that would analyze, using the life stories method, the paths of those who escape the daily prejudice patterns concerning the Roma. A proper research report: theory, methodology, results, conclusions, bibliography. But it just so happened that, as we started to “collect the data” – consisting of meetings and discussions, which were often long and very emotionally charged, with the “respondents” or the “subjects” – our initial plan got a bit sidetracked: those

interviewed became much more human than mere “respondents” or “subjects”. Collecting the data became some sort of an initiation path in which our own intense feelings after each interview started to slowly but surely hijack the idea of a simple research. The narrative research method is not easily theoretically defined, nor could it be. All of those who have used it and based their writings on it (Atkinson, 2006; Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Liebllich, Rivka and Tamar, 2006) emphasize its versatility and adaptability. An instrument of qualitative and interpretative sociology at first, used especially within by symbolic interactionists, the narrative research method is applicable not only to sociology and anthropology, but also to psychology, literature, or journalism. As to its scientific applicability, this method is traditionally associated with the Chicago School. Gender studies were among the first sociological fields that used the lives of “ordinary” people as worthy of scientific attention. In 1984, as Bertaux and Kohli were concluding about the narrative research in various sociological research fields, they noted that a clear methodology is not to be expected to emerge any time soon; furthermore, its most relevant aspect is not the methodological debate, but the possibility to renew the perspective on older and newer themes and the “constraint” it sets for the researcher to explore various levels of the social life using the means of his/her own subjectivity. For us, this “constraint” turned into an immeasurable freedom: the freedom to engage directly, in an unmediated matter, with the stories to which we have listened, and to allow ourselves to be touched by them instead of thinking about interpretation guidelines.

Obviously, from a scientific point of view, this is a “weak” position, but it became clear from the first interview that this would be the most suitable for our project. On the one hand, this is because it allows those to whom we have talked to tell their own story in the pages of this book, and even though the analysis would have been an attractive option, true storytelling remained the most impacting choice. On the other hand, this manner of engagement allowed us to render, be it clumsily and with digressions, the intensity and variety of feelings we’ve had during each interview, without having to tame them down to fit a certain paradigm.

In fact, Gelu Duminica suggested that we keep a “field diary” of this experience. This proposal might sound redundant: what use is there for a diary if the entire research is based on taped discussions? However, after the first interviews we soon came to understand that the “field” was us. This finding reminded us of one of our favorite “motivational” quotes in the anthropology field, issued by Clifford Geertz: “An anthropologist’s work tends, no matter what its

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ostensible subject, to be but an expression of his research experience or, more accurately, of what his research experience has done to him” (Geertz, 1971)<sup>1</sup>.

Thus the stories caught us in a game of deconstructing stereotypes and prejudices, but also in a game of introspection – an introspection mirroring that undergone by our main characters. The game of mirrored visions – of “normal” Roma and of Romanians who might be “abnormal” for most has revealed unsuspected tensions we wanted to emphasize. We went back to times when we, at a certain moment, were confronted with the same stereotypes and prejudices with regard to Roma and, either as a spectator, teacher or even outraged by a profoundly unjust thinking we reacted – or we chose, consciously or not, not to. We were confronted with our own stereotypes and own impulses to objectify what it means to be Roma, especially when some of the people we were interviewing returned the question and we discovered we didn’t know what to answer when they asked us what it means to be Romanian. We have acknowledged our weaknesses, but also the moments of edginess we had during the interviews, anticipating “high rating” stories, highlighting emotional episodes. We have allowed ourselves to take a plunge into a righteous path blind to the stand of the potential readers of the stories. At other times we curbed our enthusiasm and limited to rising question marks, to pointing out the incoherencies of those who think in black and white, simplify, reduce and create stereotypes.

It is impossible to render here all the talks and reflections we have had with regard to this material, on our own or together. You will see many of them in the following pages. It suffices to say, for now, that out of them, but especially out of the extraordinary stories of these Roma/ ordinary people the idea of a corpus of life stories emerged, punctuated by short narrative interventions which reenact a constant dialogue between subjectivities. On the one hand, the life stories, tributary to the style of each narrator – dry and factual sometimes, or overflowed with reflections about certain experiences at other times – constitute the musical score of the soloists, which we wanted to emphasize first of all. On the other hand, our own reflections, a metanarrative voice accompanying the soloists’ main tune without pretending to be able to sing their scores as well and as authentically as they do. On the one hand, the life stories of “normal” Roma, narrated with no hard feelings, no matter how revolting they might seem at times, on the other hand our reflections on the “abnormal”, prejudiced thinking which made them possible. Prejudices which

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<sup>1</sup> Clifford Geertz, *Islam Observed*, University of Chicago Press, 1971.

our characters deconstruct one by one, either anecdotally or in a reflexive manner. Thereby “What do you want to be when you grow up?” remained the key question of this project, even if sometimes it became “How do you want the world of your children to look like?” or “How was this even possible?”. Most of the people dealing with stories, regardless of their occupational field, whether they come from literature, sociology, linguistics or psychology, talk about “the power of stories”. One of the ideas which motivated us in this project was a Bulgarian writer’s answer to the question *“What can we, as writers or researchers, do so that the violence against the Roma that took place in Bulgaria last autumn won’t happen again?”* „Tell the stories of these people” went his answer; *“people won’t kill other people whose life stories they know”*. And then maybe people won’t despise, discriminate, segregate or reject them as neighbors, friends, colleagues or pupils. In this book we told the stories of 20 of them, and their families: brothers, sisters, parents, cousins, grandchildren and children. But there are far more invisible Roma. It’s enough to look at them and see them the way they are. Our initiative can be read as an invitation to reflect on the perceptions the Romanian society has about the Roma, enduring perceptions that are perpetuated by an often irresponsible press and by a society which is not used to the practice of a respect-based democracy.

It is an invitation not only to a cognitive exercise to understand social realities beyond stereotypes, but also to an exercise of empathy for humans made of flesh and blood, beyond the abstract and anonymous representation of an ethnic group which is still severely stigmatized.

**Ana Chirițoiu, Ana Ivasiuc**

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George Lăcătuș, journalist,  
Mădălin Mandin, actor,  
Roxana Marin, English teacher,  
Lefter Nicușor, jurist,  
Oana Parnică, social worker,  
George Rădulescu, sociologist,  
Sorin Sandu, actor,  
Corina Stanciu, student of the Faculty of Medicine,  
Nicu Ion Stoica, jurist,  
Ion Stoica, history teacher, school inspector,  
Luis Turcitu, Journalism student,  
Marian Ursan, sociologist,  
Daniela Văduva, medical nurse

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Also, our thanks go to UNICEF Romania who supported this project and gave us their trust every time we suggested changes of the initial idea.

“Impreuna” Community Development Agency

*„My father’s biggest wish was to see me wear a doctor’s coat”*

**Daniela Văduva**

40 years old, medical nurse, Târgu-Jiu

The past months I reconnected, through Skype, after many years, with my former desk classmate from high school and secondary school who’s been out of the country for some time now. In reply to the traditional “so, how have you been?”, whereupon people expect you cram, briefly and concisely, several years of your life, I told her, among other things, that I’m working for an NGO that deals with the Roma. She seemed a bit thrown off her balance – or maybe it was just the poor connection between Bucharest and New York. Oh, but I hope you’re sitting at a desk and you don’t have to go to the Gypsies’ homes, she hesitantly expressed her concern. It was my turn to pause. From this point onwards the enthusiasm of the virtual reconnection gradually diminished; the things that separate us slowly made their way into our dialogue, dense and harder to ignore – as I was explaining I was very well received every time I went to the Gypsies’ homes I felt it’s easier for her to doubt me than the stereotypes she grew up with. Our dialogue with pauses and distances reminded me of the visits we’ve made to Daniela Vaduva’s home. Before meeting her I was told I’ll be going to a traditional community and I’ll be talking to a traditional Gypsy woman. I spent all the way to Targu-Jiu, in the car with Geraldine, the volunteer photographer of the project, feeling like a character from a road trip movie. Except the action was not based in the 60’s America but half a century later, in Romania where walls reminding of ethnic segregation are still erected. I was thinking of how, later, I’ll be telling people of how I entered a traditional Roma community. The temptation for outlandishness grew even more when I actually met Daniela, in a long skirt, wearing a golden coins necklace, at her house – a big house, where the most ample space is the living room, with leather couches. A stairway with aluminum railing goes up to the bedrooms; on the two storey high wall behind the room there is a painted idyllic scene with reindeers at a spring or something along those lines. For the first seconds I spent in the house, still drunk with the adventurous feel of the expedition into the traditional community, I was almost



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projecting myself in one of the tens of Roma Interiors Carlo Gianferro photographed in his famous album. We sat on one of the couches; before I pulled out my tape recorder and Geraldine her camera, Daniela set the table for us with the help of Cristina, her youngest daughter. Nelu Pavel, Daniela's husband, and her mother joined us. On the TV a "manele"<sup>2</sup> music channel was playing in the background, but I noticed I was the only one paying attention to it. Nelu is a local counselor; he told us about some of the projects he's been running in the community. Daniela didn't speak much. Daniela's mother and Cristina were smiling at us and inviting us to eat. I don't know exactly when the anticipation of outlandishness gave way to the feeling that we're in a regular visit. Maybe it was when I realized that some family friends have a house with a similar living room, also large, also with couches and sandstone floor tiles, or that the idyllic scenes with reindeer were familiar before the live visit of Roma Interiors from numerous acquaintances on whose walls hang the famous carpets picturing similar scenes. After ensuring that we're not missing anything, Daniela sat on a chair and told us her life, with minimal interventions from us or the others:

*I was born on September, 13<sup>th</sup> 1971 in Targu-Jiu. I can say I come from one of the most beautiful families there are. My parents live close to me, down the street, actually my mother does, because my father is gone, God rest his soul. I have four more siblings besides me, but I am the oldest of the siblings so I raised my brothers because, not only with us, in the Roma community, as this happens everywhere, the girls who are first born carry this "burden" on their shoulders – to raise their brothers. It wasn't hard for me to raise them because we are and always have been a close family, we care a lot about each other, we are, as the saying goes, "one for all and all for one". And when there's understanding and a good soul in the family everything goes smoothly, we really don't have problems between brothers or relatives, everything has always been as it should be. I grew up in Targu-Jiu and I went to the "Saint Nicholas" No 6. School It wasn't a problem for me to integrate in a majority class, because, honestly, back then it wasn't an issue if you were Roma or Romanian. Maybe the fact that I never felt that depreciation that many children talk about makes me be a bit subjective. Because I never felt it, that's*

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<sup>2</sup> Manele is a Romanian music style with Turkish and Balkanic influences, generally (and wrongly) associated with the Roma.

*the truth. I was never called a "Gypsy" in school, nobody pushed me aside on the ethnic criterion, nobody made me sit at the last desk because I was of Roma ethnicity – if I ever sat at the last desk I did so because I wanted to – I was never rejected by my peers, on the contrary, most of my colleagues loved me and cared about me and respected me also. With the teachers I never had any altercations, not by far, not during the elementary school, not during high school and not in the faculty either. I didn't have any problems anywhere, maybe also because, besides being a woman, I was a very serious, responsible person.*

Daniela says this last phrase on an even voice, without emphasizing it, but for me it sounds strange. What does an adolescence look like when lived like this, among delimitations you can hardly avoid to internalize, with the pressure to not make any mistakes, to be "X" times better, to be serious because otherwise you would get an explanation you really don't want to hear: "You didn't learn your lesson/ you missed school/ you argued with your classmate because you are a Gypsy"? But Daniela shows me from the very first words that, through a discrete revolution, she managed to go far beyond the role that her ethnicity and gender prescribed for her in the society.

*I wasn't the first, nor the last in my class. My grades were satisfactory. My mother would sometimes argue with me, she would say: "Laugh your school off! You'll be a teacher! You stay home more often 'cause we have things to do." She had to leave home every day to make money, as she could not stay and forget her children – you can imagine, we were five, there was need for tidiness...in the evenings, when my mother would come home, she'd take over the household chores and I would finally get to my homework.*

Hanging on the walls of the living room there are two pictures of Daniela at the end of her teenage years: nothing seems to differentiate her from other black and white images from the same period, the late 80s, picturing high school girls wearing white ribbons over the slightly scroungy hair and with that teenage gaze in which determination and ingenuity mix in various doses. In another picture, an 18 year old Daniela wearing a leather jacket and white shirt, with pointy lapels, this time with no ribbon, looks at us even more determined. At that time Daniela had already been married for two years.

## What do you want to be when you grow up?

*At the end of my 10<sup>th</sup> grade my parents decided it was time for me to get married. It was a fixed marriage, my husband and I had never met, we hadn't even spoken for a second before he came to ask for my hand in marriage. The only thing I asked my father to do when he decided to marry me off was to allow me to finish my studies, at least high school. As he had a big soul and a really, really healthy thinking, he agreed with me and not only that he agreed, he even imposed it. My father's biggest wish was to see me in a white lab coat...he would tell me to be a doctor, that was his saying. He would always push us, he would always say: "Children, go to school!", "Children, study your books! That's the future, you won't do anything anymore with the horse and carriage". My father did all the trades on the face of the earth. He had horses, he had cows, he travelled with the carriage, he traded, he opened a shop, he opened a restaurant, he had a donut shop, he had a juice factory, so he did everything that was possible from a commercial perspective. But he never worked for himself; he worked for his children. His wish was to build each child a house, so that two sisters in law won't share a yard, so there won't be conflicts between brothers or talks, regardless of how well they get along. My father was a man with extraordinary healthy, solid principles. He has taught us to work, he has taught us to trade, he has taught us to stand on our own two feet without ever going to strangers for help. My daddy had four years of school and at a later date he finished nine years at low attendance so he would get his functioning authorization. But he had a mind...if he were to sit at a table with an accountant, my daddy would do the math in his head faster than the accountant would with the computer. And that's why he pushed us toward school.*

On the living room wall there's the portrait of Daniela's father next to a picture of both her parents. Plus a picture of Daniela's husband and another one with her oldest daughter, recently married and a law student.

*Being married has not stopped me from finishing high school, even though, after getting married, I had my share of hardships: I had to take care of the house, I had to take care of my husband, I also had my brothers. And on top of all that there was the school that I had to finish and I had to finish it well, because I didn't want to be left behind, as the saying goes. I never liked to be last. I suffered a lot*

*back then because I knew I didn't manage to do everything. I attended regularly the XI and XII grades. In the XII grade I was already pregnant, a pregnancy I didn't succeed to carry to term, because it was during the Ceausescu era and I had to hide a lot from the teachers, so they don't see, don't find out, so I would not be expelled. And then I would wrap myself, compress myself so they don't notice and that was probably one of the reasons that I lost the baby.*

Daniela is talking in a detached and coherent manner, with no tone that would demand compassion. Her story only wants to picture an entrepreneurial and independent spirit, but it actually tells the tale of someone who never even thought of being defeated by life. After graduating from high school, as the revolution liberalized the trade, Daniela and her husband started a business with second-hand merchandise. And their first daughter, Denisa, was born.

*After I graduated from high school, of course I didn't stay home. Back then the free trade was liberalized and then I decided together with my husband that we needed to do something, because we couldn't live off his salary alone. He was already working then, the year I married him, he had already finished his hair cutting school and got employed, he was working as a barber. We opened a small business, as most young people were doing in those times, because the law was quite permissive, the free trade had been liberalized, you could find merchandise both in the country and abroad. I for one didn't leave the country, because I didn't have the courage to leave home for too long, I had to be around my family at all times. I would bring jeans, all sorts of merchandise, trinkets. We went on for several years with this business, we were doing well during that time. Denisa arrived in the meantime...after I gave birth, honestly, I didn't stay home with Denisa in my arms...two or three months, after which I took her in my arm, in the stroller, and I would go with her. I would take her to the market, stayed with her at the business, as the saying goes. I wasn't staying home, because that's how I was used to, that's how I was taught, to not stay and wait around for anybody, make my own money. That's how my parents taught me, that's how I want to be my entire life and my children will probably do the same. After Denisa, one year and a half later, Cristina, our second girl was born. After she was born I remember there was a short period of time when*

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*I stayed at home, because she was very small, after which I started on my way again. By then I started to reconcile my chores, because my brothers were grown up and one of them, the middle one, would sit a lot with her, enjoyed staying with her. I had a catchphrase, I'd say to him: "if you babysit Cristina today, I'll buy anything you want, I'll do anything you want". In the meantime, I forgot to tell you, I had finished taking hairdressing classes at the Culture House. And I would lie to my brother that I would perm his hair, as he was small, 7-8 years old. And that was what he wanted, he was 7 then. And he was so happy because I was promising to perm his hair, of course he was babysitting. After this period, I remember I got hired at a barbershop and I was working with Nelu, my husband, on one chair. After that I moved to a hair parlor, after one year. I worked there for about two years. I didn't have any issues about being discriminated here either. In fact, during my entire forty years long lifetime, I am talking very seriously, I have never had a single moment of discrimination. I never felt this. At least no one manifested in front of me. If they had this in their souls, it's their business. But I've never felt it. And I've always worked among the majority.*

*There was a time, for a few years when I dealt in second-hand merchandise and, the same, there were people coming, who worked in public institutions and when they got to my table, to my booth, I would talk to them so well that everybody appreciated me, so there was no issue for anybody. From this point of view I really never encountered any discrimination problems. After I've worked for a year, maybe more than a year, in hairdressing, I gave up, because the money was so little, and I wanted something else. And the commerce was not going so well either. And then I decided...actually, not then, because in my mind I was thinking for a long time that I want to do something else besides high school. And my father would always say: "Honey, go further, because you have the head for it." In '99 Nelu and I have decided that I start the social worker training. We found out that in our town, at the Culture House, there was a three years course for social workers and medical nurses. In '99 in Iasi, Moldova, I completed the health mediator training. The training was provided by Romani CRISS in partnership with the Ministry of Health. I and two other girls in Gorj county were selected and we went to Iasi to take the classes.*

I instinctively look towards Nelu, Daniela's husband, who hasn't intervened in the discussion but only listened. He's smiling vaguely, looking through the window while he's listening with me to the end of the story:

*In those times for us, the Gypsies, it was a problem if a woman went to train, to sleep in a hotel. People would tell my husband that, if they were in his place, they wouldn't allow it. He would answer that a woman is not supposed to be locked in a house...instead of guarding a woman you'd rather guard a flock of sheep. "Rather than having a stupid wife..." he would say, "I'd better have a smart one, so I can talk to her, take her out in society..." I am the first Gypsy woman in the community to finish high school. After that the minds of other people also opened, when I started to work in the medical office, and they saw that actually they were bringing their problems, either with children, an old man, their mother or their father and call for my services.*

After the training in Iasi, Daniela got hired at the Targu-Jiu Public Health Department. She was in the first generation of health mediators in the county and she worked there for a year and a half. When she felt, again, that she hadn't found her place yet.

*After a year and a half with the Public Health Department I reached the conclusion that I had to do something else, more than being a simple health mediator. Both for me and for the community. For me in the first place.*

Wanting to do something else, Daniela enrolled in other classes, this time for medical nurse, as she continued to work to pay off her school. And here she discovered that it was what she had wanted from the beginning.

*On that moment I saw that it was exactly what I had wanted to do. I enjoyed learning this trade, I enjoyed to practice in the hospital – this is what I've started with the first time – the practice in the hospital has pushed me, made me want to learn even more. I would go to school every day. And I've graduated this three years school with an average grade of 9.90.*

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Daniela needs to go to the medical office where she works. The rest of the story, about how after Daniela graduated from the sanitary school they submitted a project to open a medical center in the community, is finished off by Nicu Pavel. I am interested in what he's saying, but my mind lingers with the "feminine half of the story", with her own personal revolutions, done without noise, but consistently. After a while, we're also heading towards the medical center, where we find Daniela working. She's writing prescriptions, she's injecting and consulting patients.

Under her white lab coat the same long skirt is showing, and she's wearing the same golden coins necklace that bedazzled me when I first saw it. Now, after several hours of stories, it doesn't seem as outlandish as it did in the morning, when we arrived at Daniela's house. But then I didn't know that the road trip we embarked on was not a trip into a traditional community but one through our own fantasies. In fact, this morning I was in a completely different movie than I am right now, on my way back from Targu-Jiu.

*“People don’t believe that I am Roma. But I tell them  
I am **very** Roma”*

**Marian Ursan,**

32 years old, sociologist, Bucharest

I’ve never seen Marian. As I get to the meeting spot – the Bucharest Faculty of Sociology – I start to look for him as you’re looking for someone you’ve never seen before: inquiringly looking at the faces of those approaching, trying not to seem too insistent, while you’re comparing the faces of people going by to the face you’ve imagined. I realize that the profile I’ve imagined has darker skin and I feel ashamed. I know that much: skin colour doesn’t mean anything, I have Roma friends with fair skin, like mine. And still, my mind worked on its own on a stereotype image I thought I was protected from. I now remember a gallery in New York on prejudices where there were two doors: above one of them it was written “Entrance for people with prejudice” and above the other “Entrance for people without prejudice. The second door was locked: no one is without prejudice. Ok, I say to myself, it’s not that bad, after all I know very well that I don’t associate darker skin to inferiority, criminality or whatever other judgment of value. However, I’m scared of opening Pandora’s box to find out whatever stereotypes my mind is unaware of. And to think that I’m free of stereotypes! I am looking towards the entrance. A young man with shaved head and darker skin is climbing up the stairs. He’s looking towards us, sees the photographic equipment and signals we’ve found the person we were looking for. It’s him. He has a wide smile on his face. Let’s go. We enter a classroom, sit on the first row, our voices have a metallic sound in the empty room, but the atmosphere quickly warms up, like in a microwave oven where the speed of particles is accelerating.

*I am from near Bucharest, from Pantelimon commune and from such a pretty street and I am not afraid to say I am Gypsy. It was obvious that things were like that, I assumed it, always. I knew I was Gypsy. I stayed there until the third grade, in the fourth grade I moved to Bucharest. I went to school there, on Miorita street, I started at the new school, after that I went to the old school, but actually the old*



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*school is now the new school that was demolished and rebuilt, indeed. I was in the third grade, class E. With Miss Caraiciu Aneta, the school teacher. I knew her very well because my sister had her as a teacher, too. My sister is four years older than me. Back then there were classes on Saturday and that was exactly when we'd want to go to Cernica, at the movies, at the last stop of 14 tram line and the only one who was there was my sister and we had to go there to talk, to argue and I would go with my mother and I would ask her nicely to give my sister a pass and I, well, I would go too, to see the children at their desks and I liked the teacher a lot, I liked her a lot. And then, when I started school in the first grade, I realized I was not assigned to Miss Caraiciu Aneta, and I went there, I was with my mother and she told me "Ursan Marian, third desk, the row next to the wall", I sat next to a girl, she was wearing glasses, and the moment I sat next to her I started crying; I cried really hard and I went to talk to the teacher with my mother: "But, Marian, what happened?" and at some point my mother told her "Lady, what he actually wants...he wants to be somewhere else, with another teacher". And this lady asked me, I think that was her first generation of children she was teaching, the first time I made a woman cry, she looked at me and said: "Marian, don't you want to be in my class?" and I said "Nooo" and she started crying and she said "Lady, take him where he wants to go, he'll get sick here, take him where he wants". Yes, the first time I made a woman cry. I also wrote it on my blog. I remembered on September, 15<sup>th</sup>, 'cause on September, 15<sup>th</sup> I wrote it. Because, basically, September 15<sup>th</sup> is the start of the school and I realized that from then and until now I went to school every fall.*

I am counting the years: 32 minus 7: 25 years of schooling. It's above the national average, by far. I'm thinking of how good it would be if, from time to time, a Roma with 25 years of schooling would get to be on the front page of the newspapers, as a reason for national pride, as an example, as a role model. It's just that a Roma with 25 years of school doesn't really stand a chance to be in the papers: this sort of things doesn't score many rating points. It might be impressive, but not as much as Roma with palaces or Roma beggars in whatever European capital. I find myself making a bigger fuss about Marian's years of school than he does. He's not stuck-up, he doesn't make it a big deal, and he brings me right back to the context he started from.

*The Pantelimon commune... although it was so close to Bucharest it always seemed so little developed and left behind, I mean we would literally stick to the fences whenever a car would pass our street "Aaaah, a car is passing by!" you know? And come on! It's only a few miles away from Bucharest, the pace was so slow. After that, when I moved to Bucharest, I had a shock because here there were other standards. I came to Bucharest on my fourth grade and it was a shock, because, although it was so close to Bucharest, it seemed so far away. We moved here to Bucharest... wow, it was a shock, I couldn't sleep, I would hear the water thingies, the water pipes, the elevator, I had to stay...I didn't leave the house for about three months. After that I remember my eyes were hurting from the outside light when I went outside. Yes, it was really hard. Yes, and if I wanted to go out I would need to put my shoes on, it seemed so strange; well, the transition was pretty slow because I practically knew we were going to move there a year before and my granny kept telling me when she was arguing with us: "You'll have your key tied around your neck there", you know? Very uncool in Bucharest, to have your key around your neck that is; and who do I know there, who? Yeah, it was different. People were supposed to be more civilized here, more...they would greet you, I don't know. I moved to Bucharest with my mom and my two sisters, because, whatever, it was this temptation to move to Bucharest that meant opportunities. We are in fact from Calarasi and my great-grandfather asked my grandfather to promise to take my mother to Bucharest, he asked him to promise this, because my mother was quite sensitive, she didn't fit in that place. Not by far, ever since she was a girl she didn't fit in that place and besides that it also was a matter of pride to have your children in Bucharest; and that was pretty much our passing through Pantelimon, a part of the family stayed there. The revolution caught me right there, at my grandma's, yeah, the revolution rocked there. I mean on this street, at the end of the earth, I went to check it out and I got up to see if any terrorists would pass by and my folks said, "Nooo, come here", the neighbors were also saying it, it was crazy but not just for them, everybody was convinced that on that dusty road, where there was no water, no sewerage, no anything, the terrorists would come shoot the people who were just hanging around. If the adults were saying that, can you imagine what we were thinking?*

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I remember well the hysteria back then. When they said on tv that terrorists were coming and shooting people in their homes, my mother turned off the lights, barricaded the doors and windows and locked me in a closet. In a small province town where nothing interesting ever happened. I can't not associate the hysteria back then to other contemporary hysteria. With the hysteria that the Roma are to blame for all of our banes. It's their fault if we were not allowed in the Schengen area. It's their fault if our image abroad is ruined. And they will be ten times more numerous than the Romanians and they will come hit us all in the head. I remember a woman from Bucharest I met some time ago who was saying she didn't feel safe in Bucharest. "Why?" I asked, surprised. "Because there are a lot of Gypsies." She didn't know any of them, nothing ever happened to her. I might add a lot here, about how all sorts of prejudices form in our heads with every article about not just any criminal, but a "Gypsy". I could analyze, make sociological digressions galore, but I return to Marian and to how he felt in Bucharest.

*Man, and I hated Bucharest, the school that is, it's obvious it was a lot different. Back there I think they would just make everyone pass to the next grade. Here they would also make you pass to the next grade, but they would sort of discipline you. I graduated the eighth grade and I was wondering what to do with my life and, whatever, I tried to go to school and it didn't work out and I ended up somewhere else and it sucked, it upset me. Man, I wanted to be a mechanic, actually at first I wanted to be a train thingy, a train mechanic. Yeah, I really liked trains. After that I started to like cars and then I was the little criminal...I almost went to the juvenile correction school, I got caught by the Police, I was driving on the boulevard and I was in the seventh grade. Was I not supposed to say that? Yeah, man, and the Police took me, I was with an uncle of mine and it was my birthday and I told him "Will you give me the car on my birthday?" and he said "What, you know how to drive?" and this and that. And I told him "Dude, listen, give me the car". Now I think I was a bit privileged, my dad died when I was really young, I practically don't remember him. This means I was about one year old, one year and two-three months, and the family tried to be really nice and compensate for all sorts of hardships ad then I was more likely to drive the car and he told me "Let's teach you how to drive". I said "No, I already know how to drive" and he said "How come you know how to drive?" I said "I looked at the buses and I saw how the drivers are*

*doing it” and I put together a lot of stuff, at least in theory I knew how to drive. I would stand behind the driver and concentrate, get it? I would concentrate to see what was happening there. And I learned how to drive and I drove off, it’s just that when the Police pulled me over I didn’t know how to stop. The police pulled us over, I mean I stopped the car, I blocked the clutch and the breaks, I put it in neutral and when the policeman came over and he saw me he said: “Oh, this ain’t right, stop it.” And I say “How the hell do I stop?”. I missed that part because I never went to the end of the line and I didn’t know how to stop the car and I said “and what do I have to do now? so if I lift, if I get off, I mean if I lift my feet from the pedals the car must leave, it’s not good. What do I do? And he got off and he went here in the parking lot and he said “Get off” and I said “I don’t know how to stop”, “turn the key!”. After that the police took us, they made me write a statement and I cried as I was writing the statement about how I, the undersigned, and what I’ve done...whatever, I got out of it ok. But I was the neighborhood hero when they saw me coming... I had my minutes of fame...*

“Was I not supposed to say that?” Marian asks. I hurry to nod yes, there’s no problem, of course you should tell the “little criminal” episode. Why should these things be erased? To not confirm a stereotype? Of course, I understand the reasoning. It’s just that a Roma teenager is the same as a Hungarian, Romanian, French, Argentinian teenager. The attraction of the forbidden fruit, the temptation of a few glory moments is the same for everybody. The turning point is the same for all. What do I do? How do I get to glory? Who do I choose as a role model?

Neighborhood hero at 14 years old. I remember I was in Pantelimon some time ago, doing a research at the school where Marian went. People were telling me about the Roma community and they were proud that quite a few Roma graduated from college, had a good job, one of them was a counselor in Brussels, another one was a lawyer, another a businessman, and the list was long. Neighborhood heroes. The little criminal episode was not remembered in the community annals. A passing event. A random episode, nothing more. The models that are remembered are entirely different.

*I got to an industrial high school with plant machinery, stuff like that. Oh my God I hated it, I didn’t like it one bit. We had to do some sort of practice and I would end up in a plant there and there is where*

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*I learned about this thing, that it really exists: pretend you're working. We would go there to assist, we had to arrive at 8, like students do, and we had to have a number of practice hours and they would arrive at 6. And at the end they really surprised me, if I need a job they would recommend me. And NO, thanks. After that...oh, yeah, I fell in love REALLY BAD, really bad. She got married but I was the one who dumped her... and I fell in love with a cute, nice Romanian girl from a good family and "Marian, what are you doing, you have to be like everyone else...the faculty is ok". I was supposed to take my SAT and it was that generation with five written exams. Five written, six in total, the first complicated generation. And I took my SAT and man I felt like I flunked it. When I went to school to get the results, I had passed! No way. Something happened, how did I pass? This is destiny. And I was so happy and I went straight to the seaside. And what about college? What the hell do I do? I will apply somewhere, wherever. And I applied at a private university there close to me. Ahh, wait, in the meantime I started to volunteer, ta-daaa. As I was staying home a lot I started to discover other kinds of music. And I started to like Freddie Mercury and once I saw a documentary about his life, a documentary that, whatever, besides telling what had happened with his life and how he evolved musically, his successes, had another purpose, an educational one, to talk to people about AIDS and that's when I first discovered what this stuff means. And then I find out that the ARAS<sup>3</sup> guys have a help line and I say to myself this is what I have to do. And I call there and I say "Good afternoon, I want to let you know I am ready to be a volunteer, do I need to have some medical training or something like that?" "No, no, just as long as you're 18" "What?!" "18" "Well, I am not 18" "Well how old are you?" "16" "16?" "Yes." "Ok, come over, we'll find something for you to do." And I went to ARAS and there were a lot of opportunities. They would do this kind of activities, not formal ones where you sit and talk and write, it's a sort of activism. If I were to identify with a type of activism then my activism connects with this part. And this is what I've done until I was 19 or so, as a volunteer, there were other kids doing other things. I liked it a lot. After that, after I graduated high school and got admitted into that faculty, after I returned from the seaside, a research*

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<sup>3</sup> ARAS – Romanian Anti-AIDS Association.

*was conducted on prostitution and I was interested in these extreme topics and I said I wanted to get involved in this thing. And I started to discover these phenomena more, these social extreme phenomena, so to say. After which I realized I didn't like my faculty, a bullshit faculty, Law School. And after that I remembered that I enjoyed a lot, when I was in high school, psychopedagogy and I say that's it, I get started on this faculty. And I apply there and fail. And I say no way, no way. After that I say yeah, I'll prepare for next year and that year I took tutoring lessons, I prepared myself, no more rollerblades, no more bicycle, nothing, I studied a lot, a lot. I struggled a lot and I got in. First. I was embarrassed with myself, when I went to see the results everybody was saying ahh, the 13<sup>th</sup>, position this and that, on which position did you get in? I looked there...I walked out discretely, it was too much, it was not the kind of image I wanted to promote...after that I graduated the faculty, I took the license exam, I passed it and man, what do I do to get into a master's programme, it seemed too much. It seemed I couldn't dare for more. But eventually I said to myself let's try to get a master's degree. And I come here at the Social Work Faculty and I take the exam and they admit me in the master's programme, really, honestly! I couldn't believe I got into a master's programme, MASTER! I would say to myself... master, master, master!*

*And I prepared for a year the application for a PhD, I didn't know how to go about that and I went to the commission...I looked at the board, they were the twelve of the last supper, it was a big table. I go in front of them, "What do you want to do as a PhD topic and what do you need?" and I told them I'm interested in these things: drugs, prostitution and they started to lift their heads, one by one, to see who the hell is this one, what does he want to do? Man, and I got admitted to do a PhD, get it, again with the surprises... yeah, man, I am a doctoral candidate, I am about to finish.*

*I had a lot of models in my life. My grandfather was extremely interesting, grandpa. I realized that in my family he was basically the character who changed the trajectory very much, I mean he understood that it is important that we go to school and this was a requirement, that we go to school. He would say that we needed to go to school, that we didn't stand a chance otherwise, that no effort is enough, that is to say it's not in vain that children go to school, he would say that this means to have an easier time in life... An*

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*educated man is a wealthy man. I mean it's hard when you're educated, but it's almost impossible when you're not. He went to school for four years, which meant a lot back then. My mother had eight years of school, which again was a lot. I asked her why she didn't go to school anymore and she said it wasn't an option, it's like for you to go to the NASA.*

*People don't believe I am Roma. Many can't understand that a Roma person can be dressed ok, express himself... everywhere I go, even abroad, people say "Aah, I don't believe you", and I tell them "Aah, yeah, my friend, mind your wallet, I'll snatch it right away". But people don't believe I am Roma. And I tell them I am very Roma. I mean there's no doubt about it, I have no reason to hide it. It's a contribution from a small community to the cultural freedom of the world, no one should be disturbed by it.*

*I live here in Unirii, I'm doing research and I moved there permanently and – we have a doorman – and 2-3 days ago a doorman from the next building tells our doorman: "be careful to lock the door 'cause the little negros come later". A lot of people come and take shelter over night. And I try to refrain but I can't and I say "look here, you think only little negros come here?". And he freezes and I say "maybe they actually live here, in the building" and he says "Oh, come on, neighbor, what the hell, I didn't say anything about you, I said little negros in general. You're different, I mean I wasn't talking about you."*

*When I take the train, when I move around, people talk about it without realizing I am Roma. And I like telling them "it's not quite like that, I am a Gypsy and still I've never done that" and they freeze a little.*

*There are some who don't admit to being Roma. And I look at them and say man, I am Roma, are you or aren't you? Some say nooo. Some say I think so. Some ahh, maybe a quarter somewhere, yeah...man if they don't assume their ethnicity they don't because they have their reasons, right? I mean probably something happened at some point. I would hear stories about somebody who helped a young man to go to a job interview and everything was ok after the preliminary talks but when they met face to face they said it couldn't be done. And after such an experience when you practically didn't do anything wrong, on the contrary you have some very good interventions and have some standards you assume and you fight for*

*and you find yourself, just like that, all of a sudden, the man can't say he's a Gypsy because they don't hire Gypsies...My grandfather died when I was in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. It really got to me. Many people died on our family, a lot of people. Now you'd think that being such a large family there are a lot of us, but even so, many have died completely unexpectedly. There were all sorts of accidents. I mean we have in our family, I think, a death culture. I was actually thinking at some point: if I were to write my childhood memoirs strictly until I left the commune I'd write something called "my native graveyard" and basically I'd talk about how I saw things back then and how important the graveyard and a dead person were in this entire family. I was fascinated, starting with all the rituals of going to see the dead, the doles when somebody died, I like going to see the dead, a great deal, a lot. Don't think I have this weird thing, but I really like to observe people, ever since I was a child. And I would like to go to funerals and they would take me to all sorts of events, all sorts of rituals and the talks they had there and all kind of representations, I would sometimes be scared, like that; I wouldn't eat anything, I was quite feeble, I wouldn't eat, I wouldn't touch anything but I liked to assist.*

*At some point people would start talking in terms of where each of us will be buried, the discussion is ghoulish, but it's actually very funny, they would say "I'll be buried with So-and-So, ahh I don't know what I'll be wearing, with my mother, with my father, let's dig that one up and I'll go in..." and I would look at this and I would say to myself where do I burry myself, where? And I got myself a sepulcher by the alley. It's like living on the boulevard, right? I got myself a sepulcher and I put a stake in the ground : "Final resting place Ursan Marian". I definitely have a feud with death. From my family and then from this thing with ARAS, where children would die off, after that these things emerged, whatever, these phenomena that many have laughed at and whatever...Things didn't stop here, but this was my way of protesting, of defying death...I have a sort of reactive activism, it's not seldom that I find myself getting involved in stuff, I do it almost instinctively. See how things come together: when I was with ARAS, I had done a research in which teachers were involved and we had to come and help them, they didn't know about the technical part. And I tell them "Professor, will you do something about drugs, prostitution?" when I was working at ARAS I had students and they didn't know anything, what about the drugs, what about prostitution,*



*didn't know about field work, about needle exchange, methadone... "we will, we're open, you think of something" and after that somebody calls me: "Mister Marian, let's talk about that proposal, we're developing master's programs right now." After that he goes "Won't you come and teach? There's no one with your expertise here". I tell you honestly, almost 15 years...and I am very pleased, the working pace is extremely fast, I basically built a system, a social assistance programme for this area of vulnerable groups, meaning field teams, social ambulances, national programs, needle exchange centers, meth centers, it's very complex. I tried to talk to get some money to run a summer school and practically now, next month, there's the third edition of the summer school.*

*We're basically going to prisons, we see there how things stand, there are people who didn't have this opportunity, we're doing field work to see the drug users, we're talking to dealers, to panders, to users, to prostitutes, whosoever, get it? with people living on the streets. It's a socio-approach. If you sit in front of the TV it's not the same, in fact you need to talk to that person. I ask my students: "What does this idea tell you?" "Ahh, crime", this is pretty much the level of the discussions. "What is this, dude, the Police Academy? How can you only see a criminal dying in that person? You're a social worker, you're supposed to care about a part of what that individual means. What's important is that person as a human being, the emotions, the thoughts, the personal history". And then they start, slowly, after one semester, we talk a lot and in the end that really impresses me: it doesn't seem too complicated to dare people to review some things they think they have settled somewhere in their value system. It has to be a challenge. And sometimes – this I know from my field work, when I was working directly there – sometimes it's enough to tell someone one or two words or smile at them and that triggers a wave of change and it's true that you might work for years and nothing happens, but how can we know where it all comes from? And it's your duty to be there, to put your hand out and see, it works...many Roma told me "You're not Roma anymore, you're mixing with the junkies?" Then they said "Do you really need to talk about that too, don't we have enough problems?" I said: "Man, I don't know a lot about Roma policy, but I believe that hiding a problem doesn't solve it". I don't mean that only the Roma take drugs. But let's approach this matter somehow, let's see, let's find some solutions.*

*These people, unlike others, have a much more difficult access to services. Besides the fact that the classic pattern of Roma having difficulty walking is applied, they are using drugs and this adds another brick in their backpack and makes it even harder to walk.*

I'm thinking that Marian's story is like an optic illusions game. It's about what's visible when it shouldn't stand out and about what's invisible and yet right under our eyes. About things that some think should stay invisible and about things that should become visible for more but aren't. Not yet. One of Marian's phrases lingers in my mind: "it doesn't seem too complicated to dare people to review some things they think they have settled somewhere in their value system". I tend to agree with him.

*“My friends from abroad who come here are shocked at how racist some educated and sophisticated people can be”*

**Roxana Marin,**

43 years old, high-school teacher, Bucharest

Last fall I was at one of the socializing evenings that the members of an expats group in Bucharest periodically organize; an informal networking meeting where talks seldom leave the professional area, and when this happens it's usually to comment on the peculiarities of the host country, whether it's the locals' ways of the business opportunities. People met and ask each other what it is they are doing here. Therefore I was not surprised when a western businessman came to me with two glasses with red wine and, after telling each other our names, he asked me what I do. I told him I work with an NGO for community development. He asked me if it's about Gypsies. Yes, it's Roma, I confirmed, starting to guess which way things are going. The man smiled condescendingly and told me, like it's almost futile for me to give him any explanation, that in the eight years he's been doing business in Romania he has never heard anything good about Gypsies. *“And you think this is because of the Roma or because of the stereotypes you're dealing with?”* I asked, in return, feeling already that a mock discussion will follow, polite, civilized, as I will have to listen to him list all the clichés I've heard and read about Roma and try to fight them while my interlocutor will look at me amused, like I were a hamster in whose cage he introduced a wheel and now is watching it running in vain. I was not willing to get into this game for the thousandth time; I was aware by now, although I was not happy to admit it, that most of the people who start such conversations don't do it because they are looking for reasons to doubt the things they believe anyway, but to pass the time arguing for nothing with a flammable partner. I thanked him for the wine and I tried to walk away. *“Tell me something I don't know about the Roma”* he tried another challenge. I was ready to give in and tell him about the discussions depicted in this book and about how each of them had troubled me; and maybe my story would have had some success. *“Why don't you try to*

*find out on your own something else than what your friends are telling you?"* I found myself asking. It became obvious for both of us that the discussion we had started was not going to be entertaining and aseptic.

We said goodbye with the same fake smile and went on to other conversation oases. I got in the middle of a group of Romanian students, I introduced myself and I also told them where I work and what I do there. The book of life stories came up, I heard an enthusiastic voice: *"My high school English teacher is of Roma ethnicity. She's a supercool woman, you have to meet her!"*. I had heard about the English teacher from Cosbuc, but I hadn't managed to track her yet. I got the email address from her former student and, after a few days, we saw each other at her house. A house not too large, but full of books, notebooks and pens, old furniture, handmade, with lamps in every corner, with an independent cat and the floor painted in a wonderful dark blue color. I was no longer in the Roma Interiors, I was in a house resembling a lot to mine. It's true that my floor is not blue but ever since I visited Roxana Marin I'm thinking of doing something about it. I sat comfortably on one of the unpaired chairs, with a cup of milk coffee in my hand, I told Roxana a few words about this project and I asked her to tell me something about her childhood. I followed the story that came after like it were a movie.

*I was born in Sector 3 of Bucharest in 1968, but this doesn't really mean anything, because I was only born in that hospital; after one week my mother took me to our community, Budesti, Calarasi County, a community that was sedentarized after the end of the First World War by giving land to the Roma soldiers who fought in the Romanian troops, and that's how my grand-grandfather settled there and from him a long sedentarization came for all of us. Our community is a community of woodworkers. I went to school in the first grade in Budesti where I had a really good and nice teacher, who was not of Roma ethnicity, her name was Miss Vasilica and I'll remember Miss Vasilica my entire life. I think she played an important role in my career choice, being a teacher, as she really was a monument of patience and kindness to all of us, a bunch of first graders from a Gypsy village, with serious concentration problems at that age, and she would be very nice, very patient, she taught us very well. I loved school because of Miss Vasilica.*

*I guess the other person who was instrumental for my schooling process was my grandmother who, in a pretty Gypsy pattern, brought up a lot of children from my generation, I was a*

*single child, a lot of my cousins are also single children – I guess this is pretty common in the early sedentarized communities. Our parents were either living in Bucharest or commuting from Budesti to Bucharest or Oltenita, again typical for the '70s. My grandmother was an illiterate Gypsy woman, very smart, who was a sort of an informal bulibasha of my kin, she would convoke the meetings when important decisions needed to be made or when she would think serious things happened, and she would call everybody and restore order, I think I inherited that, and my grandmother had an obsession about school. She enrolled us all in school and would hit us with the broom stick whenever we would do something silly in school. She had a really interesting system, a system I might overrate looking back, but I think she had somewhat magical powers, because I remember she would pick me up from school and, as soon as we'd arrive home, she would feed me and after that, as she knew that if she were to let me go she wouldn't see me until nightfall, she would immediately ask me to do my homework. Our house in the countryside had three rooms: you'd enter through the middle room and on the left there was a bedroom that was also called the good room. It was in the good room that I'd do my homework. There were two parallel beds and in the middle, against the wall, a table. And on that table I would do my homework, sat on a chair. And my grandmother, on the right bed, with a broom in her hands, with the stick towards me. She would follow me attentively. It would take about an hour for me to complete all of my homework. She would ask: "Do, what did they give you to do?" and I would say "To write 30 rods" and whatnot. "Get started already". And I would. And I don't know how she did it but, whenever I would make a mistake, my hand hesitated, I don't know how she could see it, she would say "Do, tear that sheet" and I would protest "No, granny, I didn't make a mistake", "Do, tear that page I tell you!" and she would lift the broom stick a bit. It doesn't mean I learned by beatings; I had a lovely childhood, full of fun and nice memories, and I still worship my grandmother. Maybe because she died a long time ago for me she's on a saint pedestal; she's a very special person in my universe. I think the fact that my grandmother played a coercion role is very important. Most times, I'd realize, as I would do the page again, that I really did make a mistake and that she was right. That's why I say it seemed she had magical powers. This was the first grade.*

I go over the facts again in my mind: the providential school teacher, patient and fair, who I hope had the satisfaction of seeing one of her former first grade students a teacher at the most renowned foreign languages high school in Bucharest; the illiterate grandmother who cared about her granddaughter's education. Oh, yes, and the Roma fighting the war, (finally) given land – a historic fact that the English teacher states simply, declaratively, with no arguments, as if it is a generally acknowledged fact, one that our history school books have yet to record though.

*In the second grade I came to Bucharest as my mother separated from my father, an alcoholic gentleman I never knew very well. I was living with my grandmother anyway, they kept arguing and fighting and eventually broke up. In '74 – '75, my mother bought a share of the house we're living in now. It was then when I came to live with her. I was enrolled in No. 52 School, the one on Pache Protopopescu Boulevard, former Republica, where I had a dreadful teacher. A huge difference from Miss Vasilica. This teacher's name was Larisa Serban. In fact it might still be. She was a monster – a quite typical monster for those times, I hope not also for these days. A lady who had her pets in the class, who would receive gifts from parents on Women's Day, on Easter, Christmas, her birthday and other occasions – I remember there was a girl in my class whose father was a ship captain, which was quite a thing back then, and that girl was the most wonderful, the smartest, the student with the most A-grades of them all in my class and I think in the entire school, as Mr. Pintilie would obviously bring substantial gifts to Miss Serban from his trips abroad. And here I was in this type of situation, after a gorgeous year with Miss Vasilica, with a prize and wreath. I entered the second grade reading fluently – few first graders read without struggling. Miss Vasilica inspired me so much and I loved her so much that in the second grade I was already able to read. Miss Serban managed to kill a lot of my enthusiasm for school through several behaviors aimed directly at me. These things with Irina Pintilie and the gift bags were things I had never seen with Miss Vasilica, I was too young to understand that was called a bribe and that Irina had straight As because...whatever. What really got to me was the fact that she would never let me say anything. She made me sit in the back of the classroom – it's truly a typical story, with the Gypsy sitting at the last desk. She made me sit at the last desk, with Marichescu*

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*and Jean, the two other Gypsies in my class, who in the second grade were already stupid, poor souls, because in the first grade they were in Miss Serban's class who, as I could see for myself, would completely ignore them. She would completely ignore the Gypsies in the back. I would always raise my hand to answer; she would never ask me to answer or read.*

Again a fact that many people doubt, although there are not just studies, but also numerous testimonies about it (including the memories of most of us, if we're willing to remember); in most classes, the Roma students are sat in the back and ignored.

I for one suddenly remember my secondary school classmates who sat at the last desk, Florin and Adrian, two poor and pretty short boys whom I am not quite sure whether they were Roma (they would sometimes whisper "Murgu is Gypsy, this is a Gypsy name, and he has four more brothers at home") and who were never given any attention unless to be shown as a negative example. More and more often. There are theories in psychology about how someone who is pushed into a role, by coercion and group pressure, will end up playing that role. There are books, movies, articles. And there are also memories. From the second desk against the wall, where I was sitting, the "back of the classroom", just two desks behind me, seemed an uncertain, colder and darker place, different from the rest of the room. In that space, where no one would look at them, two 7-8 year old boys gave up, little by little every day, trying to be anything than what was demanded of them: two losers. Two negative examples.

*The lack of attention at that age may cause you to be aggressive, more stupid, because you stop absorbing – it made me be aggressive. I was very smart, so I couldn't turn dumb, therefore I became aggressive. And I got into all sorts of fights with the boys in my class. What I remember from my school years with Miss Serban is a feeling of great frustration and hatred. I couldn't really stand my classmates as they all seemed stupid and mean. This was, pretty much, my interaction with that environment. At some point, in the third grade, I stopped sitting at the last desk because a girl asked me to sit with her at the second desk in the middle. Cristina. I was not friends with her; I would sit with Marichescu and Jean. We would play soccer alone among ourselves, the Gypsies. From time to time boys from poor families in the neighborhood would come, boys we knew from*

*around here, from Lira street, Hora street, as we were many children in that generation. I wouldn't interact with the others. And there was this little girl who came to invite me to sit with her; I told her I don't know whether I wanted to sit with her as I'm sitting with those two. She asked me so hard I took pity on her and I told her I'll think about it. In fact I would beat up the boys who were chasing the girls. It seemed so annoying. In our village, in Budesti, no boy would chase the girls to cram them behind the door and fondle them. They had, in the second grade, these sexual behaviors and it seemed so disgusting to me. I would have cracked their heads open. I was stunned to see them chasing throughout the school screaming little girls who were obviously in distress, they seemed to have such a frozen smile, but the feeling of discomfort they triggered in me was extremely clear and acute. I was taller, heftier and I would catch one of them and throw them against a wall. And the girls were starting, in the third grade, to like me, to bring me small presents: butter sandwiches – I would look at them as if they came from outer space, 'cause Marichescu, Jean and I would only eat summer sausage, and these would come with bacon, with fancy sandwiches. They were being nice. I would take them, because it didn't seem polite to refuse, but I wouldn't eat them, I would take them to the back to Marichescu and Jean, they would eat everything. That's why I think Cristina invited me to sit with her at the same desk – I think she felt protected. Things improved a bit when I moved to the second desk, the teacher would sometimes ask me to read out loud. But, before I moved to the second desk, the teacher called Cristina's mother to school and told her "You know, Cristina wants to share the desk with Roxana, and Mrs. Munteanu was a simple country woman from Transylvania, she was a maid in the house of a nomenclaturist, she resembled my grandmother a lot. Her mentality was that of a simple country woman, an extraordinary strong horse sense. I remember as Cristina told me, she was with her mother when Miss Serban told her. And her mother said "Well, if they are friends, let them sit together". That was pretty much her mother's reaction. From that moment on I decided that Cristina was ok. We stayed friends for many years. I only got D-grades in the second grade; I only got A in Music because we had a Music teacher and not our regular teacher. From the third grade, she started giving me C-grades because she understood I was not a complete moron. And on the fourth grade she gave me the fourth*



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*prize. The last mention in my class. I still had a feud against her but, over time, the feeling turned into compassion. I see racism as a problem of the racist. He has a problem, he is the one getting mad, he feels hatred, he sucks. I don't care about the racist's problem, it sucks for him, I couldn't care less. At that time I hated her, but with time I realized she's part of a category deserving compassion. It was not necessarily her fault she was that way, she was part of a category where that was the norm anyway, at that time I couldn't have known that, for me the teachers were benevolent entities, like Miss Vasilica. In time I stopped hating Miss Serban.*

I wonder how much the two boys in the back, Florin and Adrian, hated our teacher. The regime change in 1990 found her on the brink of her pension years, unable to adapt. One of the first measures I remember her for was that she asked a “daddy” who was working with wood for a long, sturdy stick, that would help her maintain the order. The daddy did it right away, as he probably was one of those who thought that everyone could benefit from a small “correction”. Moreover, the stick handle was a bust of Vlad the Impaler – one of the tutelary figures of the aggressive and exalted Romanian nationalism - I don't know whether that was as per the teacher's request or because the father was overzealous. That's about the time when I stopped looking at Vlad the Impaler kindly, before discovering him on various forums, conjured in the name of out-of-context hatred for foreigners. His menace was everywhere, for all of us – for those in the last desk and for those in the first desks – whenever we wouldn't obey the narrow orders of the teacher. I often found myself put in a corner together with one of the two boys: I was there because I already knew how to read and I was bored with the monotonous classes, and he was there because he couldn't spell at the pace the teacher would set. Uniformity. I wonder how our class would have looked like if, instead of putting us in the corner – he not talking to me because I was a “nerd”, I not talking to him because he was a “slacker”, both angry and frustrated – she would have made us sit at the same desk. For now, I know for sure that my “honorable” colleagues would not have been so outraged when, at the dance at the end of the eighth grade, I allowed myself to dance with one of the two boys forever in the back of the classroom who, in the meantime, were playing the “bad boys” act to perfection.

*For the secondary school, I stayed at the same school, nr. 52, but it was a completely different story, as we had about 11 teachers in*

*total and it was another scheme. Either I was used to it or they were really completely different from my teacher. The fact is that from the fifth grade on I had a smoother development in my interactions with my classmates and my teachers and I've always stayed in the top half of my class. I was not a "nerd". When we moved to Bucharest my mother tried to check on my homework, but I've never had a strong affinity with my mother because my grandmother raised me. And my mother didn't know how to follow my studies and stimulate me. She almost short-circuited the educational process, because my mother has always wanted me to be the best so I don't embarrass her. My mother is one of the persons who have hidden their ethnicity until very recently, she first declared her ethnicity at this year's census, and her speech when we came to Bucharest was something like "Don't you ever go out to buy bread without shoes on, don't you get poor grades, don't this and that, so people don't point at us because we're Gypsies". At that time that too was very frustrating; now, after working with various persons from various communities in similar situations as my mother I understand why they did it and why some still do, but it wasn't nice.*

I go over it again in my mind: complying with the stigma. Accepting the stigma. Internalizing the stigma. Rejecting the stigma. I don't know what incentives this rejection has found in Roxana Marin and I don't feel the need to get into theoretical discussions. On one hand because, as much as I try to brush up on my academic readings about ethnicity it's possible that my knowledge is still limited and I am sure Roxana masters this subject, and on the other hand, I don't want to interrupt the story.

*What contributed to the success in my education was, on one hand, the fact that my grandmother would come every Saturday from Budesti because she knew that I didn't get along well with people here, because I would always run away to the Gypsy community – they would find me at the train station and bring me back; and she would come to make sure I was ok. And she developed some rituals I kept until I was on the eighth grade: she would come every Saturday from Budesti by train around noon, we would eat at home and after that we would go for a long walk. We would come back at around six or seven, we would go and visit Bucharest. And she would show me and explain to me in her terms of an illiterate Gypsy woman who had*

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*lived in the Gypsy community what about the buildings, what about everything. My mother never did that with me and there were no other characters to assist me. After that we would stop at the Verdun cafeteria where she would buy a “juicy” cake for her and a “chocolaty” one for me. She was known all over the place. These rituals kept me going on, in the sense that I could go on, despite the challenges I was facing. On the other hand I started to make friends, starting with Cristina in the third grade and ending with the fact that in high school I had a group to hang out with and I was a “normal” teenager, with friends and boyfriends. Being a GGypsy woman gradually started to mean less and less for me in the educational system. It didn’t seem to mean anything anymore. What I’ve learned from this and what I’m trying to make others understand is that this is something worth hanging in. Of course it’s not easy. But it’s worth hanging in. It’s worth to toughen up and pull your weight, to hang in there, even if all you get is passing grades in a row, just enough to pass, for a few years, until you develop a support system – with friends, with teachers who like you, understand you, support you. There will always be “bad” guys, but there will also be ok people around. And so, if you hang in there for a while, you’ll get to plug into that support system you need, because you’re small, weak, you’re looking for some self-esteem, I know how it is. But it’s an endurance test. Unfortunately, it’s the same now – not quite as in my time, but it still is. There are still big differences between communities, between a rural and an urban one, with teachers who have been exposed to projects that would alter at least their behaviors if not their mentalities, and teachers who have not had the opportunity to participate to such experiments.*

“Toughen up”, “hang in there”, “support system”, “endurance test” – for most Roma children the educational path is like a siege they need to endure. On one hand, the parents: “So people don’t point at us because we’re Gypsies”. On the other hand the teachers and classmates prone to marginalize them. A siege they get to understand much later. Because it is impossible to understand it in its essence. Roxana Marin knows better than I do that not all who have to go through this situation manage to resist until the end. And that we should talk more about how, beyond the hardships they share with the other children in their classes and communities, the Roma children become involuntary victims of marginalization. However, Roxana is not talking about these things, but merely telling her story.

*When it comes to my ethnic identity, I had an interesting time during high school, because that's where I met my classmate Suzana Vasile, who came from a family of musicians and who was, for me, a bizarre mix of things: on one hand, she came from a much wealthier family than us. My mother was working in a factory, she wasn't married, it wasn't great. But in Suzana's case it was different: her father was a musician, her older brother was a musician, she had really cool clothes – back then they would trade jeans from the Serbians, blouses, whatever, there were some things that were hard to get and whoever had them was really cool. And Suzana had it all. But she was not cool. That was striking for me. She had a lot of the things that I and other classmates would only dream about. But she was very humble. She had a very low self-esteem. She was one of the first Roma from whom I heard this speech, "I am more stupid because I am a Gypsy". And it was the first time I thought of how stupid that was. Of course the situation of Marichescu and Jean might have given me a hint on this issue because when I met them in the second grade they wouldn't even try anymore: all they wanted was to get a passing grade and they were extremely happy when they got one. That was the maximum educational success they had set for themselves, as an attitude, in the second grade. And that's why I thought they were from a completely different movie. That's why I tried to tutor them for a while, in my home, because we were neighbors. But they lacked the elements to manage some stuff, and I didn't have that much of a pedagogical ability and, that's it, I couldn't really impact their development. They remained my friends and soccer buddies till the end, but we had no academic interactions; I made homework buddies among Romanians. But there was this thing about Suzana...God, she was so conscientious, she had such neat notebooks, with markers – my mother wouldn't buy me markers – with nice colored lines. And I couldn't understand how comes she only got passing grades. She had this theory, that she was more stupid because she was a Gypsy girl. At first I laughed because I never thought like that. But in time I realized that Suzana had this issue deep in her mind. Later, when I've learned about Afro-American activism and about the consequences of marginalization and discrimination in education I understood that Suzana was very normal in such a paradigm where a category is considered to be inferior, hence they end up thinking they are also inferior. And poor Suzana*

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*was enrolled in this scheme. I tried to explain to her that this has nothing to do with it, I told her "I'll explain, you'll see, you'll get it". She was almost afraid to be smart. Take for example organic chemistry. I really liked organic chemistry, but it's important how the teacher explains it to you, because if you don't get it in the beginning it forever stays a pagan mystery. And I started to explain it to her. I could clearly see it in her eyes that she got it and, at a certain point, she would block: "No, I don't understand these things". Later, when I entered the Roma movement, I met all sorts of attitudes. And I have to admit that I didn't meet too many Roma who had my luck. They would often tell me I'm the exception. And beyond the annoyance this thing causes me, "Oh, I can't believe you're a Gypsy", when it comes to pure luck I don't really know many people with this kind of luck. I know a few who were lucky to have a mother or a grandmother like mine. When I say "luck" I don't mean something random, but I mean the luck of having a family member with such perseverance, who wouldn't emphasize blame or other stupid stuff like "I sacrifice for you and you destroy my hard work" – this was pretty much my mother's speech and it was not ok. I would have failed if it weren't for my grandmother. It's very important to have a correct support during the first stages of our education. That's why I say I was very lucky to have had my grandmother.*

I have the feeling we're getting close to the end; I can almost hear the soundtrack at the end. But I feel there is still a lot to be said – or perhaps it's just my appetite for Roxana's story, for her calm voice, without emphasis, about all sorts of things. I ask her about college.

*In college the story had nothing to do with my ethnicity. It's a typical story for communism. It was very difficult to get admitted to high school, but I never doubted that I'll go to college. In high school, as I was part of the first platoon, there was no question about trying for college. The question was where you'll try, not whether you will try. I wanted to go to Law school because in our family, at that time anyway, there were two people in jail for nothing. For example: the uncle who was in prison since I was in the 12th grade, one evening, went to have a drink with a friend in a restaurant around Dimitrov Boulevard, and at 10 pm, when the restaurant closed, they were already drunk as a fiddler and they went to the bus stop across the*

street to wait for the bus. My uncle's friend left. We'll never retrace all the steps. The fact is that my uncle stayed alone on the metal bench at the bus stop and at a certain moment two policemen came and arrested him. After that he was imprisoned for four years in the Bacau penitentiary. What had happened was that the administrator of the nearby grocery store was also drunk that evening; I think the investigation revealed that he had drunk in the same restaurant. He had a leather briefcase with that day's earnings and, in the space between the restaurant and the bus stop he was attacked and his money got stolen. The man walked to the bus stop where he collapsed. It was there that the policemen found him, at around ten thirty – eleven in the evening, they obviously knew him, they jiggled him, opened the briefcase and – “where's the money?”. They see my uncle: “Aaah, it must have been the Gypsy”. So he was charged with robbery. It just so happens that he's one of my gentler uncles but he seems extremely ferocious. That's why this happened. He's a large, very dark Gypsy. He seems very fierce. He was called Cassius Clay when he was younger and he also did some boxing. So he's a former boxer who got fat. When he was in prison he got into a cell with 40 other inmates. And he would tell – I was fascinated by his jail stories – how he entered the cell with those clothes they gave him and, when he entered, big, black, with large lips, it got quiet. He sat on the bed, he was sad, almost crying – and the boys started to come to him; they had never seen him in their lives but, so you understand the effect the black face had on people and of course many of them were Gypsies also: “Dude, what you need you tell me, so we don't have no problems, I am your brother”, whatever – he seemed very dangerous and people came to get on his good side, fearful he'll kill them, cut them open. He wouldn't even kill the hens when his wife was cooking. In those circumstances I decided that was the last drop: I get into Law school and become a lawyer. It's just that in Law school if you had close relatives in jail they would reject you. I had to double back and so I thought “I should apply for something I know really well and so I don't have to stress myself too much” and I applied for English. I failed by very little. The faculty is not at all representative of my intellectual – educational becoming because, failing, I did extramural studies and I worked as a translator in the meantime. I would go to the faculty only during the exam sessions, I would learn the week

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*before the exams like any normal student so that's not an episode worth talking about for too long.*

What's left to be asked: how did she become a teacher. How does she see this job. What was her experience related to her ethnic identity. If elementary politeness rules wouldn't stop me I think I'd stay on my chair for hours, listening to Roxana Marin telling her story and asking more and more detailed questions.

*I chose to be a teacher for lack of other options. This was a very unexpected episode in my life. I graduated English and I worked during this time as a translator at the Informatics institute. There I discovered the satisfaction of being a translator and I still have a soft spot for this: I translated books, I do simultaneous interpretation for foreign programs, I like talking a lot and I enjoy studying the linguistic mechanisms and seeing how they reflect some cultural aspects. I wasn't even thinking about being a teacher. My place with ICI was very warm, I had a translator certificate issued by the Ministry of Labor – it was an extremely good scheme back then, I had some very cool colleagues, IT gurus, I liked it to death. But the revolution came and the ICI changed. The first things to die after the revolution were the research institutes. I was pregnant anyway with my daughter, Sanziana, and I took a prenatal, natal and post natal leave for about two years. In the third year I said I'll take her to daycare and return to work. But the ICI management had changed and the message I got at that time was that it was highly likely that there would be cutbacks after I start working. It was September – October of '92. And, after exploring some schemes, somebody suggested to take some classes. And so I found myself at the IOR high school in Balta Alba, where I had, in my first year as a teacher, the 12th grade Industrial, vocational school, night school classes and two theoretical high, different classes. I was completely puzzled, but I like challenges. The challenge was that I was a teacher – something I had never thought of before – in an industrial high school; I had many types of students, I was teaching a foreign language, something I had no idea how to teach, I looked over my high school books that seemed truly crappy; and the racism of the teachers in the IOR teachers' room. It was something you'd face on every break: teachers would come from their classes and there was invariably at least one who'd say "John Doe*

*irritated me again” and another who’d comment “What can you do, he’s a Gypsy, there’s nothing you can do”.*

*This thing of “once a Gypsy always a Gypsy” gets on my nerves so much that, together with my friends, we got to deconstruct it, to make jokes about it, because there’s nothings else you can do, you take on such ineptitudes you’re facing every step of the way and have nothing to do with what you are and the only weapon you have is to mock it unless you don’t want to be filled with rage. That was a time when I first felt compelled to decide about my Gypsiness. Until then, this had been a natural part of my identity, I knew that my second grade teacher wouldn’t take me into account because I was a Gypsy but for me she seemed the stupid one in this situation, I never saw myself as a victim, but this was a bit different. Those were educated people, many of them were very sophisticated persons – that’s what shocks my friends from abroad who come visit, how racist some educated and sophisticated people can be. You can have wonderful talks about Umberto Eco with the Romanian language teacher, you can think she’s truly a very sophisticated person, and the next break you see her entering the teachers’ room, slamming the class book and saying “Damn the Gypsies, I can’t stand them!”. And she’s saying that with passion. And you get kind of blocked in these situations, you’re thinking “And she seemed ok, poor thing”. This is the perversity – the first reaction is to empathize with her, to think that maybe a Gypsy did something to her. But she was just a plain and simple racist. I would ask her “But what happened to you?” – carefully though, because she was my colleague. And she would say “I can’t stand them anymore! When I see their faces and how they grin at me from their desk at the back of the classroom... they should go to their Gypsy world!” I would realize that it was impossible for this type of teachers to give the proper support to Roma students, they just couldn’t. I realized that, beyond the fact that these people had a personal problem, that they were racist, from my position as a teacher this seemed even more irritating because I realized that their attitude was counterproductive for students. And that it affected them.*

It must be weird to be the only Roma teacher in a teachers’ room full of teachers who are cursing the Roma. To feel that your educated and sophisticated colleagues are looking right through you, a Roma woman, without seeing you, and continue to curse their Roma students. For no



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particular reason, just because they don't know how to handle otherness, because neither education nor common sense had given them methods to relate to the students whom somebody, at a certain moment, put in the back of the classroom and forgot them there.

What makes them blind to the fact that the teacher they complain to about the Roma students is, herself, of Roma ethnicity?

*Confronted with this type of racism from my fellow teachers, I was forced to think about what to do: should I tell them I am a Gypsy and that this type of comments is bothering me or tell them "But why do you think the Gypsies are a problem?" without revealing I am also a Gypsy. Well, I never had "problems" – that's a word that generally annoys me with regard to this issue – about my ethnicity. Maybe because I adored my grandmother whom you couldn't see as anything but a Gypsy woman, therefore it always seemed very cool and very sexy that I was a Gypsy woman. But that's just as a woman – from this point of view I never wanted to be Romanian. As far as my profession goes, though, it was another story, it was not just about me, Roxana Marin, the woman. I didn't know what to do, therefore I didn't say anything. I just stopped talking to them. This was useful for my professional development because that year I started a professional training course at the British Council where my English mentor adored me. My accent was very close to the native one and she was fascinated of how British I sounded. She was another great luck in my life – she mentored me that year, came to me at IOR – can you imagine, a diplomatic car at the gate of the industrial high school, that was a historical event – and I focused a lot on my professional development that year – and took me away from the confusion that my colleagues had created for me in the teachers' room I couldn't relate to them and they annoyed me. I let them be in their smelly bubble of racism and I took care of myself. Then I took a holder exam that I passed with an A – one of the three A-grades out of some three hundred candidates – and so I was able to choose any high school I wanted out of the ones close to my home; IOR didn't have an opening, because I had built a relationship with those students, but the principle was holding the position for the daughter of the Technical Installations teacher. I chose "George Cosbuc" which I didn't know was bilingual- this being any English teacher's dream – it had native teachers, very Beverly Hills, I liked it. And so I ended up*

*being a teacher at the best high school in Romania, and I'm not just saying that because I work there but because I know what goes on in other schools. I have worked in many projects involving secondary schools and high schools throughout the country, in many counties. There are many people trying to make a difference, some of them succeed, but it's rather individual stories, while at Cosbuc we're not talking about what that Miss is doing but about what Cosbuc high school is doing; there's a lot of extracurricular activities, whatever. That is because we, the English teachers, have been exposed to native teachers, and we came with their models. I first left the country in '95 for a scholarship in Scotland and when I came back here I was very excited: teachers there would work extra with their students on community involvement, they would talk about the problems in their community. We brought back those models and started working with our students on issues affecting the community – for example human rights clubs, in English, with American, black, gay guests where children would assist, stunned, and it all started as a “cool” wave. But we found ourselves to be very activist and very involved.*

I for one have missed teachers like this. All those years of American and British culture and civilization – and almost nothing on the civil movements that made the turmoil of the XXth century. All the details about English and Scottish kings and warriors, about the Founding Fathers of America and the ships that took them there – but nothing on protesters. Nothing on revisiting the colonial past of the United Kingdom or about the massacred Indians and the recent policies concerning them in the States. Nothing on the color population. The snipping in the Romanian history affected, at my high school, the perspective on the history of other states also. I don't remember there being much talk about the Roma. But, when I think of my Math teacher being truly outraged by the fact that the foreign word “bairam”, meaning party, has entered the Romanian language, it's perhaps better this way.

*I think it's counterproductive to ethnicize the problems of the society or associate them with certain categories. Take the level of education for example. While we consider it to be a Roma problem, Romania will always have a problem with the level of education – the Romanians' level of education. These confusions really peeve me and as a teacher I find them to be extremely counterproductive. If Romania has a percentage of people who can't read or write those*

are Romanian citizens, it's very possible that many of them are Roma, but it's impossible they are all Roma. If we approach the illiteracy issue from the perspective of the Roma culture then we set out for failure. Because there is the approach of illiteracy from the Roma culture perspective. Illiteracy is an issue that's been approached in many places throughout the world, but not from an ethnic perspective, at least not in the last decades. In the US there are state funded locations where 40 – 50 year old people can go to in the evenings, between 6 and 7, and learn how to write. And they go there. Why do they go there? Because no one points a finger at them as Roma, Native Americans, alcoholics or anything really. Those are state provided classes designed to correct the number of illiterate citizens. That approach is ok. If you want to address illiteracy in its prevailing category you have to not embarrass the person. No one does this to assume their ethnicity. No one goes to school to prove that Gypsies are just as good as Romanians. They go to school to feel good, to be an ok person. Any other problems – when they will be treated as society problems, when the state will assume them as its own problems, the system's problems, then we'll stop wasting so many resources. It took me about three years to assess my availability and abilities with regard to the Roma. Eventually I decided to get involved – but with an exploratory title, first to see what the possibilities are and where I can capitalize my abilities, namely my teaching abilities. Because I fell in love with teaching at IOR, it seemed extremely cool. I like talking and I feel good when a person who thinks is more stupid realizes they're not stupid. That's why I am a teacher. And I use teaching as a platform for activism: I have students coming in the ninth grade saying "Good afternoon, I am such and such and I am a legionnaire<sup>4</sup> and I want all the Gypsies dead!" and by the 12th grade they become pro-Roma activists. But I never doubt they will change in four years.

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<sup>4</sup> Member of the extreme right-wing movement in Romania.

*“I’ve always needed to study more than others just to be accepted around them”*

**Oana Parnica,**

33 years old, Social Worker, Bucharest

We’re in the backyard of Geraldine’s parents, where we’ve decided to have the interviews for a while now. The portraits are done in the living room, in front of the spiral staircase leading up to the first floor. The camera, the lamps and the screen are installed there. When it’s warm the interviews are held outside. It’s a small yard, near the Firemen’s Tower, in the center of the city, but it’s retreated and isolated enough so we feel we’re cut off from the Bucharest madness. When Oana walks into the yard I can’t help but notice a certain self-assurance that stands out immediately. She’s determined, no shyness in her walk or in her eyes. She has frank eyes, the eyes of a person who knows what she wants. We’re settling, she warns us that her story is not happy at all. I am glad, with the ferocity of a journalist who’s looking for high rating scores. I’ll have enough material.

*I come from a mixed family. My mother is Romanian and my father was half Roma half-Romanian. We’re six siblings. Three of us are white, three dark, my mother made us this way so we’re not upset. I would wonder why my sister was white and I was dark. When I was a child I always thought my mother wouldn’t wash me up properly and I would steal the dishwashing powder from the kitchen and rub my face so I get whiter, I thought that’s why I was dark, because my mother didn’t wash me up properly. All six of us were enrolled in school by mother and father, but too few of us actually finished it. I was lucky to have an extraordinary teacher who got after my parents to take me to school. She would come to our door and tell my mother to let me come to school. My mother would lock me in the house and I would jump out the window – we were living on the ground floor. My teacher would buy notebooks, clothes, shoes so I could go to school. I was not a very good student, I never had straight A-grades, but I wasn’t a bad student either. I’ve never wanted to be left behind. I’ve always needed to learn more than others to be*

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*accepted around them. We were the only Roma family on the street. When I had to go to high school the neighbors in our building would say that I have to get married at 15, because that was the Gypsy way. I told them I will not get married, "I'll show you I'll go to high school and finish it high school and I'll go to college too". All of my friends in the group of children from my building ran away from home when they were 17, 18 years old, they didn't accomplish much in their lives.*

I feel the need to confirm: did I get it right? Oana's family was the only Roma family on the street. So the neighbors Oana talks about were Romanian, right? And the girls who ran away from home when they were 17-18 years old were Romanian girls, right? And Oana, a Roma girl, is the only one of those girls on that street who continued her education? It seems so. Only five minutes into our interview and Oana's story contradicts a famous stereotype, that the Roma girls marry young and that's why they drop out of school. Oana doesn't fit this category, unlike her neighbors – Romanian girls – who stopped their studies earlier than she did. Moreover, the neighbors were telling Oana she'll get married before high school, that's the Roma way, we all know it, right?

I remember meeting a young Roma girl, it doesn't matter from where, who had an intercultural education class in her school. I ask her: what did you learn about the Roma in those classes? She says: that the Roma girls marry young. I ask her how old she is. Fifteen, she says. I say ahh, so you're married. She says no. I say well, maybe you're the exception. Do you have Roma friends your age who got married? She doesn't. In the entire Roma community of a few thousand Roma, no girl has married young.

*"The Roma are not as they were 20 – 25 years ago,"* Oana says. Our stereotypes, on the other hand, don't keep up with the pace of change.

*There were two groups of children when I was a child, some whose parents allowed them to play with me and some whose parents didn't allow them to play with me. As the saying goes: "Don't play with her because she's a Gypsy". Until I got mad and I told them: once in your life you will need my help, it doesn't matter for what, and you'll come to my door for help. And they did, whether it was for French, English or Geography lessons. Then I got admitted into high school, in high school I had for the first time a good class master and good teachers. I, as I learned in secondary school, started with a good stock of knowledge and I got noticed in some classes,*

*especially in the ones I liked. And on the eleventh grade I had a class master who would never give me the grade I deserved. In the meantime I got sick, I stayed in hospitals more than in school and I ran away from the hospital to go take a test. My teacher told me I was crazy, that I couldn't do that, and I got a 9,12 out of 10 at the writing test of the SAT. The class master came to me and said: "See, if I gave you the grade you deserved, you wouldn't have gotten this grade now". I told her "If you gave me the grade I deserved, maybe I would have gotten a 10, not just that".*

And I remember again of a school where there were a lot of Roma children. The teachers there are telling me that all they expect from the Roma fifth graders is for them to sit quietly and salute. That's it. And in the fifth grade all the Roma children knew was to sit quietly and salute. Maybe they could have done more than that. I remember of what Roxana Marin was saying, the teacher who never doubted the fact that those children stating they were legionnaires and wanted "all the Gypsies dead" were going to change during the following four years. And I am also thinking about how important the teachers' expectations can be. But what can you expect from Roma children? To prove your stereotypes wrong? To prove they can do more? To pass the tests with straight A-grades? To prove that they won't get married at age 15? That they can get admitted into high schools? Go to college? That they are working, honestly, and maybe more than others?

*I've been working since I was a girl. After getting into high school I would look after a child during the holidays so I make money for notebooks, clothes, so I can go to high school. Then, at 16, I was a seller, I would sell beer, sodas, also during the summer. It was true that I would come home very tired, I would fall asleep on chairs at night, I wouldn't even make it to the bed. There were a lot of things that not even my brothers or my mother don't know. My mother doesn't know, for instance, that during the first year of faculty I would eat milk and bread for one week and apples and bread the next week, with just 2000 lei. If I'd ever eat Bologna sausage, wow! I would go and buy some Bologna sausage with my friend and we would sit on a bench in the Cismigiu park and we were the happiest of all when we were eating Bologna sausage. When I had to go to the faculty I met a man from the Roma Party, back in Ploiesti. Some Germans came to Ploiesti to talk to the Roma there and they needed a translator, and*

*this man knew me and asked me to be the translator. And after that he asked me "What grade are you in?". I was in the tenth grade. And he asked me "What do you want to be when you grow up?" and I told him I wanted to go to college, I didn't care which one. I wanted to go to Law School, that's what I wanted, to be a lawyer. When I graduated from high school he came and asked my mother: "Well, your daughter passed her SATs, will you take her to Bucharest to try for faculty?" My mother: "No!" – she had such ideas: "How can I let her leave home, what if something happens, I won't take her". Since talking to that man and as I really wanted to go to Bucharest, I didn't sleep at all that night, I cried and I told my mother the evening before: "if you don't take me to Bucharest I will curse you my entire life! Take me, at least to see what my chances are, and then I'll tell you if I deserve it or not". And I came to Bucharest, scolded by my mother the whole way here. In Bucharest we were about forty people gathered to prepare for the admission. Only six of us got admitted out of the total forty, we would gather in the evenings in the room and discuss the lessons, about where we're at, I didn't study much until I wagered with my friends and I told them: "tomorrow night this time I'll have six lessons done, your number plus one ahead of you". "No, that's impossible, you can't learn that much". "Yes I can". The next day I gathered the books next to me, I started, I studied and at midnight we questioned each other on the lessons. Then a friend told me: "You'll get in!" and I got into faculty. I had to commute during the first year – they don't provide housing for first year students. I didn't know I wasn't going to get a room. I didn't know anyone in Bucharest and so I went to the Roma Party headquarters. They paid for my hotel room for the first two nights. They couldn't keep me there. They had, in their headquarters, a large room. There were couches, everything they needed, and they told me I could sleep there. I stayed there for the first semester. The second semester they transformed the room into a recording studio. I had nowhere else to go, I had a friend who had relatives in Bucharest and Emilian, whom I knew from the Roma Students Association. And I found myself the first day of the exam session in the second semester with no place to sleep. I went to the Rahova neighborhood, to this friend of mine, there were four children, six including the parents. Where could one sleep in a single room apartment? There wasn't any room. I left for Alexandria, that's where I was staying, at about 10 o'clock in the evening, I was really afraid of*

my own shadow back then, but I left for Alexandria. In Alexandria it was snowing, it was cold and windy. Emilian was not home, I came back. This dude comes to the door and I tell him: "I won't leave here, I have nowhere else to go, I'll sleep at the door, but I won't leave". I think he took pity on me and let me in. I stayed there that night. I got by relatively well the first year, I commuted to Bucharest, I also commuted from the countryside, from Afumati. The first year has passed, sometimes it was easier, sometimes harder, but it eventually passed. In the second year I started as a project assistant, a project regarding admission into college. In 1 Decembrie commune I made friends with a girl and her parents liked me a lot, because all throughout the faculty I stayed in their home and her parents helped me a lot, maybe more than my mother and father helped me. My mother, if she would give me 5000 lei during the first year of college, I would pay 3000 for the ticket and 2000 would be for my expenses. I can say that it was in 1 Decembrie, in this girl's family, that I became a real person. They never told me I had to pay for utilities or...never. I never felt like I was a guest or a tenant in their home, I was their daughter. If they would buy my friend socks, for instance, they would also buy some for me, as they knew that I would go home and my brothers would take them from me, I would come back with no socks on.

I was lucky to meet, in my life, people who helped me. I first took my husband home to my mother, before we got married: "Look, mom, you see him? This is who I'll marry". My mother didn't say anything, I've always done what I wanted. He would keep postponing taking me to his home, we were close to our civil marriage and he wouldn't take me there. "Hey, why won't you take me there? What is the problem?". So I picked up the phone and I called my father in law and I told him: "Good afternoon, I am your future daughter in law, but just so you know I am a bit too blonde with blue eyes, so that you're not shocked when you see me". We went to my father in law's house and, when he saw me, he kissed my hand. My husband started to cry, he couldn't believe it, but he never asked me anything. He was probably afraid they wouldn't approve. I have wonderful in-laws. After the wedding the neighbor started talking: "Aah, your daughter in law is a Gypsy". When they started saying I was a Gypsy woman, my mother in law told them: "She may be a Gypsy woman, but she's smarter than all of you together!".



*And now I've finally decided to work in my field because I've been working for ten years but not in the field in which I've received training for so many years. I've decided I want to work in my field. I like helping people and I can do just that. I work with the General Directorate for Social Assistance of Bucharest. It's been difficult getting to where I am now, I's been difficult to be accepted. Many years ago I went to get a job in Sector 1, with the diploma in my hand, as a social worker. I saw the positions available and I said to myself "I'll go and register". I went there and the woman behind the desk asked me "Did you finish the post – high school?" And I said "No". "Did you take a course?" I told her "No". "Did you go to college?" And I told her "No, madam, can't you see I have a baccalaureate diploma, I have a license certificate, I graduated a faculty!" "A state university?" "Yes". I could see her looking at me and I said to myself "She'll call me in when hell freezes over!". Why didn't she take me? There was an opening, I had the studies for it, I was a perfect fit. Why didn't she call me back?*

*A few years back I was working in a company in labeling and after two weeks I got promoted to an upstairs office and they would all whisper and wonder whose protégée I was. I wasn't anybody's protégée. It seems impossible for some people to graduate, and from a state university no less, to be smart, to have a head for something.*

I remember again of a scene in a school with many Roma children. The teacher tells me "I have this girl in my class, she's so beautiful and smart! You wouldn't say she's Roma!" The negative image of Roma is so engrained in our minds that we can't even imagine there are beautiful and smart Roma. How many beautiful and smart Roma children do we miss when they pass us by?

*I have a wonderful boy, he's 3 years old. He's in a nursery. When I first enrolled him in the nursery it was past the admission period and it was very difficult to get a spot. But I have a blond-haired and blue-eyed boy, no one will say he's Roma. When I got hired, a co-worker said "It would have been better if Antonescu was still alive, as he would have taken all the Gypsies to shoot them". The next day I took my son to work and I told him: "Would you shoot him?" "No". "Well, why not? Am I not his mother? So what if he's blond-haired with blue eyes? He's my son".*

I often wondered how come some people feel such violent wishes. For the mass murder of a group of people. Many say it out loud, and I think many more think it. Some of them are even believers, I know of such examples. I wonder what it's like to make the cross sign when you go past a church and, five minutes later, to wish for all the Gypsies to be dead. I am sure that it's about blindness. About the fact that those who say or think that don't see people or children when they wish them dead. They got to an abstract, dehumanized concept that, in return, dehumanizes those wishing them dead.

Oana is telling about how her co-worker changed his mentality once he got to know her. How, nowadays, he doesn't want the Gypsies to be shot. I suspect that meeting a child whom he wanted dead shook him up a bit: how can you wish for a child to die? I am thinking that Oana's son molded another person and changed him for the better. And I wonder how the society will return the favor. How the society will mold him as a person.

*A neighbor once asked him: "Dude, are you Romanian or Gypsy?". He looked at him and said about another neighbor: "He's a Gypsy!" I never taught him that, the difference between Romanian and Gypsy, I thought he was too young to teach him about it. Then, when we got inside, I asked him: "Honey, why did you tell him that Victor was a Gypsy? How come you know what a Gypsy is?" "Miss told me at the nursery, she came to me once and she told me "Come inside or the Gypsy will come and take you away!"*

The interview is coming to an end, much too soon. I wish I could talk to Oana more, It does me good to listen to her story, it's like taking in her strength. I'm telling her that, in spite of her warnings at the beginning of the interview, her story didn't seem sad to me. That it gave me her strength. That it left an impression. That this story is like a strong coffee, it shakes you up and gives you energy and you feel you can go on.

*“Yeah, I’m a smart Gypsy, what’s the problem?”*

**Claudia Bulata,**

42 years old, accountant, Mizil

Although Claudia is a little over 40, I can easily picture her as a school girl. Maybe because she’s talking a lot about her school years, about teachers, about how they gave her as example, about the classmates who wanted to sit next to her during tests or asked her the solution to exercises during the breaks. And maybe because she still has an almost child-like conscientiousness and energy, a schoolgirl’s desire to be the first. Our talk goes on for hours; Claudia’s nieces are looking at us, from time to time, through the door glass, they are the daughters of Claudia’s older sister who is working in Italy and Claudia has been raising them for years now. When I come out into the yard the girls sit next to me, quietly, like cats, and look at me out of the corner of their eyes. The older one answers my questions politely, she speaks correctly and nicely as if she were in school; I picture Claudia at her age. An open, generous girl wanting to get noticed. Claudia went to the school within the community. Even back then she was among the top students in her class and, although she was not the only Roma student in the class she knew that some of her Romanian colleagues might be irritated by her performances. But no one said anything to her face and Claudia didn’t care about what they were saying behind her back. “Yeah, I’m a smart Gypsy, what’s the problem?” she repeats during our dialogue as a recurrent reply to some voices – not at all imaginary, unfortunately – saying that the Roma are “predisposed” to not studying. “That’s their problem, they don’t like school” I hear from time to time from a cab driver, pensioner, a seller or a friend of friends with whom I decide not to spend much time talking. “There’s something in their culture that prevents them from going to school” somebody told me a few months ago. “What is it?” I asked curiously. “I don’t know what it is, but there is something” the friend replied, sure of himself. “Is there something in your culture that prevents you from thinking?” I felt like asking. But it would have made me look like an unnuanced partisan, so I refrained from my justice-seeking urges and settled for pitying him in my mind for his lack of information.

*I've liked school since I was a girl. I would think: God, that child can study, so what if he's Romanian, I could study as much as he does, maybe more...and I had the strength to go on, I didn't give up, even if I was sick, I had health issues when I was little, I had chronic hepatitis, I stayed in the hospital, but because of my ambition I said "I won't give up!" and I went on, even without extra tutoring lessons, because we were poor. And because I was a good student the teachers loved me, they would give me as example, they would take my notebooks to show my colleagues: "Look here: tidy writings, no blots, no wrinkled corners, homework done on time". Or they would ask us to come up to the blackboard, me and another Roma pupil, I knew the answers, him not so much. And the teacher "Hey, isn't she like you? How comes she was able to do it and you're not?". And maybe on that moment I would feel a twinge in my heart, I would feel sorry for him being the negative example, you know, he was a Roma of mine, of course I didn't want for them to point their fingers at us, and during the break I would try to talk to my classmate: "Come here, you why didn't you do your homework, let's do it together".*

It was the same in high school. Back then Claudia was the only girl in her community who was going to high school, and to the Economic High school no less, where she passed both her stage exams with high scores. She was not the only Roma student in her class, Claudia remembers amused and irritated at the same time: there was another Roma student who wouldn't declare his ethnicity.

*I was kind of sad, that he was ashamed of what he was, because of that, not because he wouldn't admit it to me that he was a Gypsy, because I didn't care whether he was studying or nor or whether he was Roma or Romanian. But he didn't recognise his identity and it was kind of bothering me when I'd see him so conceited while everybody was talking behind his back that he was a Gypsy, maybe they did it to me also, I didn't know it. If only he had recognised it! Yes, man, I am proud of what I am, a smart Gypsy, I am a good student, what's the problem? I come from a special family, I have siblings in school who're also good students, my parents minded their own business, educated us, kept us in school, this should be a pride for any child who's staying in school even if the parents are poor, maybe they made sacrifices to keep me in school.*

## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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Claudia's parents have always put the education of their four children first even if the financial situation of the family was not great: Claudia's father was a foreman in Braila and would come home once every two weeks, and the mother was a housewife. But, wisely and with understanding they kept their four children in school. And when it came to studying, the children were pulling their own weight.

*We really liked to study, especially my older brother and I. The teachers would write on the notebooks of all children that their parents should come to school for the parents-teachers meetings and they would always say that, in our case, the parents didn't have to come to the meetings. But my mother was a member of the school's parents council and she would attend the meetings regularly even if maybe many times she didn't have to, but she would go to learn about us, like any parent. And there: "You really don't have any problems, you have a very special child, congratulations". Then my mother would hear the other parents "Look at them how they're praising her daughter, the Gypsy". But my mother didn't care, she would say "Let them talk, honey, the important thing is that you study because you know things for yourself, not for others".*

From time to time Claudia is looking at a picture on the wall, a picture of a blonde, beautiful, young woman with ambitious eyes. "That's my mother, a blonde Gypsy with green eyes. I take after my father, swarthy". Claudia's father was Romanian but, after forty years of marriage living in his wife's Roma community, although he had never learned the Romani language, the father had come to feel as if he was part of the kin.

*Whenever my father happened to be free he would ask me: "Honey, can I help you with your homework, are you done?" and I would say: "Yes, father, I'm done, come look, is it ok?". And, whatever he remembered from his time, he would look, check the answers, see that I have the same solutions and he would tell me: "Yes, honey, it's ok", he'd try to stimulate me. That's how parents were in those times. My parents were my models in life, I had a lot to learn from them, they were honest, upright people. Then I had teachers for role models. One who made an impression in my childhood was my primary school teacher. I actually met her on the street a few years ago; I was not sure it was really her, but she stopped me and said "Are you Stoicescu, by any chance?" and*

*I looked at her for a little while “You are my first teacher” I said. “Yes, Claudia, see you haven’t forgotten me?” “Yes, Miss, I haven’t forgotten you, but you haven’t forgotten me either.” It was a special moment for me. Then, the same, I met my Math teacher on the street. Also her hair turned grey, poor soul, she has a daughter at the University now, she was a baby when her mother would bring her to class, when she was teaching she would sometimes bring her along, I was in the third or fourth grade, I don’t know, and now she was with her daughter, student at the Math faculty. I say: “Is she the little girl who came with you in class in the third grade?” “Yes, she replies, look how much she’s grown and how the years have passed”, we talked and reminisced. She asked about my sister, about my brother, about my workplace, she said she felt sorry for me because I had health problems and I didn’t try for the university, but she advised me to not give up on this idea if an opportunity should arise.*

And she hasn’t given up – when I met her, Claudia had just registered at the faculty, to study the Romani language. Although she graduated high school among the top of her school, she didn’t manage to go forward because her mother was sick and she had to take care of her, and then she also got sick. Because of the months she had spent in hospitals she couldn’t prepare for the admission and so she failed for a few points right below the line. Out of disappointment, she didn’t try again the next year, then her mother died and Claudia chose to get a job, figuring it was time for her to bring some money home. As she had graduated from the Economic High school she got assigned to an agricultural association from a neighboring commune, where she commuted for five years, until the revolution. After that she got a job, also as an accountant, at a furniture factory where she still works now. In the twenty-something years of activity she managed to earn the respect of her colleagues and managers, even of those who’re loudly stating they “can’t stand the Gypsies”. *“But they have no choice, they have to respect the position, even if they don’t respect the person, at least they respect the position”,* Claudia says.

*I want for our Roma people to get to be somebody too, because there are some who have succeeded, who became doctors, prosecutors; even here in Mizil I know somebody who graduated from the Law school and is now a prosecutor, I also know a boy in Ploiesti who’s Roma and is also a prosecutor...I believe that our ethnic group can also get places.*

*“Trust in yourself comes from what you  
build on your own”*

**Dezideriu Gergely,**

35 years old, lawyer, Bucharest

It had rained over night; the summer morning was cool and a bit cloudy. I was to meet with Dezideriu Gergely, one of the professionals of the Roma movement, lawyer, member of the National Council for Combating Discrimination<sup>5</sup>, who studied abroad, who – as I later found out – was soon to take on a leadership position with the European Roma Rights Centre in Budapest. I realized I was a bit nervous from the way I kept going over the questions I wanted to ask him and from the fact that, almost without thinking about it, I chose to wear clothes slightly more office style than I normally wear. I wasn't wrong: Dezideriu also had a smart casual outfit, suitable for the morning chill. I found him at our headquarters, talking in Romani to Catalina. We went together to the yard of Geraldine's parents and we stayed there for over three hours; when we left, the cool morning had turned into a warm summer day, and my initial stage fright had made way for enthusiasm. I was almost imagining that, if they would meet Dezideriu, all those who have fixed ideas about how the “Gypsies” are and how the “Hungarians” are (usually the same people) would instantly change their opinion. When I returned to my office I didn't know what to start with: about Dezi's journey, about the unproblematic way he assumes his double ethnicity, Roma and Hungarian, about the calm way he talks, with a vague Transylvanian accent, smiling charmingly and with confidence, about his experience with Romani CRISS and NCCD, about his calm determination to do something for the situation of the Roma, about all the things he's done already...my co-workers were probably confused by the way I would jump from one topic to another without finishing any sentence, later, in front of the transcribed interview, the story settled on itself. My enthusiasm hasn't diminished though.

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<sup>5</sup> Further in the text, NCCD.

*I was born in Sovata, Mures county. I lived in a mostly Hungarian community because there are mostly Hungarians in the area where I was born and where I lived until I was 6 years old. That's one of the reasons why, until a certain age, I spoke more Hungarian than Romanian. Then my parents moved from Sovata to a town close to Targu Mures, where they still live now, to Ludus. It's a town really close to Hadareni, the area of the '93 conflict when they burned down the Roma houses.*

I remember Tony Gatlif's movie, *Gadjo Dilo*, released in the '90s, that was inspired by the Hadareni events also. I liked the movie a lot, it's actually the only movie I've seen at least five times, wanting to show it to my friends from abroad too. At the same time my Romanian friends were dismayed by the movie. They didn't care about the artistic part of the movie, nor about the excellent music (shall I remind you that some of the songs were played by Adrian Minune?) or about the incredible part of Rona Hartner or about the love story, nothing. What upset my friends at that time was the image the movie would show about Romanians, in the episode where they burn the Roma houses. And even though it's the truth, that Roma houses have been burned down, people have died during those events, the veracity of the facts wasn't even important. The important thing was that Romania's image was to be stained, that foreigners might generalize (as abusively as some Romanians also generalize) and have the impression that Romanians are some barbarians who burn houses down. Sometimes obsessively. We're more interested in Romania's image than we are in reality. It doesn't matter what actually happens in the country, the important thing is that we project a good image abroad. But let's get back to Dezideriu's story.

*I lived in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious area. Leaving aside the conflict of '93 I mentioned, besides that, the relations between people, at least the way I've perceived them as a boy, were completely normal. I couldn't see anything that seemed out of the ordinary. Most of the time was under the communist rule, I basically couldn't see much of the discrepancies, at least not at that age, because I'm 35 years old, so I practically lived in the former regime until the eighth grade. And at that age the discrepancy between – let's say – the way communities live was harder to notice. The point is that, in my family at least, we never talked about differences. They weren't important, and that was maybe because of*



*my parents' background: they started out from a mixed family, my father is a Roma – Hungarian, while on my mother's side they are Romanians. They would speak Romani on my father's side. I only learned a little Romani. At some point I talked to my father about why he never taught me, I reproached him in a way, and he told me that the main reason was to keep me away from what I could have felt or endure as a frustration, something that my father had faced many times. My father is a fiddler and his ethnic background had been held against him many times. Besides that, my mother had been basically stolen and that's the reason that my father felt it was better to keep especially this language issue away from me. But we talked about our ethnicity quite late, when I started to have relationships with girls, when more serious relationships involved meeting their families, it was then that my parents told me: "Ok, you need to know that this is what you are and that this is our family". They wanted me to take my guard in a way, that I didn't have to hide, to be ashamed of what I am, but that it's possible this would be held against me. This was a known fact but we didn't particularly talk about it, it wasn't necessarily an issue, it was an implicit thing.*

*I went to a Romanian school with children from the Hungarian minority, the Roma minority and Romanian children. During the communist regime at least for the first eight grades I didn't know of separate classes. I don't remember knowing about an all Roma class in my school. There are now. And then, after the revolution, in high school there weren't any, for sure. I went to high school there, in Ludus, near Targu Mures. I don't remember of any moment when someone's ethnicity was an issue – that's also because generally in Transylvania that's not an issue, that person being Roma or Hungarian, I was never confronted with these problems. I remember though that the Roma students sat somewhere in the back. I also sat in the back but not because I was of Roma ethnicity but because I just liked sitting in the back, I've always enjoyed sitting in the back because I was shy, I was very shy. My father finished the music school and played in restaurants. My mother worked in a hotel, she was a receptionist. It was their choice that I go to Law school, it didn't seem interesting to me, I wanted something else, I thought about History, stuff like that. But my folks were pragmatic and told me: "Ok, what will you do with History?" Later it was proved to be a really good choice because I followed a career in law. In 2000 I came to*

*Bucharest, I took the bar exam and I passed. After that I started working as an intern in a law office. Well, right after that, a few months after I passed the bar exam I met certain people, I met Mariana Buceanu who had worked at Romani CRISS, she introduced me to the people there and that's how I ended up running the Human Rights department at Romani CRISS.*

Although Dezideriu talks calmly and it doesn't seem like he needs to explain about belonging to two contested and debated ethnic groups, I can't stop insisting. I ask him about what this double belonging means to him, how does he live it, with his fair complexion and chestnut hair. What's his favourite team when Romania and Hungary play against each other. About how fluid the boundaries are between the three groups he belongs to and how he negotiates the boundaries and the overlapping areas between them.

*My ethnic belonging has never been an issue for internal turmoil, because I came from a mixed family, from an area where there were no problems regarding ethnicity and I never really wondered who I am. I wondered this much later, especially after starting to work for the Roma movement. My answer is that I am what I am, regardless of ethnicity. This is a pretty difficult question for someone born into a mixed family because you get something from each of them and it all depends on what the person identifies with more from what they've got. In my case there are three nationalities, three ethnicities, whatever you want to call them, and of course there's a blend and the situation is pretty confusing. It might be ok because you're not thinking about it or it might be upsetting because you do. In my cases people would tell me "You're not Roma", Romanians would tell me "You're Hungarian" because I have a Hungarian name and the Hungarians "Are you a Hungarian?" when they first meet me. In the end all that matters is what you feel, not what others believe. I asked this question late in my life, but I clarified it not by assuming something but by what I feel and I believe that the most important thing is to not feel constrained in any way by my Romanian or Roma or Hungarian part, it's something that I feel naturally and it shows in certain situations. That's why I chose to work in a field that was related to this topic. I could have very well practiced Law, for instance with the office in which I started to work as a lawyer before knowing of Romani CRISS or other organizations, I could have*

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*continued my practice on civil law, commercial law or penal law. I have several options, but this part concerning human rights seemed something I could find myself in. And it was a double retrieval, connected to me, to my inner self as a person, but also to my profession. I worked at Romani CRISS as a lawyer only on discrimination, abuse, violence cases, pretty serious issues regarding the Roma. For me this contributed to the development of my inner awareness regarding this part of me. For someone in a similar situation it's easy to juggle, but because you can always hide a part of you, deny it, put it aside or not admit it. As far as I'm concerned, what makes me feel at ease and free is that I feel no reluctance in saying I come from a family with a Roma side. It's obvious that when you declare your ethnic background there are some who feel a certain discomfort when you tell them you're a Roma – Hungarian. "Ah, so you have both of them, that is the worst!" if you add the fact that you're of another religion, let's say a neo-protestant religion towards which people feel reluctance, then you're the sum of all "evils", of course with inverted commas – and I'm talking about the public perception. I'd rather ignore these situations, I prefer to keep my distance, because such a situation is not about me, really, but about the other one: the problem is not with me but with them.*

*After the activity with Romani CRISS I went to America where I attended specialised human rights courses. I went to Columbia University in New York, I went to a specialization program for lawyers and, through a Public Interest Law Initiative scholarship there was a department associated with the Columbia University. The scholarship was for attorneys working in the human rights field. Of course my work with an organization, Romani CRISS, in a way was a good fit with the program. After I came back from America, after a two year program, the NGOs proposed my appointment as a member in the Board of Directors of the NCCD. In august the Prime Minister appointed me a member of the Board of Directors after an interview. I was appointed thanks to my expertize, which was suitable for that position, as the law stipulated the requirements for membership in the Council. Therefore I am with the NCCD since august 2005.*

From this point on Dezideriu prefers to tell me more about his work and about why he thinks that what he's doing is what needs to be done. That people need to be protected from discrimination, that the weak need to be

protected from injustice. Dezideriu's work comes from a moral impulse, transparent and almost elementary, and it's hard for me to interrupt him and bring him back to his childhood or his years in university. I listen to him and I don't want to change the subject.

*It's outrageous to put the children in separate classes, to differentiate between them. Oftentimes, schools invoke the principle of class continuity: if a class is formed in a certain structure it has to follow the same structure until a cycle ends, this means that if you have some Roma children from a community the school will place them in the same class and then they'll say that by virtue of this principle they will go all the way with the segregation. It's unacceptable, it's a form of discrimination because you're involuntarily labeling even though you base your class formation on a pedagogical principle or on the principle that those children come from a certain area, a community. I remember the first segregation case I brought up for discussion with the Ministry of Education in 2003 (I was working for Romani CRISS back then), a case of Roma learning in a different building, they weren't even in the same building with the others, and that building was a ruin, the conditions were unacceptable. There were only some desks, no windows, no heat, nothing. There was an investigation and the NCCD went to the site. This seems extremely cruel: the Roma children were in that separate building, there was no teacher in the classroom, they were alone, but they were playing chess. Yes, it was extraordinary for those who went there to see some children left on their own but who would sit and play chess.*

*One of the most sensitive situations is about placing Roma children in special needs schools, basically in schools for mentally disabled children. The Roma children would be placed there without any medical certificate that would attest it. Besides those situations there are others related to the behavior of teachers towards the Roma children. As I was saying before, the child is told "you're this and that". There's another case of a teacher who didn't allow a Roma girl in school. These types of cases are, in my opinion, extremely, extremely serious. Why? First, because they take place in the educational system, and we expect that an educational system helps the child instead of throw her aside. Second, because there are consequences for a child, that child is subjected to discrimination*

## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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*from certain points of view, not just because she's of a certain ethnicity but also because she is a child, like any other child. And this calls upon protection, not violation of her rights: protect him, or we have the exact opposite. That child has no blame whatsoever, and there's no justification for treating her differently, even if we say that discriminations are not intentional, the effect is the same. To behave in a discriminating way means to hurt another person's dignity, even if we talk about a child, that child has her dignity, I can't imagine any situation that would justify that. Of course it's difficult for a child to react to such a discriminating behavior or attitude but you surely have to fight back. Now, of course children internalize differently the situations they go through, some children may close in when they feel such a situation, get a frustration that they keep inside and this may lead to feeling isolated, right? Other children may accept the situation and take it as it is. In some cases the child may have a feeling of acceptance of being inferior, that is "You're stupid anyway, you're a Gypsy". Ok, no one expects anything from me, therefore this is what I am.*

That's called self-fulfilling prophecy. The psychological and sociological literature are full of studies that reveal the same thing: if the perception of you as an individual or of your group is a negative one, then it's highly likely that you'll end up confirming that negative perception. It's a vicious circle. It's scary to think that my prejudices might determine someone's destiny.

*The Romanian educational system is so criticized around the world but if you add the discrimination cases then how can you expect that an educational system prepares the children? We're not used to react, we take everything as a given, because the system was basically based on providing information. Children are never asked to think, to debate, to have an opinion, another point of view. I had the opportunity to study in America where there's a completely different system. There the emphasis is on individual study, if you don't read you can't go to class because you won't understand a thing. They don't teach in class, in class they debate, and if you haven't read you can't debate because you can't intervene in discussions. We have the exact opposite, the teacher comes in and delivers the information.*

It just so happens that I can confirm what Dezideriu is saying. I have been trained, after the revolution, in a different system than the Romanian one. I was able to notice how the Romanians, otherwise capable of solving difficult equations at an age when the other classmates hadn't even heard of equations, were perfectly incapable of critical thinking. They would stand up whenever they were asked a question. The other classmates, from other countries, would laugh: they had never seen something like that. The emphasis was not on discipline, memorizing and on the holy obedience to the teacher. The emphasis was on judgment, on originality, on initiative. A foreign school has taught me to think by myself.

Some time ago an old friend asked me about my old school. He asked me to talk to whatever people I still knew at the school so that his son would get admitted there. As we got to talking we inevitably debated, during a few months, on the Roma topic, on discrimination and racism. We had a fight. I am angry that I couldn't get him to think at least a little for himself instead of spewing almost ad litteram the stereotypes he read in newspapers. And then I remembered that his son will go to my old school. Never mind, I thought, I give up. Maybe in ten-fifteen years his son will manage to dislocate the prejudices I couldn't shake.

I come from an average family. My parents are not university graduates, they are at a middle level, simple people who succeeded in life through what they've done and for whom it was important that I achieve more than they could. And from this perspective I did exceed my family's status. I succeeded because my parents have supported me completely, made total sacrifices so that I could overcome my condition, in fact I think this was the most important thing I got from my family, their complete support. It's very important to be supported, but it's also important that you do something for yourself. You create your own value, by what you do. Self-confidence comes from what you know, from what you build on your own.

## *“My first teacher didn’t care that we were Roma”*

**Mioara Ganea,**

24 years old, primary school teacher, Budila

*“Look at me, I am Roma, I’m a Gypsy and I got here, so it’s possible”.* That’s what Mioara Ganea said to the parents and children with whom she was about to start her teaching career, during the first days of school.. She had been assigned a class of Roma children who, as she was soon to find out, were facing serious problems at home: financial, health, family, perspective problems. As she’s telling me about this first episode of her teaching career, almost a year after it happened, Mioara is looking at me with a serious look on her face, but her speech is enlivened, alert; only from time to time she lowers her voice and the phrase ends with a “well...” to which I don’t really know what to respond.

It’s the first time we meet but we stay together for more than two hours, during which I seldom interrupt her with questions. Mioara tells her own story, with determination, the same way she lives it. A story about human limitations, sometimes petty ones, left behind as if the only solution is to overcome them. *“In my family too, the relatives would tell my folks: what will this one do if she goes to school? Nothing will ever come out of a Gypsymanager, engineer. But my will was stronger than their mockeries”.* And stronger than many other things: financial hardships, discrimination, all sorts of difficulties. *“No one in my family has ever gone to high school before me”.* Mioara starts her story, for a reason, with her insistent wish to go to school. Because she’s only 24 and she’s a school teacher and also because, no matter how many brackets we’d open, we’d always come back to the preoccupation with school, it seems this has been the focus of her entire life, the most constant challenge and the greatest source of satisfaction.

*When I was six years old, in the fall, my mother came out to send the cow with the herd and I came out after her. Everybody was walking around, with flowers in their hands, dressed nicely, and I say: “What’s going on?” and my mother says “Well, the children are starting school”. And as I sat there and looked at people I started*

*shouting that I also wanted to go to school. My mother tells me: "They won't admit you to school because you're six years old, there are older children who weren't enrolled in school yet and there's no room for you, you should go to kindergarten". My best friend and I sat in the middle of the road, in the dust, carriages would pass by on both sides, as people were going to the fields, and we would kick and scream that we wanted to go to school. Eventually my mother took me, completely unprepared, because I was not of school age, took me to my aunt, took a uniform from one of my cousins, dressed me up and took me to school. I wasn't enrolled, anything. And there I was in the school yard, many children around, I was happy. Teachers start talking about school, what not – I was very attentive; then the teachers for the younger children are introduced and my mother asks me: "Which Miss do you want to go to?" There were two young ladies, one in a long green skirt and the other one with a red mini, and I say "The lady in red", "Ok, I will enroll you in that lady's class". The lady took me in, it was ok. After I left school I went to the stores with my mother so she would buy me what I needed. She bought me things, we went home. The third day the principle comes in and, when he sees me there, he says: "This little girl has to go home, she's not seven; we have nine year olds who haven't been enrolled in school, we have repeaters and we don't have seats for six year olds". I started yelling, because I enjoyed school, I liked the teacher and, as the principle was coming to throw me out the door, the Miss says: "Ok, we need to make room for her, I'll gather my things at my desk and Mioara will come and sit at the front desk". And she made room for me at her desk. When the principle saw that, he couldn't say anything else and he left. That's how I started to go to school: because I wanted to. And I was a good student, I finished first grade in the top of my class.*

Mioara doesn't comment on the facts, she's just stating them. She doesn't tell me, because it's obvious, how important this episode was with respect to what she was going to become later. She doesn't send out reflections about how crucial it is that, early on in life, you meet someone with an open mind, who's willing to support you, to help, to get involved – in other words to do their job. Such an unexpected apparition in that world, a lady with a "red mini" in a grey world. It's clear that the teacher instantly became a role model for Mioara – as for many other students probably.



## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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*Miss didn't care that we were Roma, we had some great festivities with her, we went caroling at Christmas, we had a carnival, all sorts of things, it was great. Starting the second grade Miss got involved in all sorts of projects that would bring things for school: she would bring us clothes, supplies, all kinds of stuff. I was – I don't know, I just loved her. At the end of the second grade she brought furniture for the entire school from The Netherlands, she brought typewriters and computers.*

The young teacher, at the beginning of her journey herself, didn't embody just an early role model but also an early warning on the fact that, when you're different than most of those around you, regardless of what that "different" stands for or whether it's relevant, you're prone to face difficulties – a fact that the teacher and her student discovered almost at the same time.

*At the end of the second grade, during the summer, Miss took one of the typewriters home; she was going to bring it back and she was the reason they were brought in anyway. And I think they've accused her of stealing but they didn't tell her. I think one of the other teachers accused Miss. She wasn't like them, she wouldn't smoke and drink coffee with them in the teachers' room, and when they had the chance to get rid of her they took it – that's what I'm thinking, I don't know whether it's true or not. When I started the third grade Miss was waiting for us at the door and the principle came to her and told her "You know, you don't work here anymore". She didn't know, they didn't tell her over the summer that she was going to be fired, that her work contract will be interrupted. "You don't work with us anymore, you've been detached to work somewhere else". And she left for the school in the neighbor commune. When I saw her leaving I was surprised, I didn't know what was going on. The next day another teacher came, and she was ok, but we didn't get along as well as we did with our Miss, we didn't have the festivities and the activities we used to do.*

I can imagine the harsh world she found herself in, Mioara's "lady in the red mini". There was a rural world, brutified by hardships, without many perspectives, breathing the heavy air of inertia, a world that the young teacher wanted to change. Among the teachers who have lost their calling, if they ever had one, on the daily village roads, either dusty or muddy. And among the

parents who have lost their faith, if they ever had one, that the school will do much good for their children. A world animated by petty plots, resentful, stakeless, fostering a lazy, inertial, standardized thinking. A world that many of us want to change and, after a while, we give up trying, settling just for the hope that it won't end up changing us. Mioara does not say all of these things, but, as she reaches this point, she sighs. But she soon gets back to her story about how she relentlessly followed her path. Her will to succeed in life becomes apparent, though I don't know what might have inspired it, but it was surely supported by the chance to have had a providential teacher.

At the end of all these trials, one of the most convincing signs that Mioara had succeeded was to meet her old teacher, in the school where she would start her first year of teaching:

*Miss, my former teacher, is still working in a nearby commune where I was also assigned last year. I hadn't been in touch with her since the second grade, but I had heard that she was working there. And when I went in the first day of school and saw her, I couldn't believe it, I was embarrassed to talk to her, but the next day in spite of my shame I went to her and asked her: "Excuse me, are you by any chance Andra Ursu?" "Yes", she said, "I am, but my name is not Ursu anymore" – she had gotten married in the meantime. "Do you need anything from me?" "Yes, I do, you know in '96 when you were teaching, I am Mioara Ganea". "And what are you doing here?" "Well, you know, I teach second grade D". and then she started out loud, "What do you know, my former student is a teacher!" I was so nervous that my knees went feeble.*

Mioara had to walk a long and winding road until she got to be colleagues with her former teacher. Of course she's not the one using these words, I am, for lack of others that would better describe how much her story moved me. I don't use it out of compassion for what she's been through but out of admiration for the determinacy with which she faced and overcame the situations she encountered, thanks to her inner rebellion or another engine that drives her and I can't fully grasp. As I follow Mioara's story a dimmed rural scene lingers in my mind, colored in stuffy shades of grey. And then, somehow, light manages to permeate this whole scene, almost imperceptible. "First of all," Mioara tells me, "my family's situation was not an easy one":

## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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*My father is a driver, he works on a tractor; he went to some sort of vocational school in Bucharest, and my mother has only graduated from secondary school, because her father died when she was eight. After my mother turned 15 her mother wouldn't allow her to go to school; my grandmother had already raised seven children on her own and she felt it was time for my mother to help her so she urged my mother to get married. My mother told her she didn't want to get married, because she wanted to go to school, but my grandmother wouldn't hear of it, and so it happens that she didn't go to school but she also didn't get married then. My mother had graduated the eighth grade with an average of nine point something and I had the same average, the exact same one. My brothers didn't go forward, unfortunately, because the family's financial situation was so bad and well...I was really keen on studying, and this is why my parents made tremendous efforts: they both got jobs when I was on the eighth grade, although my mother had never worked since marrying my father, because, well, she had five children to raise, and my father had retired a few years before by the ordinance. But when I was about to take my capacity exam they thought: "the girl has to go to school, we need to work" and they both got jobs. And, even so, there were times when my mother would stop buying her medication so that I would have enough money for transportation; there were times, in the early school years, in winter, when I would go to school wearing my brothers' jacket, which was too big for me and it was also for boys. I didn't have cool clothes in high school either, I would wear whatever was around, but they were clean clothes.*

Again the cleanliness that many of the characters of this book bring up, so many times. Having clean clothes as an alternative to having fashionable clothes. Or as a response to one of the most common clichés regarding the Romas, that they are "filthy". And again the pressure to prove oneself. To be good – the best if possible. Is it a competitive spirit or is it again an unconscious attempt to combat a stereotype, maybe an internalized one?

*During the second grade we got a new classmate, the daughter of the chief policeman. And I went: I have to learn better, this girl is going to take my place, we were a mixed class, Romas and Romanians also, and I used to share the desk with a boy, a Romanian, and when the daughter of the chief policeman came the teacher sat us together. And I started to learn even better; I was learning well anyway because*

*it was like that, I started like that. Therefore I got the first prize in the second grade also. I don't know, there was an insignificant difference, my average was nine point seventy something and my colleague had under nine fifty and she was so ashamed that she moved to another school or something; they said that her father had been detached but Miss would say that she moved because "Oh, look, the Gypsy took the first prize and the daughter of the chief policeman who came from I don't know where only took the second prize". We were getting along great, I would visit her, she would visit me, even if the conditions were very bad in our house. I would visit her, she would visit me, we were getting along great, but the competition was competition.*

Until the fifth grade discrimination was not among Mioara's problems. But as she went to secondary school and the ethnicities in the class diversified, it became a problem:

*In the fifth grade they mixed us with the Hungarian ethnic students, so that we were three ethnicities in the same class, and they started to gibe us, to call us all sorts of names, and the Romanian classmates would say "Dude, are they not people also? We've been with them since the first grade". Yes, they were really talking dirty to us, we would tune out. There was another big issue when, after the first semester, my average grade was again bigger than the one of my classmates from the Hungarian section, who used to be prize winners up until the fourth grade. I would learn the same way I had before, I didn't take it into my head to do it, I don't know, I wanted to learn and, well... and eventually it turned out fine, we got along. There was a difference in the teachers' evaluations, for the Romanian class we had been given as homework a plan for The King Aliodor. Before me, my Hungarian classmate presented her plan, I followed after her, that was the class book order, Gal – Ganea. And she got a ten and I got a four. "Why is that, Miss, I have ten ideas", because there was a minimal number of ideas, "why four for me and ten for my classmate, the plans are similar, I say: why?" "No, you did it wrong", and such. Ok, that's how it goes. Of course my classmate got the first prize in the fifth grade, but, well, with the required quotation marks, she shouldn't have as far as I'm concerned, but, well, that's how it went. I believe I took the first prize in the sixth grade, as well as in the seventh grade, because the teachers changed.*

## **What do you want to be when you grow up?**

The discrimination on behalf of her Romanian teacher was not a singular event for Mioara during secondary school. The Math teacher, a young gentleman from Bucharest, had pre-established principles about how much the Roma learned, so he wouldn't bother to teach them but he would go and ask them embarrassing questions – mainly for himself, actually – imagining out loud they were living in tents and washed up with rain water.

*In the eighth grade a young teacher came who didn't care about what happened to us, he didn't care about coming to class on time, if he got there, fine, if he didn't, he didn't. He would come twice a week, four hours or something, and he then he would arrive late and start the discussions: and how do you live out here? And how do you wash up? With rain water? Do you herd the goats? Where do you live? Do you live in tents? Because the gentleman was from Bucharest, he was the son of an university manager and well... that was aimed at us, he would mostly talk to us, because the others, the Hungarians, were not involved, or the Romanians... but the talks were mostly about us, he would circle the room... "crap" and "crap" again. That's the word that stuck with me, "crap", I had never heard the word before, I didn't know what it meant, I ask my classmates: "What does it mean?" "I don't know", because, well, we didn't know it in the countryside. I go home and tell my mother: "Mother, I keep hearing the Math teacher saying "crap" in class, what does "crap" mean?" "It means something bad". Ok, something bad, what does he think it's bad? I didn't know what was it that he thought it was bad, that's how it was... I never asked him, I didn't have the courage. And at the end of the first semester we had the final exam, of course I got a poor grade. And now he goes: "What will you do, you're not preparing for the capacity exam, what shall we do so we talk to the principle?" In the meantime the principle had changed. He went, he talked to the new principle, my mother of course went with a complaint, "I will go and file a complaint!" She had one complaint for the Inspectorate, one for the principle and one for the Ministry. "I will go and drop one off with each of them, so they know we have problems and we'll see what we'll do". When she went to school, the principle said "Please, don't" – I think that's where they found out he was the son of a university manager. "Wait, this and that, we'll do something and we'll move her from class A to class B", because class eight B had more Romanians and Hungarians than Roma and the*

*teacher would come in more often there, he would come to class more often than he did with us. The same teacher, and of course he got really upset with me, because it all started with me. But he had something against us, there were also Romas, but there he would come to class normally, it was a normal class, normal lesson, normal evaluation, exercises, recapitulation, normally constructed classes. He would come in time, he would go out when the bell rang. He was different, but with us he acted differently, and well, they were not surprised when I didn't pass the exam. Because you could see the difference in the other classes where the teachers worked properly. I don't know, take Geography for instance, the best teacher I've ever had, I think, it was obvious, I got a nine something in the first exam. After that, well, because I didn't go, the second time I took the exam I got an eight something, forty I guess, less. And I went there, big competition, what not, of course ambition, I have to learn, I have to learn. I started to do the exercises on my own, to teach myself from the Math book, to catch up with the students in eighth B, because we were far behind. Somehow, somehow I managed to catch up with them, but I couldn't come that close and I took the capacity exam and I failed, no one in our series passed the Math test. I got a 4,95 in Math.*

Before I recall that Mioara is a school teacher now, that she graduated from the faculty, for a split second I think “Oh, and this is when you gave up”. I instantly remember that Mioara in fact didn't quit, and I'm waiting for the rest of the story to see how she has found the strength to go on. I get no explanations, no victimization, no demands, but a story – made up of episodes of various intensities and lengths, sprinkled with various details and alertly described scenes, and I still don't understand what's driving this story. Maybe the engine is hiding in “Before me, no one has ever been to high school, I was the only one in my family”, a phrase that Mioara slips into her story made up of action verbs: “I went”, “I did”, “I enrolled myself”, “I took”, “I passed”. I extract it from there and I wonder if, maybe, that's the plot – a plot that's well hidden by the moments describing the action. A phrase which comprises the determination of a family to make sacrifices so that their name is called out, for the first time, from a high school class book. A decision placed on the shoulders of a shy little girl, as Mioara still seems to me, with big eyes, who somehow got into her head the decision to not give up.

*So I don't stay home and forget what I've already learned I went to a vocational school for a year, so that I didn't lose my touch. I got admitted into a professional school in Brasov and I went there for a year. I prepared the entire year, I did exercises, especially for Math because that had made me fail the year before. I said: this is how it is, at least I tried. You need to try, at least. I signed up again and I was the only one to have passed from the previous year. In Math I only passed with five point five, just above the line, that was all that I could learn on my own. When I took the capacity exam my parents were both in the hospital, my father had problems with his eyes and my mother had some problems with her heart and kidneys. My mother had been hospitalized from the very first day of the exam. And I went there alone, the same happened at the baccalaureate exam. When the results were out I was at work in their place, they were shop assistants and I went to cover for them after the exam. My aunt comes to me and says: "Do you know today is the day they release the results?" I say "Yes, I know, but who can I put in my place? Shall I call the owner to come and cover for me? Because, well...she won't come". And she says "Wait a minute, I'll call the Music teacher, maybe she can make a call and see if she can get your results". She went and came back excited, "Look, you passed", she had the list with the results. I was, well, happy I had passed. I was supposed to enroll in high school I don't know how many days after the results, there was no parent at home to give their consent, to sign some forms, I didn't know what to choose, there was that list that needed to be filled in, I didn't know how to fill in, what choices to make first, what to do, how to do it, whatsoever. And my aunt says, "I'll talk to this Music teacher again", she was from our commune. "let's go to her for help with filling in that list". I went to see her, we filled in the stuff together, the high school I went to I had put on the 16<sup>th</sup> position, my average was not that great anyway so I could aspire to a better high school and whatnot. The first on my list was Grigore Antipa High school, something sanitary, because at that time it seemed impossible that I would also pass the baccalaureate exam. And well, with the help of the Music teacher I filled in the admission form, one of my brothers went to bring my father from the hospital and that was the first time that my father came to school and talked to the principle and the teachers. He did come again after that, but he would only come to the school yard, ask a child to give me my lunch pack*

*and otherwise he wouldn't come in to talk to anyone, it was my mother who attended the meetings and all that. My father came from the hospital for a few hours, signed my form and went back, and that's how I enrolled in high school. After that the computer did the assignment, I went to see what high school I was assigned to, I saw it, and thought, ok, very well. My mother had come home from the hospital in the meantime and she goes, "let's see the high school" because we needed to drop off the file. When I got there the first day and I saw that it was on the outskirts, behind the "Roman" factory, I say "oh, what am I gonna do here?" I had to walk beneath a small forest, on a hill, between two factory buildings, and I say "I'm not staying here", especially because on the high school door it was written "You've entered hell" or something like that, a very nice message, probably written by former students. I entered, I looked around, I started crying and I didn't want to leave my file there, we went home. One of my uncles says "don't worry, I'll take you by car every morning, I'll come and pick you up" and so on and eventually I went and left my file there. My uncle took me there and brought me back throughout the first semester, until I learned the way and got used to it. Well, he didn't do it for free, my mother would pay for the gas, it was pretty hard.*

Things were fine during high school. Mioara continues to tell the story. There are a lot of episodes after which I feel again like interrupting her to ask how she felt, but I don't do it, and not only because it would be a tacky question, from a namby-pamby reportage, but also because the answer is not easy to give. What could she tell me? Probably, something along the lines of, "it wasn't quite ok" or "it sucked but, see, I moved forward". That's what she's, in fact, saying, but in other words, without pondering, without going into details, without lecturing me. Mioara has a story to tell and she doesn't pause to spread criticisms and judgments.

*There was an event one time, so to say: in high school I met with a far cousin who wouldn't say she was of Roma ethnicity and she kept asking me not to say that we're Roma, because she wanted to be a model or something, she was a blonde. Ok, I didn't say anything during the ninth grade. But in the tenth grade I couldn't help myself and I told them I was a Gypsy. And this cousin transferred immediately, she wouldn't stay for one more day, she was ashamed,*



*but I am not ashamed. And I integrated with my colleagues pretty well in the ninth grade anyway, I enjoyed myself. There were no issues with the teachers either. Every time they held a parents meeting – too bad we're not home so you could ask my mother what the class master or the principle or the other teachers were always saying: "Mioara is well behaved, if only all the children were like Mioara" and so on. It didn't go as well as it had during secondary school but it was ok, I passed all the classes, I finished high school well. Although, during the 12<sup>th</sup> grade, the Geography teacher wouldn't allow me to take the baccalaureate exam, I don't know what she had against me. We had three tests before the baccalaureate and I would get a four or less than four at every testing; my best friend in the class, who was a prize winner in high school, would look and see for herself that our papers were identical, because Geography was my strong suit. When the results came, she would get an eight or a nine and I would always score below five. And the teacher went: "I won't let you take the baccalaureate exam, you're not up to it" and so on. I would sit with my classmate and compare papers, because she was really supportive of me, and when the colleagues from the other classes heard they also came with their papers to compare, to check the results. Cheating was out of the question, because when we entered the classroom all the bags were put in a corner, all the phones on the front desk, the teacher would give us pen and paper, everything, and we would go to our desks and write, there was no one to cheat from, we would sit one on one end of the desk and the other on the other side. We went to the front desk, took the papers to compare them, everybody supported me because it was obvious and everybody knew you couldn't cheat, the teacher couldn't justify my grade, it was settled that she won't allow me to take the baccalaureate exam. We all gathered to talk to the class master, but she was out of school that day and it was the enlistment week, that was the last test before the exam, so we went to the specialty teacher, Biochemistry, Miss Cizmarescu. When she heard she put her hands on her hips, like that, and she said: "It's impossible, how come she doesn't allow you to the baccalaureate exam, the grades are pretty good in Biochemistry, seven something in Biochemistry, let's see about Geography". We brought the latest papers: "Look for yourself", my papers and my classmates'. She then went to the principle. After the break we had a Geography class; the teacher came in crying, "What*

*have you done to me?” and so on. “We have nothing against you, but if you gave me this grade...”. I think she cried for half an hour, then she eventually rallied and allowed me to take the exams. And at the baccalaureate exam I got an eight something, I got a nine in the Romanian oral exam and 7,45 in writing, the highest grade among my classmates. The Romanian teacher was also surprised, since he would never grade me more than six. There were classmates who wouldn't even come to class and get a passing five, and if I didn't know the quote he wanted from me I would get a three; when I asked why he gave me a three he would say, “Because you come in every day and you have to know, because you can do better”, that was his explanation, the lower grade will motivate me to learn harder.*

Mioara takes a break. She completed another episode and she's looking at me with a mix of seriousness and amusement. I feel she's not expecting indignation or pity from me. She's not telling her story to elicit a tear from me. She's not insisting on the difficult moments, doesn't make a big deal out of it, she's recounting all at once, the good and the bad, about the teachers who have helped her, teachers who have impeded her, about solidary classmates and about classmates who would squint at her, about moments of tribulation and moments of success. She doesn't even stop to sigh and say “What can you do, that's life”, although her story breaths the air of reconciliation, one way or the other, with the things that have determined it, good or bad. But Mioara doesn't want to conclude in our place; she's just providing a good piece of food for thought, in a pure form, not seasoned with sayings and quotes. Therefore I don't ask her this time either “And how did you feel?” but I ask her to tell me how she moved on, to faculty.

*I enrolled in faculty two years after I graduated from high school. Back then I wanted to go to the Polytechnic University, something food related, because that was what I had done in high school and I liked it quite a lot. But after I signed in I had to withdraw my file because my mother got even sicker, she couldn't work, and I stayed home to take care of her and work, to make some money for the house, in her place. After my two years home, in the summer of 2008, I took an exam for unqualified substitute teacher positions. I met my secondary school Romanian teacher at the exam, the one who'd only give me four, just because she thought so. She was also taking the exam. I only knew Romanian and Methodology, I saw the bibliography before going to the*

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*exam and I could only read a little, I didn't know that much anyway, but I got a six. And my former Romanian teacher didn't even get a five, she failed and was unable to go forward. I went forward to the assignment, but there were no positions close to my commune and I didn't want to go too far, I couldn't leave home, with my mother being so sick. That pushed me to sign in at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences. And, of course, I really liked the way Miss Andra Ursu, my first and second grade teacher was teaching.*

Reduced to a narration, Mioara's story sounds simple: a teacher who impresses you, the desire to learn and the support of those around you – your family, your relatives, your friends – to overcome the difficulties. This could be the story of many people born in the rural areas or in the outskirts slums, who were confronted with material hardships and health problems, whose family had previously only studied up to eight grades, who didn't have any perspectives, worked hard around the house after classes, commuted, who many times saw the family's last money going to their school needs, but who were strong and went forward. People who allowed themselves to be inspired by a providential person and mobilized by a strong will which, if you ask them, they wouldn't know where it came from. It's true, this might seem like anyone's story, and up to a point you could even forget that it has an ethnic twist. Or that, alongside all these difficulties that many pupils face, Mioara, being of Roma ethnicity, also had to endure the injustices of some teacher or classmate: some additional difficulties that were also overcome and on which you can focus your attention when you follow her story. or not.

*During the faculty years I would try to work wherever I could during the summers, any kind of work, cleaning, housekeeping. The money I would earn over the summer were enough for two months, I also had the faculty scholarship and some help from my parents and that's how I got by... well, I also wanted to learn, not just go to university just for the sake of going. At home, of course, I would also work, because my mother and my father had jobs, so whenever I got home I'd clean, wash, and cook for them, because they would only get home at ten in the evening. They were shop attendants. And I would come with God knows what, a portfolio, homework, I had to study, I did what I could. The teachers didn't have any comments on my being a Roma, the colleagues either, I told them from the beginning that I was a Roma, I introduced myself the first weeks: I am Mioara, I am a Gypsy, well,*

*that's what I am. I graduated faculty this year, I passed the license exam on June, 27<sup>th</sup>.*

A few days after our meeting Mioara had the tenure exam. “I’m scared to death,” she told me back then. I saw her again in the fall, on the first day of school, after she had passed the exam and was assigned a position in her natal village, in Budila, where she had been a student herself not too long ago. Now she was surrounded by little first graders, brought by young mothers who were slightly intimidated by the ceremony of the first day of school. The classroom was already awaiting them decorated with drawings, flowers and books. And maybe some of them, following on Mioara’s footsteps, will become teachers themselves, in fifteen-twenty years, and will greet their students between the same walls silently witnessing so many stories – both failure and of success.

*“What does being a Romanian mean to you? Is there any difference between us?”*

**Madalin Mandin,**

28 years old, actor, Bucharest

I arrive at Geraldine’s parents’ house during the photo shoot. You can see from afar that Madalin is enjoying himself: he’s cheerful, laughing, cracking jokes, his good humor is contagious. You instantly like him, even before you know him. He’s a person who’s giving out energy and optimism. I picture him as a jolly child, with a happy, carefree childhood.

*I lived in Bucharest until I was seven, with my brother and my parents. After that I went to the countryside, as they say, for the first grade, in Islaz commune, Teleorman county. It’s a historical commune, in 1848 the abolition of the Gypsies’ slavery had been read there. It was all good there, a happy childhood, but in the fifth, the sixth grade I would be labeled “a Gypsy”. Everybody would tell me: “Aaa, Gypsy, come over here, Gypsy!”. I’ve never been bothered by this. I was actually the only one “of ethnicity”, as they say, in my class. The first issue related to this “Watch out, he’s a Gypsy” thing happened once, during the teachers’ meeting with the parents. I was sitting in the first row and I remember, that’s still with me even now, like an arrow of some sorts, like a sling hitting me right here in my ear, the mother of a Romanian child saying “Please don’t sit my son with that Gypsy!”. That was a shock for me, I was surprised, as I was only a child: how could anyone say not to share a desk with him? What’s wrong with me? On the contrary, I would actually sit at the first desk and I remember that I would help this classmate of mine many times with the subjects we had in class. I remember being good in Romanian, French, Geography, Arts, I was good in Music. He was good in History and Maths, exactly the subjects I didn’t like. That experience I had then has marked me in a way. Is it that difficult to*

*not change your opinion about a person? Does ethnicity matter that much? Does it really matter whether you are a Roma or not?*

Unfortunately, sometimes it does. Madalin remembers another episode in secondary school when one of his classmates has lost his pen. All eyes turned to Madalin, who suddenly became the main character under the spotlight. The classmate started to aggress him, to blame him, "You've stolen my pen! The entire class saw you steal my pen!" Optical illusions, magic tricks through which it's a Roma's fault if something disappears. Madalin hadn't stolen his pen, he had his own pen, as he remembers to this day, and it was nicer than that of his classmate. There was no reason for him to steal it. And yet, under pressure, to get rid of the others' accusations, Madalin bought a new pen for his classmate. He repaired a mistake he had never committed. Madalin was no thief. He wasn't filthy either. On the contrary, he says: "My father would always see that I have handkerchiefs at school, I am always neat, he would always scorn me if I came home dirty". He was not neglectful either. Quite the opposite:

*I remember, I would go to the library, it was the communal library within the cultural house and everybody knew me. I remember I would borrow books there. Sometimes they would give me a torn book and I would say: "Look, it's torn, I'll fix it..." And I would cover the books in that white paper, I would cover their covers and take care of them, just so, you know, they don't think I was the one who tore them up.*

I wonder what it's like growing up feeling that, if something is torn, stolen, or lost, the first person they look at will be you. Having to anticipate this kind of things and do everything to prevent them. It's hard for me to picture how I would have felt or reacted under that pressure, regardless of how much I empathize with the person next to me. Or the need that many of the people I interview talk about, the need to be twice as good, as conscientious, as tidy as the other one, so that I don't fuel the stereotypes about my own ethnicity. My ethnicity, in my own country, has never been a problem for me. In his own country, Madalin's ethnicity has caused him discomforts which he overcame by holding his head high:

*In secondary school older children, from the ninth or tenth grade would sometimes come to the school yard and bully the little*

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*kids. And I remember some gave me a beating once. "Dude, 'cause you're a Gypsy". And I go to my father: "Dad, they've beaten me! Some kids have beaten me!" "They have beaten you? Yes? And what do you want? To take me with you so I solve your problems? No, son, you solve them yourself!" I have met with the aggressive classmates, older than me, we meet, we talk. Now they look at me with admiration: "Wow, you've come a long way, we're proud that one from our village has gone so far".*

Madalin was the first in his class to pass the eighth grade exam.

*In the eighth grade, what shall I do? My father says: "Let's take you to Bucharest". "Where?" "I was a woodsman and I went to high school in Branesti. Do you want to go to the woods?" "Well, dad, not really. I don't like the rifles, stuff like that". He says: "Ok then, what are your other options?" "Well, you see, the Music High school." "The Music High school? How come? What can you play?" My father, during the summers, would take me to an instrumentalist somewhere in Corabia, about a hundred kilometers away, and I would stay there for a month or two and study the piano. I knew what that person knew, which was not much. And my father liked to listen to us play – I would play the piano and my brother would play the violin – whenever we had company. I went to the Music School. My cousin was one of the best instrumentalists at the Music School and he had a high statute there. I remember there was this 22-23 year old guy in the dorm, a law student and one day he came to me and said: "Mandin, go wash my socks". And I said "Yes, of course, I'll wash them, no problem". "Go get me some donuts also". I bought him the donuts, I washed his socks. The next day, I don't know how, word got out in school, someone from the dorms told my cousin the story. I mean there was quite a scandal, they beat this guy up... well, they hit him as musicians do. And I didn't want this, I don't want anyone stepping in for me, solve my problems. And I told that to my cousin, I say: "Dude, please, don't ever do that again. You shouldn't have done that, it wasn't necessary. Don't intervene again". After that, that guy would always be so slavish and I would be ashamed of what had happened. I thought I could solve the problem on my own. There were a lot of Roma children in that dorm, pretty young, in their fourth or fifth grade, they had just arrived from the province, I don't know*

*where they were from. And I remember that in the evenings, when they were serving dinner at the high school cafeteria, many were still hungry after eating dinner and I got along with the ladies from the cafeteria and I would ask them for more bread and, whatever, I had jam up in my room, stuff like that. And I remember taking them up in my room and just staying there... the Roma children of the Music school. This I remember and I say, See, that was something I could do. Why not do something good for someone if you can? It's like putting them in an inner room, in a drawer, some good things and you take them out from time to time, whenever you do something bad, you take them out and say "Man, why can't I do this good thing? Let's put it back and leave aside this bad thing that I'm doing".*

Talking about the Roma children and about the bad things we're doing, Madalin touches on the subject of the prejudices against the Roma. He gets upset when he hears people tell their kids, "If you don't behave I'll have the Gypsies get you". Or: "We've gone full Gypsy", or: "What a Gypsy thing to do". Geraldine remembers how, during her violin classes, when she was young, the teacher would always tell her not to play as a Gypsy. It sounded negative, "to play as a Gypsy". It seems a little embarrassing that someone in the music field doesn't know – and doesn't appreciate – the mastery of many Roma fiddlers who, even if they can't always read the musical score, are appreciated abroad and "score points" for Romania. "I wished I could play like that", Geraldine says.

*In faculty they received me with open arms. I remember the admission exam, I remember that Zamfirescu and all the theatre elite was in the board, and he says: "Well... why did you come here?" "Well... why? Because I like it a lot", I say, "I hear you are Roma". "Yes, I am Roma". "Well, do you have something prepared for us, do you want to tell us something?" "Sure, I'll tell you something in my language". "Tell us then!". I told them the story of "The goat and her three kids" in Romani. I had guts, I admit it. And a few songs, I told them I could play the accordion if they wanted. I got in. And I want to say that for four years I really performed, it's still a state university, it's a lot of work. I would still stay at the dorms, obviously, I had a scholarship back then, one million three hundred lei, which covered my expenses with the housing. But I would still live off my parents, my folks would bring me food. It was a pretty difficult time, during the third year I would often think "Man, where am I going?". This artistic side in*



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*general is pretty complicated, especially with us. I say “Look, I don’t stand a chance, I am all alone in Bucharest...”. The other colleagues were pretty well off, and I would wonder: “Will I do something to succeed among them?” I struggled, I admit it. I remember going to the faculty and the colleagues would say: “Let’s make copies of the plays”, we needed the texts of the plays and you would go to the library, take a book and go and photocopy it. And I remember they would send me: “Hey, you, will you go?” “Yes, sure, I’ll go!” And they would say, “Look, you can keep the change”. And with that change I would buy bread and salami, I remember going to the third floor, to a drama room and eat there, because I didn’t want my colleagues to see me and say: “Aaa, look at him, he’s so poor, he has nothing to eat”. And I would go to school, I was always the first to arrive for the acting classes, I would wash the room, I really liked washing the room, because during the acting classes we had to rehearse there, on one side we would put the scenery, move the scenery, the clothes, I would take care of my colleagues’ props. It was really good for me, I admit it, I felt really, really well in faculty.*

I’m thinking that Madalin never thought it was weird or improper to be the one washing someone else’s socks when asked to or the one making copies of the plays for his colleagues or washing the floors of the classroom. I would have probably reacted differently. Why should I do things I can perceive as humiliating? Why accept to be put to do such chores? Madalin has never wondered, and he’s giving me a lesson: “Don’t ask what your country can do for you, you just go ahead and do something for your country. Have you asked yourself what you could do for it?”. A lesson in civism, modesty, simplicity. Madalin then enumerates the professional experiences he’s had since faculty. Best actor in the faculty award, best play in 2007 award, two TV shows, collaborations with Radio Romania Cultural, shows in the Bucharest and Brasov theatres, his own improvisation band, and now, “the icing on the cake”, he’s acting in a play in Romani, “A stormy night”, as Rica Venturiano.

*I’ve recently had a fascinating and great show at the same time. With people who came to the theatre for the first time, their first experience, and one of them said: “God, I went to the theatre last week, I am a Gypsy, I fell asleep last week, but now I laughed so hard!”. “What do you mean, did you fall asleep in the audience?”. “Yes, man, I fell asleep, but now, he says, now I wanted to know,*

*when they were chasing you, you were Rica, and they would chase you around the house and I thought oh, boy, they're gonna get him!" The show was very, very well received, which is very nice surprise. Well, it's a Caragiale play, and almost everybody knows Caragiale. It's also a comedy, people also come for that, especially as it brings a universe of our own. The way we are...we haven't changed at all...whatever, there are some negative comments about the show also: "Aaa, you stole Caragiale too? You stole him too?" That was on the news on a well known site...yes, it's all for the better, this means the Romanians have stolen Shakespeare and Cehov, the French have stolen Visniec if you put it this way! I remember my band members also asking me: "Hey, Rica Venturiano, what's it like in Romani? Come on, say something...". And this is where Rica Venturiano's part begins, when he arrives at the house of the alleged lady and he says: "Radiant angel, from the honor I felt first when writing my first letter, I want to say that I've gone mad!"*

Madalin's dream, also the dream of Sorin Sandu, his band colleague who we were going to interview later, is that Romania has a Roma theatre, as Russia has had for a long time, and as we have the German, the Hungarian or the Hebrew theaters. A theatre for a large community. I'm asking Madalin what does being a Roma mean for him.

*What does being a Romanian mean for you? It's the same thing! Being a Roma, a Romanian, is there any difference between us? I don't know, really. I am a bit darker than you are. I have a small chocolate "problem" with my skin! It's the first time anyone ever asked me this question, I admit it makes me smile, but I've never thought about it. What does being a Roma mean? I don't introduce myself: "Hello, I am an actor. I am Roma". Because we think the other one has prejudices and will say: "Aaa, wait, if I work with you in a theatre project or more you can do something bad to me". Last night I was walking with my girlfriend on the street and there were some kids, bigger, taller, more Roma, and she pulled my hand. And I say "Why did you pull my hand?" "Well I don't want us to pass them by!" "Why? I will pass them by!" And I had no problem to pass them by. This panic that you develop for yourself this way, constantly feed it, it generates an engine that, at some point, will work and generate hate. What do I do, I develop this panic that they'll get me? We have these*

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*clichés and patterns that drive us: you're a Roma, you must be black and aggressive...well you've never even talked to me to ask me how I'm doing, what I'm eating, invite me someplace or let's go out to talk, just the two of us. That's it, this basic instinct often betrays us because we don't know how to educate it, myself as a Roma or you as a Romanian.*

I only ask Madalin one more thing. If he went to a poor Roma community what would he tell the children?

*"You can do this and anyone of you can do as I did". My financial situation was not very good so I support myself there, but look, with the help of my parents, my parents have not invested in a house or a car or something, they've invested in our education and said we had the right to an education, and they have supported me as much as they could. And they have supported me, thank God, for 8 or 9 years, from high school until I graduated faculty. What can I say, I thank them a lot for this. But beyond the message, I would go to those children and say: "How are you, kids? Let's sit down. What toys do you have?" "Well, I have a broken spoon and a headless doll." "Come on and let's play with it". I could play with them. For one, two, three hours. This is what I think I'd do. What would you tell them if you went... to a community with poor Roma children. What would be the first thing you'd ask? Have you eaten, kids, would you ask them that? Would you have the courage to ask them that? Kids, do you have enough clothes to wear? Would you ask them that? Maybe by playing I can show them the occupations. We're playing and now we're saying: "Aaa, I'm giving an injection" "That's because you'll be a doctor someday!" What, do you need a strategy? Do we lie to them? Do we lie by that? No! You have them believe in something. What would you tell them? Tell me, what would you tell them?"*

*“They would all say: “Jesus, have you ever seen a Gypsy priest?” I thought I’d be the first one”*

**George Radulescu,**

32 years old, sociologist, Bucharest

I know George, we’ve worked together before. He has just finished his doctorate in sociology. He’s a handsome man, tall, slender (“he’s so good looking!” some sociology students would later say when they saw him in the documentary). He’s always behaving like a gentleman. I’ve never seen him wearing anything but suits, with a perfect line, impeccable shirts. He’s the prototype of the “classy” man, as they say.

*I was born in Braila in a family of Roma fiddlers, a combination of Roma fiddlers and blacksmiths. My mother went to a technical school, she had been motivated and supported by her family to go to school. My father also comes from a family of fiddlers, he was raised from an early age without a father, he was part of the working class, his studies were minimal. I inherited this motivation for school from my mother’s side. There were three values in my home: honesty, humanity and education. Ever since we were born, ever since I can remember, ever since I was a child, ever since I first went to school, I had ever since high school this stress of going to school all the time. And, including when I came to Bucharest, my only purpose was to go to faculty, school has always come first. I can say I’ve been lucky because I grew up in a family where my father was a good father and my mother was an intelligent woman. My father indulged us and my mother was a very strict woman, who has always monitored us and has guided us from behind. I’ve never seen her shadow but I felt her breath. I have two more brothers, my older brother is a social assistance graduate, we both shared the same path, actually all three of us, up until a certain point. So my brother is a social assistance graduate, master in development Social Policies and now he’s doing his doctorate and my younger brother has stopped to social*

assistance, master in probation. We've pretty much had the same route. We were the first in our family with higher education. As any other family during communism we lived in a workers' neighborhood – my mother and father worked in a plant – in a mixed neighborhood, with people from all over the country and I can say we were raised like any other child, with the key around our necks, in front of the building, with working parents and there was no difference between me and the other children. The children knew, they would always hear I was a Gypsy, they knew from their families, because it was obvious, you can see the difference in color. The parents have always told us, especially my grandfather, who was a true - born communist, they've always told us that we were Gypsies and that we always need to be dressed nicer than everyone else, to be one step ahead, because we were Gypsies. It was like a warning, it's been very difficult for me, but it came from my family. I won't say I was smart, I won't say that in the fifth, sixth or seventh grade I was thinking about the Romas and oh, how bad I was feeling because I was a Gypsy. I felt it inside, especially when we did that lesson on "Razvan si Vidra"<sup>6</sup>, those things. Everybody would focus on me, I even had nicknames then, I was either "Parpangel"<sup>7</sup> or whatever...I mean it was this thing that I kept inside, I've never been able to discuss it with anyone, not even with my family. My older brother was a rugby player, he was very well developed, he was one of the "tough guys" in the area – it's obvious that people would call us "Gypsy", "negro", "crow"... I was a more feeble child, I had a pretty nasty paresis for about a year and I was more feeble and my family knew how to organize me, how to protect me so that I would never get upset. It's been very difficult for me in certain situations when people would ask me why I was different from the others. That was the only issue. Being part of the Gypsy world, as they were saying back then, was never a problem, because I was living in a family that had been assimilated by the majority. There was no difference in statute in the neighborhood; everybody was working in the factory. For instance, I couldn't have said I am discriminated at the store, the way it happens now, because all the children only had three lei maximum from their parents, or a five lei coin. We were all dressed the same,

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<sup>6</sup> Classical Romanian theater play.

<sup>7</sup> Famous Roma character in Romanian literature.

*we went together to the same movies, there was no difference. From my perspective there is a differentiation now – I don't want to call it discrimination, as that's a heavy word – you can treat someone differently, but you treat them such from a social perspective, I don't think it's from a color perspective. It's a social and economic matter. I went home three weeks ago, for instance, my home-town. I was looking at the other children whom I left as children, they were all grown up now, but they're the same. The differences reside where people live secluded, segregated, where children only have access to what's inside their community.*

Many times I thought that what aggravates the Romanians' perception of the Roma, beside the ethnical limit, is the belonging to a disadvantaged social class. George also confirms this. Where the Roma ethnicity coincide with a low socio-economic statute, is where the difference is made. Because if a middle class Roma – like all those interviewed here – and a Romanian from the same class have the same cultural references, watch the same shows, listen to the same music, have an account on Facebook and go to Bulgaria during vacations, it's obvious they can find common elements to communicate about. The openness is greater towards those in the same social class, because there are more common experiences. It's just that the Roma, or at least most of them, belong to a disadvantaged social class that hovers over them and the ethnical boundaries are emphasized by the ones that pertain to class. I've noticed many times, however, that we are far kinder with our own poor, who also listen to manele music (but that's not what's important, is it?), who don't go to school for more than eight to ten grades, who live in poverty and maybe even off welfare. It's possible that we'll be surprised of just how much the Roma and the Romanian poor have in common. How about using the same criteria for our value judgments? We often take pride in the fact that we don't listen to manele music, that we go to the theatre, that pursue higher education, we pity our own poor, but when it comes to Roma poor suddenly the criteria are much harsher. All of a sudden being poor is explained if not genetically then at least by malevolence and laziness. They are responsible for their own fate, are they not? They don't do anything to get out of that situation. We should, in turn, help more the Romanian poor. A hypocrite double standard, especially when it is preceded by the famous "I have nothing against Gypsies" that I hear so often, followed almost systematically by a "but...".

*What did the socialist period mean? – That everybody was equal, no one was different. My family had been assimilated. For my grandfather work was sacred, as were humanity, honesty, education...I remember he wouldn't talk about Gypsies. He just wouldn't allow it, it was taboo. The blacksmith wanted so much to be assimilated... he was a blacksmith by trade and he left the countryside to the city because one of his neighbors had left. And when he came back he told him "Vasile, man, do you know how the city life is? Water, everything, you don't have to labor in the mud..." He came to town for the sake of his three children. And when he saw they put him in the same building as the director of "Progresul" factory, for him that was... do you realize it, at that time the director would live next door to the forge blacksmith. That was the peak for him, he said the Romanian society is the best society. As for the discrimination... we do encounter it. We now have a case – a young Roma mommy whose baby died, they wouldn't allow him in the hospital... I've experienced these issues in the lives of others rather than my own for many years now. I only knew the feeling of discrimination in faculty – I wanted to go to a club and it was a pretty ugly experience. It was the first time I've ever felt this, we went with some colleagues from Social Assistance and we decided to go to a club, but the bodyguards wouldn't allow us in. Why? They told it to our face – because we were GGypsies. That was the moment when I said I was going to have some fun, I had money in my pocket, I am dressed ok... or, in another club, in Braila, I was home on vacation and together with my neighborhood friends we went to a club. They wouldn't let me in and I asked them why. "Because you're a Gypsy". We later found out that a week before there had been a big scandal, some Roma had entered with some knives... and now, on one hand I understood, but I tried to make those people understand that was not the correct attitude. That was the only time when I can say I felt a bit pushed aside, but besides that I've never felt it myself.*

*I wanted to go to theology school, to be a theologian – my mother was a believer and I was raised this way. I got a taste for church because I really liked the atmosphere within the church, everything was beautiful. I remember the church in the main square in Braila, there was an old priest with a beautiful face, with white hair... an extraordinary man who would always talk in parables. He was a role model for me and recovering from my paresis got me closer to*

*church. Therefore I wanted to go to the theology school. Now... everybody in my family would say, "Who has ever seen a Gypsy priest?" I thought I would be the first Gypsy priest, but it wasn't something planned, it was unconscious.*

*My father had one of those motors for cutting wood, only Gypsies were working with those motors. Only my grandfather and another family in Braila had those motors, only "the ethnics". And my brother and I would work on the motors during summers, because we liked it ever since childhood, and we liked to get involved. We would work in the garden, digging... In our family – my mother had four brothers, so did my father – everybody was working, nobody was sitting around. During the school breaks, at seven o'clock the tea was served, then breakfast, and dinner in the evenings, everything was very well organized. And we would have those motors for cutting wood and people knew about it, there was a clear association. So I used to have money on Saturdays and Sundays and I would buy those blue rolls... I was working and I had my own pocket money, I never asked for money at home, even though my mother had opened a business, after the revolution, we had the first auto service after the revolution. We had money, but we would never ask, neither me nor my brother. We were hard-working. And whoever saw me with the engine went, "Right, this one will become a priest..." And it was starting to get to me. And I didn't become a priest because God didn't want me in his Parish, not because people didn't want me. I failed my baccalaureate exam, we were the first generation to fail, because we had seven exams and for Math we had competition exercises. It was back when only 10% of students passed the exam nationwide. And I failed, can you imagine? I stayed home for one year, I changed completely... my mother punished me for the first time, I worked for an entire year, I also had tutoring... I passed the baccalaureate exam the second time and we simply wanted to leave Braila. Things were going sour, the transition period had started to be felt. Hunger had started to be felt in Braila. I arrived in Bucharest with an uncle of mine at the airport, he was leaving for Canada, he was a musician. And when I saw the lights in Bucharest... I said that was where I had to be. I came to Bucharest to sign up for faculty, at the theology school. And where do you think I ended up? I met with some relatives from Bucharest, some cousins of mine, who were not quite ok. And I ended up signing up for the Zootechnics school. They convinced*



me. I got home and I told my mother about not signing up for theology school. There was a big scandal. And my father found out that there are some positions especially for Roma at the Faculty of Social Assistance. I went there to sign up. I had taken the Psychology exam at the baccalaureate and I had passed with a good grade. What did my mother do? My brother was a Law student, in his second year. We got on the train the next morning, we arrived in Bucharest and stayed at some relatives, very serious people, we met a professor who told us there are available spots. I had to get a certain grade to get in. I was thinking, when I heard that, "Wow, a Roma..." My mother had signed the incorporation order for the Army, so I would have gone to the Army if I hadn't passed. So I took the admission exam for the faculty, my brother took it as well eventually and we both got in, and then the fun began. Leaving Braila was hard but we did it. The second week in Bucharest a woman came to me, Mariana Buceanu, and told me "Hey, Gypsy, come over here! Do you know you have a moral duty to work for the Roma?" She took my brother and me to Romani CRISS, she caught my mother during a visit... and I got a taste for activism at Romani CRISS. For the first time in my life I saw what "Roma" meant, for the first time I met young Roma, like me. We didn't have those in Braila, there were only those with long skirts, that I didn't associate myself with. I can't relate to them now either. Instead I've seen these people being just like me, dark haired, dressed the same, we were identical. And that's how I started to work. I was lucky to have a good mentor, a woman just like my mother who would tend to our education. If my mentor would have been a man I don't think I would have reacted. And this is where it all started. I didn't know there is so much poverty. I went for the first time to a Roma community in Stefanestii de Jos through a program with the sanitary mediators. My hair was long back then, I was trying to hide the consequences of my paresis. When I went to get a haircut in Braila the barber lady told me to go home and ask my mother if she agrees to my getting a picture for a catalogue and I would then have 10 free haircuts. I went home, I got my mom – I was a boy, ninth grade – and signed a contract with that woman for ten haircuts. Then, when I came to Bucharest, I went to the freshmen ball and a lady from a fashion house came to me and the idea seemed appealing. I had a contract for two years to work as a model. That's how I afforded to volunteer a lot. I had a project I established in an NGO:

*the first fashion house in Romania and Europe with a Gypsy influence. It was one of my crazy things. I got on a bus and there was a beautiful Gypsy woman in a traditional, elegant costume, with such a necklace... and she sat alone even though the bus was very crowded. And I got this idea that people turn away from that Gypsy costume. But why? It was gorgeous! In my assimilated Roma mentality I said I have to change something about the Gypsy costume not about the mentality of the people around us. My first project was to establish a fashion house that would combat the stereotypes of the majority regarding the Gypsy costume. This went very well for about three years, we did some shows, I was in my own world, the arts world. After a while I quit because I worked for Romani CRISS for about four years, very hard – I've done this project, I've also worked on media – and my mentor kept telling me to make a CV. I was shy, I didn't want to impose myself. After four years I had a talk with my boss, who had worked us very hard – a very good experience for later – and I stepped out. I had won a very strong project, some kind of scholarship: they would select five Roma from every country and they would take them to some sort of Big Brother. I had won that project, I've been gone for three months and when I got back I stayed for about six months doing nothing, I didn't want to go back to Romani CRISS. I enrolled for a master's program, I went to school, I spent my time this way and then I got hired at an American organization in the health field. I worked with them for about three years in about three communities in Romania, I went to the Civic Roma Alliance, they needed a manager and I was the fooliest of them all for accepting that back then, because that took about two years of my life, one to work there and one to stay at home to recover. I was coming from the American system where everything was on a schedule, there was no time to waste. If you had time you would do something else, never waste time. The Alliance was a new organization, I couldn't really adapt, I was not prepared. I stayed home for a year and got back to fashion, I did a new collection, with my own money. I didn't go to school for that, I went to a studio to see how it's done. I only work with one model and one tailor. I did a new collection, I researched for three months. I went to Sibiu and did a documentary on the Romani costumes, about how they are done... then I went to Sintesti, where I got a lot of inspiration, they gave me some picture from 70 years ago. My first show was at the Operetta Theater, and the hall was full*

of people. The second show was at the European parliament, also a proper show. It was a very popular show with the majority population. I had orders but I didn't want to make a business of it, I didn't want people to think I'm doing business with this. I'll never do business on behalf of Roma. I could have made it a business, but I wanted art. I had the opportunity to talk at exhibitions with society people about how beautiful the Romani costume is and how bad it is for a woman with a baby in her arms to be pushed, segregated, and discriminated against. That was my message. I went to the Venice Biennale, there were a lot of artists and I had the opportunity to talk to some people from Italy, when there was that conflict, and it was for the first time that I talked about the Roma' situation and about why they were doing that. For instance there was the woman from the Venice City Hall – she didn't know why the Roma were behaving like that. It was a social moment, we could talk. I took some kids who played music with me and they played Gypsy music on jazz and swing rhythms and it's a killer to listen to a Gypsy dance tuned to those rhythms. I also had a cool lady, dressed well and with good taste and with one of those cool costumes... what's wrong with that? I mean, you can have a relaxed conversation, without thinking about the interethnic conflict... No, take these ten Roma models who are hot, who go to school, who have a good résumé and do this. I had my first show. In my craziness I wanted to dress five Roma women and five non-Roma women, so that people would see that non-Roma women could get dressed in Gypsy costumes, why not? It worked, but that was just a matter of hobby. I think there are some great kids in certain areas who don't have the means, don't have money for food. There are children in need of support, they lack role models, they want to go further but they lack the support. That's our objective for the next period: to identify children who want to go in a certain direction and support them, because otherwise they could give up. I would have given up if it hadn't been for the support I got. My mother got ill with cancer when we left to faculty and the treatment was very expensive, my father lost his job because he had to stay with her... if it hadn't been for my scholarship and the modeling I couldn't have supported myself. We stayed in the dorm, 12-13 friends, and we all went to Romani CRISS, we got along really well. We would never eat if one of us wasn't there, we would borrow shirts, support each other. If it hadn't been for that group of students... they were like a second family to me. It's been

*difficult without my family in the first year, when I wasn't staying at the dorm, but then I moved to the dorms and I met my second family. Everybody in this group has succeeded.*

I'm asking George, if he were to put together everything he has done, to whom does he owe his successes.

*I think it's an accumulation. First to my parents. I had an intelligent mother and a good father who made tremendous efforts to keep us in school. My mother pawned her wedding ring and her earrings when we left for school to give us money. I can't forget that. Leaving home was very difficult, but I clenched my teeth and moved on. There's nothing you can do without education, there's no chance, other than going to school and learning. You know, the one who's had enough doesn't understand the one who's hungry. My father has this sister, she has eight children, she's not married – a woman with no education. One of her children, because he had a good environment at school and his teachers felt he was a good kid, even went to school in his mother's high heels shoes when he had nothing else to wear. His story is shocking. He did his homework on a briefcase, after everyone fell asleep. His mother wouldn't let him go to school in any way. He left for faculty to Sibiu... and God has helped him. He took the exam in Sibiu as first on the list, he graduated from Foreign Languages, and the theological school, and then he signed up for some master's program and decided to leave Romania. He didn't talk about his Roma identity and he said he never will, he can't stand the Gypsies, because they steal, they're lazy, he's totally against. He has issues with his family. If they had supported him he would have been more emotionally relaxed. He went to Germany, he did a PhD in the sociology of religions and he's now running a parish in Germany. And I was talking to him on the phone before his wife gave birth and he was saying he began to understand what it means to be a foreigner. Now he doesn't have problems because he's Roma, he has problems because he's Romanian. And he experiences that very intensely.*

It's a cold shower when you discover that you could also be, in turn, unjustly discriminated because of your ethnicity or nationality. I'm thinking about those who claim they are ashamed of being Romanian when they're abroad because people look at them as if they were inferior human beings.

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They say that this attitude is due to the Roma who embarrass our country and they get upset with the Roma instead of getting upset with these racists who look at them as if they were inferior creatures. Because we're looking up to foreigners, even though some of them are racist, we make excuses for them and we absolve them of any wrongdoing and we look around to see whom we can blame in their place. Just like in the donkey game, where we try to pass the ball as quickly as possible to someone else. Pass the blame. I digress a little. These days a foreign friend has sent me a three parts caricature. The first part is the image of a road a few people were working on. The caption was saying: "Delivery time: 4 months; done in one year, 3 months and 21 days". The second one showed a road full of holes, and the caption said: "After the second rain..." The third image shows the name of the country in which the action takes place. You guessed. We see the straw, we don't see the beam. Of corruption, incompetence, this faulty mentality of "Just leave it like that, it's still working", how easy we bribe so we're fine, even if, by doing so, we fuel a corrupt system and break a law, who do we blame for that? Whose responsibility is it?

*In our faculty they don't do social assistance, we're talking about social provisions. You go to a city hall and you ask "Do you have a social assistant?" "Yes" – "What have you done this past month, what's your strategy, what vulnerable group?" – "I have no idea" – "Well, what do you do then?" – "Well we're delivering the social aid and doing the social inquiries"...and that's not social assistance.*

It was Gandhi who said that a nation's civilization degree is measured by the care that the state provides for the most vulnerable of its citizens. The social assistance represents that care for the most vulnerable, but if it settles for small amounts of money, that's anything but care. It's a delusion. It's the gesture of a society that's dismissing this problem and places the blame with someone else. And I remember what Madalin Mandin was saying, and how nice it would be to ask myself not what someone else could do for me but to start with the commonsensical question. "What can I do?". What can I do for those more vulnerable than me?

*It's a general problem, but maybe there will be a time when things will be ok. Unfortunately I don't know... I wonder how come we don't invest in children's education in general, because if Romanians*

*were to invest in the Roma children these would be the people who could pay our pensions later, to all of us, because the Roma have many children. The authorities say that, the Roma have many children, but they don't do anything for them. They only give them social aid so they can manipulate their votes. Children from the social aid families need to be helped. Because children like me came to the special spots in the faculties. Almost all children come from assimilated Roma families, who could face the Romanian society.*

The concern for a future when we'll be fewer, older, and definitely poorer unless we invest right now comes to my mind. Unless those coming after us won't have a certain level of education so they can have good jobs and pay their contributions, we won't be able to have pensions. Roma who are now children are among those who'll pay for my pension. Maybe this argument, facing the future instead of facing a responsibility for the slavery past of the Roma, has a better chance to convince the Romanian society that the Roma have to get another fate. It's in the best interest of all of us.

*When I went to the traditional Roma they would say I was not a Gypsy, when I went to Romanians they would say I was a Gypsy. And then, what am I? In the end you're a human, when you go to church, to the doctor's, when you are at home... you are human. You are discriminated against based on the level of assimilation. My wife has recently given birth and there were no problems. She's a non-Roma and we didn't have any problems in the hospital, neither she nor me. In front of me one woman was saying to put two Gypsy women in a room, not to put them with someone else. Right in front of me. And I tried to talk to her, she apologized, she said she didn't know. That she can tell by the economic status, by the way they dress. I sometimes prefer to pretend I am a foreigner, an Arab, so people don't look at me so nasty. I went to a restaurant with an Indian woman and they wouldn't serve us. We went in, we greeted, and they wouldn't serve us. It was only when the woman asked something in English that the maître d' got it. Now I know the places, I prefer to go and sit in peace, to talk to my wife in English because I don't want to ruin my evening.*

I'm surprised by what George is telling me, and not in a pleasant way. I'm thinking about the acclaimed Romanian hospitality that many take pride in.

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I'd like to take pride in the fact that I come from a hospitable society, it's just that listening to George I can't stop questioning our degree of hospitality with regard to the idea of otherness. It's hard to be a foreigner abroad, but what is it like being a foreigner in your own country?

*I am relaxed, I overcame all the barriers, you can tell me anything, I don't care. There are some people whom God made this way, open to receive everything: "Come on, are you stupid? It doesn't matter, dude, you're one of ours, come on!" That's just the way they are. There are some people who need convincing and there are some who won't change, no matter what you show them. Well, you need to know who you interact with. My wife is a ballroom dancing teacher, and whenever I participate in an event with her entourage, they always talk about Gypsies and junkies. They called me a Gypsy, they called me a junkie. They don't mean anything by it, they've been to my wedding, no problem. My Godparents are Romanians, they're extraordinary people. When we first met we had a fight. Now they call me whenever they hear something about Gypsies or junkies on TV to tell me. People started to get more involved, and sometimes I had to threaten them. A friend of my wife's once said he doesn't allow Gypsies and gays in his club. I told him I'll go to the National Council for the Combat of Discrimination and file a complaint. And now the most racist man is my best friend.*

I go back in my mind and I remember the days when I discovered that one of my dearest friends was a racist. I say days because it took me a long time to accept that the sensitive, refined and cultured boy I met seventeen years ago is capable of thinking those outrageous things. He wanted irrefutable proof that the Roma were deported during Antonescu's time, even though there was someone right in front of him telling him that his own family had been deported. Moreover, that people from his own family had died in Transnistria after deportation. Completely impervious to any argument and any testimony, he had been touched by the nationalism virus denying the others' right to dignity. A blind concern for Romania's image, for absolution from any historical mistakes: cosmetic surgery that can only do harm. I'm scared by the thought that he, of all people, is a denier. He says that Romania's image is ruined by the Roma who steal wallets. I tell him: between stealing a wallet and denying the death of six million people, which do you think ruins Romania's image more? I think that maybe the line between good and bad should be extremely

visible. To see a racist from afar, to see his ugliness right away, and that ugliness be complete. So the racists have nothing good about themselves. And yet, it's not like that. The racists are among us, sometimes hiding really well under a nice face. They can talk to you for days about beauty, sensitivity, love, kindness, and all of a sudden they disrobe this coat and you see their lack of humanity. What's the use of talking about love when you're practicing hate? What's the use of saying you know your beauty when you can't see it in front of you, in a colored costume, in a darker complexion that you want for yourself whenever you sunbathe? Right after the episode with my friend that unsettled me ("Come on, be honest, have you never ever wanted the Gypsies dead?!") I read a scientific article. I read that at a neuronal level, whenever we see our own kind, a part of the brain activates, and that part remains inactive whenever we see people we associate with the marginality, people who are "undesirable" to us. As if we're looking at objects. We dehumanize them. The beggar, the Roma, the drug user, the foreigner are mere objects. And then it's easy to talk about their death. To state without any problems that yes, you've wanted them dead many times. I remember when Oana Parnica has pushed her three year old son in the face of the colleague who wished Antonescu had shot the Roma: "Tell me, would you shoot him?" What is it that you need to do to become human again in some people's eyes? To make them realize how horrific it is to want the death of your peers. That the Roma are not some abstract entities, there are children, women, old people, some without any protection. I try to stay positive. "You have to believe you can make a difference", George says.

*I had a big fight with my father-in-law when I got married. There was no problem, I stayed with my wife, we would pay them visits... My father-in-law is an intellectual, my mother-in-law is a Math teacher, they're people from the good walk of life. He said let's have a talk about Gypsies, with their history... if I hadn't been prepared for this I could be without my wife now. If we had offended each other nothing good would have come out. About the Gypsies being slaves..."What's wrong with being a slave? You're hardworking, loyal... aren't you the slave of society? We all work so that Antonescu thrive, Basescu thrive, we're all slaves". Ok, the Gypsies are more slave than the Romanians, if you want. And this is where the fun begins, you have to believe you can make a difference. I changed something in my wife's family, which is pretty large, so at least I changed something. My wife's cousin has a Gypsy girlfriend. What matters is your will to do something, family also matters.*



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I ask George what message he has for the Roma children. What would he tell them?

*What can I tell them? To clench their teeth and follow their path, until they are 18-20. Do your duty as a child, as a teenager... There's nothing you can do without school. They need to know where they want to get and get what they need, because society doesn't provide for them anymore. If you watch TV – who's our role model for the next period? Florin Salam, Becali, Dragusanca, Columbeanca, Columbeanu.... Romanian society has a problem. It sucks. But you can be anything, a priest, a teacher. My message is – I would say this at "Dinu Lipatti", where I was a mentor – "Enough with the manele music, I sing it sometimes at parties, but what is your projection in 5 years from now?"*

*“I’ve always wanted to be somebody”*

**Flori Ancuta Gheorghe,**

19 years old, canto school graduate, Slobozia

I teach an English class for grown-ups. They are absolute beginners, which sometimes, much to my amusement, and theirs, infantilizes them a bit. The first class a colleague of mine from the agency, Andrei, joined us, and he never kept being Roma a secret. In fact he couldn't have kept this a secret, because he was the only one in the group whom, when he wanted to enter, the doorman held at the door – it was a public building, belonging to the university – and asked where he was going. Andrei sat in the back, next to a thirty something student who immediately gave him his manual and to whom I saw him talking from time to time during the class. After a few sessions Andrei quit coming, but I remembered that the beginners group didn't seem to have problems with relating to other ethnicities. A nice, comforting thought. Months later I asked the students to write in a few phrases things they hate or love. The student who had been so friendly with Andrei wrote from the first phrase: “I can't stand Gypsy music”. It was clear for me, as it was for him when he forced the translation of the word “manele” that he wasn't referring to the Roma fanfares that are famous not just in Romania but also abroad, nor to the Roma fiddlers in the folk groups that fill up the concert halls, nor to the music of Roma students in the art schools or of the Roma students in the Conservatory, nor to the music of Goran Bregovic and not even to the new (for us) Gypsy punk. I expected that, under this abusive association, I would find, with the next phrase, the short version of the most widely spread Romanian idiosyncrasy: I can't stand Gypsies. Fortunately, this time it was not the case. If I knew about diagnosis I would probably know how to name (and maybe even “cure”) this dissonance between what we state about the Roma (even when we're talking about manele music to refer to Roma) and the way we behave when a Roma sits next to us. And if I knew about the history of music I'd know how to explain to the principal adversaries of manele music that this is not as Gypsy as they comfortably like to think, but it is a musical genre with old lineages, that once preoccupied Dimitrie Cantemir, the scholar. But, as I don't know my diagnosis

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nor my music, I let Flori Ancuta Gheorghe, 19 years old, canto graduate, talk about music and about the way she feels that dissonance I was talking about.

*My name is Gheorghe Flori Ancuta, I am 19 years old and I am of Roma ethnicity. I come from a Roma family; both of my parents are Roma, it's a simple, modest family. My mother is a housewife, my father works as a laborer; I have a younger brother, he is one year and a half younger. I've always wanted to be somebody, to make a name for myself, to be able to help those around me. In a way my grandmother inspired this thing of going as far as possible, I've always liked to overcome my condition, I really liked to go to school, I went to a music profiled-class. I have been studying music since my first grade. First I played the piano. My grandmother, two days before the school started, went to check out the school, the teachers, but she hated it and she said no, the girl can't go there, she has to go somewhere else. She then went to the art school, which was next to the school where I was supposed to go, and she signed me up for the music section, it was the only section with available spots. I took an exam there and I passed. It was more difficult in the beginning because I didn't trust myself that much... When I was younger my mother would actually tell me, you can't sing, you take after your father; my father doesn't have an ear for music, absolutely nothing. And I believed that, "I can't, I can't", until we had a choir in the second grade and then I realized I could actually sing, something does come out and the teachers also discovered that I could sing and I played the piano until the eighth grade because in our school you couldn't take up canto until high school. In the seventh grade I was a choir soloist and in the eighth grade and even the ninth I went to the Olympics at the national stage and I got an honorable mention. It was the first time that our high school took part in the choral national stage. I had really wanted to go to the canto section, I got in first, 50% the capacity exam and 50% a skills test.*

Ancuta enumerates these performances in a discreet voice. She has an elegant diction. I expect, from the calm way she's telling her story, the rest to flow at the same calm pace. But it doesn't.

*This year I was supposed to go to the Olympics but just a week before I found out I have a problem with my vocal cords and*

*I can't sing anymore. This was a radical change in my life because I wasn't expecting it, every time someone would ask me "What do you want to do from now on?" – "I'm going to take up canto at the Conservatory". I've decided to go to Law School.*

A biographic accident that can turn your life upside down if you don't find the strength to double back. But Ancuta, despite the fragility she's projecting, emanates a sort of determination, as discreet as the voice she's telling about all this with. Ancuta doesn't look like she intends to allow herself to be pitied and I wouldn't want to change the registry either. So all we're changing is the subject.

*– Did you have many Roma students in your class?*

*– Not really, but I declared that I was one – this way I know myself better and when I know myself better I can do certain things. If anyone asks, anytime, anyplace I tell them I am of Roma ethnicity. Something did actually happen to me... it was the birthday of one of my classmates and there were several of us, Roma and Romanians, and at some point this issue of the Roma and the Romanians came up and I say "I am also a Gypsy", and I say "Gypsies can also learn, Gypsies can also have careers and become famous people. It doesn't matter what nationality you are, it matters what you are as a person, you can be Romanian, Gypsy or Italian, it depends on the person, so you need to decide for yourself, that's all; and to know yourself well and know what you want to do". And one of the girl says: "Aaa, don't say that, you're not a Gypsy, you can't be a Gypsy, you're smart, there's no way". And I say "That's not important, if you're smart or not". We are all people, we have equal rights, we have to be treated like people, but generally the Romanians only see us like persons who do only harm and even if they do good things they still don't see it, I say this is about people's mentality and about the parents because I've seen children on the street and they say "behave or the Gypsy woman comes and takes you and puts you in her sack" and I think these children will automatically think that the Gypsy, man or woman, is somebody who harms people. I would sometimes even take pride in this, somehow I wanted to show the children and my classmates that, even though you are a Gypsy, you can do good things also, you can learn, you can go to school, you can be clean, anything, it depends on you as a person. I used to have a classmate*

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*who'd say bad things about the Gypsies, though he wouldn't tell them to me personally, he would say them in general, but I never fought with him, I only told him that it doesn't matter what ethnicity you have, it matters how you are as a human being. If I had fought with him he wouldn't have learned anything, but this way I think he realized his mistake.*

I look at her as she's talking. She's thoughtful, everything she says is thought through; she never raises her voice, she doesn't become agitated, she does not make declamations. She's wearing a summer dress with flowers which shows her thin arms. She's very young and has long, black hair, and a darker complexion – but maybe it's the late summer tan. From the corners of my mind a prejudice surfaces. "Have your parents ever told you that it's better to get married than go to faculty?"

*No, my mother is the kind of person who tells me: "You do what you want because it's your life. If I tell you what to do and things turn out bad you'll blame me forever and I don't want that", she said, "You think this through and you go wherever you want to go".*

Yes, my mother would say that to me too. And it was good that she did that. But the Roma marry young and stuff, right? As if she could read my mind and be embarrassed a bit by my own embarrassment, Flori thinks for a moment and then she says:

*there was a case. A classmate, he was a tinsmith and he went to school until the tenth grade, then his parents got him married and didn't let him come to school anymore. In a way his mentality wasn't quite open either, I might say, because he said: "If I have a boy I'll let him go to school, even faculty, but if I have a girl I only let her until the fourth grade because all she'll learn in school is chase after boys and rubbish." And then I actually had a discussion with him and I told him it doesn't seem fair – girl, boy, we're all humans. He discriminated. You don't only learn "rubbish" in school anyway, you don't go to school to ..., you go there to learn. Education makes you become a better person, think much clearer. Now I'm trying to get my younger brother to go forward, he won't go to faculty, he says: "What do I do with it, there are many who go to faculties and maybe they don't even have jobs", but I'm trying to tell him that education matters. Go to school; it doesn't matter that you don't have money, it's fine, just go,*

*you can be without something you might want, you can for instance walk instead of taking the bus, you wake up earlier, learn harder, get good grades, get a scholarship. You have to do anything...*

I wonder what it would be like to introduce my student to Ancuta and ask him „Are you sure you can't stand Gypsy music?“, and to remind him that ethnicity is not a matter of taste.

*“If a Roma became an actor this means that another one can do it too”*

**Sorin Sandu,**

39 years old, actor, Bucharest

I was happy when Sorin agreed to talk to us. I had spoken to him only once. About how the society will look like when his children and my children will be grown-ups. I had found he was struggling with the same questions as I was. But, at the end of the discussion, the same ideals, as well.

Somebody's at the gate. Geraldine goes to open and I see a little girl walking in. She should be about six or seven. She's brunette, long haired, a bit shy. She's wearing a pink dress. After her Sorin walks in. The girl stops half-way from our table, Sorin gently pushes her towards us, they both get closer and we shake hands. Her name is Teodora. Teodora looks at the other children playing in the yard. They are Geraldine's children, a six-year old girl and a three-year old boy. They stop from playing for a little while, look at the girl but don't do anything. They stay at a distance for a while. Then, Geraldine's children go on with their playing. Teodora gets a glass of juice, she sits next to us, on the chair. But it's obvious that we don't exist for her. She turns her head towards the children and keeps looking at them. She observes them for a while. She can hear them talk in another language and she looks questioningly at her father. Sorin tells her not to be ashamed, to go play with them. She gets up quickly but stops a little, looks back at her father who nods with encouragement, she turns towards the children, and slowly goes closer. Sorin can start his story.

*I come from a regular family, it wasn't a wealthy family, it wasn't a poor family either, my parents have always worked. My father was a locksmith in a factory, my mother was a spinner in a weaving factory. I have two brothers and a sister, I am the oldest. In my family it was like this: when we were living in my grandparents' house, where I was born, where my father and my mother stayed until I was four or five, all the street was of Romanians, it was in the city.*

*They wouldn't talk in Romani outside. "we don't speak Gypsy so people hear us, so the neighbors hear us". Of course everybody knew that "these are Gypsies". But we've always spoken in Romani in the family. I slowly started to see, to know. I would ask my mother for a long time, because my mother would say that we come from India and Antonescu wanted to send us back to India. What did she know? What she had heard from her elders, probably. And I say: "What do you mean we draw from the Indians?" Of course I would see there are some who look like Indians and not just in skin, because the skin is dark, because I know Roma people with fair complexion, white. But they have such traits that it's like seeing Amar from some Indian movie or Raj Kapoor, for example.*

*I've been a lucky man, I am lucky. In the way that, ever since I was a boy, from the first grade, my father would urge me, would nag me...He was a very smart man, they called him "the Brain" at work... and he would say: "Listen, you need to learn. Do your homework!" and so on... Certainly as I grew up he became more insistent. My father was my first master. In the Orient there's this master-student relation. The parents are your first masters in this respect, your first supreme teachers. You learn from them, and what you learn from them you keep for a lifetime. My father was my first lecturer, he had some lectures... pfoaaa! He was brilliant! I've been the class prize-winning pupil during secondary school, the best in English and French from secondary school to high school, I remember classmates coming to me and asking how you say this or that. I read the New Testament in French at some point. A classmate had given me the New Testament, I savored it. I would read a lot and learn a lot. My father had planted the ambition of being very good, if not the best ever since I was a small boy. At some point, during secondary school, my classmate Capra and I would race...Capra Gheorghe, we'd call him Gica. And my father would say "What grade did you get?". "Well, I got a nine". "What about Capra?", "He got a ten". "Oh. Well, is he smarter than you are, is he?". And he crammed this in my head. I met with my secondary school classmate by chance, after more than 10 years, last fall. I was surprised to see that his wife knew a lot about me. And another thing also surprised me: he was the best in our class as far as I was concerned, I would always try to beat him, but knowing, being aware that he was better. And he told me something that truly blew my mind: "Look, if it hadn't been for you, since it was*



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*you who ambited me to study, I wouldn't have studied". I say "Dude, I ambited myself because I saw you there". "No, you were better", and now we were arguing about the other one being better, you know? Something happened in school that stayed with me for a long time. I got out of the classroom...it was the first grade...and there were some older boys, seventh, eighth grade, maybe even ninth grade, they weren't even wearing their uniforms, they were wearing gym suits, they were just sitting around in the school yard...they took my fez from my head: "Give me the thing!" "Dude, if you say "I'm a nasty Gypsy" I'll give it back to you!". I didn't say it. I was ambitious, I didn't say it. How could I have said it? If he would have said "I'm a Gypsy" I would have said it, but how could I be a nasty Gypsy? I didn't even know what that meant. I still don't know. I don't even know if I told my father, I wouldn't tell him about these things I thought were shameful. My pride! You do have pride when you're seven, oh boy! The feelings you have at that age!*

I remember Teodora, I look at her. She's playing calmly with Louna and Yoschka, we haven't ever heard them making noise until now. Geraldine's children have accepted her in their game, it's a serious game from what I can tell, it seems they're up to something. They're building something together. A little house, more little houses. A neighborhood.

*My neighborhood was The New Neighborhood, the Gypsy neighborhood, on the outskirts of the city. This is a paradox: this is the city, this is where the city ends; the village, next to the city, starts five meters away. That's the distance, five meters...in fact there's a railway that used to go to a preserves factory, preserved vegetables, stuff like that, it used to go to the other side, you would step over it and get to the Poroschia commune, and, just as you enter Poroschia, there is a street on your left that leads to a border, an actual border, and again it's not really a border, because it's really close to the main street, you know?... There is just a row of houses dividing this thing, but it was a forsaken place. There, whenever a car would pass by... it was an event. People would come out on the street to see the car. From my neighbors in the back, in that part of the neighborhood, there were those who were working... one was an actual foreman in the factory, a Gypsy, uncle Fane. It was something to a foreman, being a Gypsy. My mother would talk with such admiration: "Look*

*what a smart man he is, he's a foreman!" Man, that was something! He was the first to get a car in that neighborhood, a red car, a Dacia. He would take it out on Sunday evenings and learn how to drive, there were no cars passing by, it was a country road. And when he would take his car out on Sundays he would go to the corner of the street, come back, go again, everybody would come out and say: "Look, Fane bought a car!"*

*There were raids. The Militia came periodically, I think they came at four o'clock in the morning, park somewhere and circle the neighborhood, all the exits. They would come with dogs, there was barking, their dogs were barking, the neighborhood dogs were barking. That was when I began to be afraid of militiamen. During my seventh, eighth grade, coming from school, whenever I would see a militiaman or a car on the other side of the street – he wouldn't do anything to me, I wouldn't do anything – but my heart would pound, I would feel this fear. I think this is where this comes from, from the raids in the neighborhood. They never came to us, because they knew that my folks were working.*

*I once stole grapes from a neighbor with a cousin of mine, Liviu. I was scared but my cousin said: "Come on, dude, he's not home!" He had made a hole in the fence, it was a wire fence, we pushed it aside, wham bam, we took a bucket and let's go. And I told my mother: "Mom, I took grapes with Liviu". And she told my father. What my father did to me! So, he wouldn't hear of it, stealing was inconceivable. I think that if it hadn't been for my father's nagging I wouldn't have been where I am now. I am aware, knowing myself, that if he hadn't nag me all the time to study, to study, "that's the only way you'll ever be someone in life!", I don't know if I would have come this far. And he would tell me: "Look, if you want to be someone in life, get your act together and study, Romanian and Maths first, these are the most important!" How did he know? He had only gone to a professional school, he never went to high school, he went to a professional school and got a job, he worked. This was his idea and that was my idea too, later on. I thought these were the most important... So I studied. Him being on my back made me have this mentality that, if I graduate high school I need to go to faculty. My father used to say "You need to study, 'cause once a Gypsy, always a Gypsy! Whatever you'd like to be, anything, no matter how hard you try not to be, you are, an engineer, a doctor, they will see you like*

*this. If you are an important person in life they'll respect you", "them" being the Romanians, the others. He was obviously talking from his own experience and of course I took notice. And as I was saying, I had this idea in my head that I needed to be very good, I needed to be good. I mean, I had objectives, spiritual ones too, you know? My physical appearance wasn't that obvious either, you know? I used to have Romanian friends, my best friend later became my wedding godfather, a Romanian. My father would tell me to go to the Police: "Go to the Police Academy, you're a policeman in uniform, for fear alone and the people salute you on the street". A mentality of a very healthily pragmatic man. And so in my mind there was: go to university. I took the exam the first year, I changed my mind the last month, before the admission. Instead of applying for the Polytechnic school, as I wanted for a long time, a colleague told me: "Look, I'm applying for the Economic Academy". Ok, we talked a bit and I said "Fine, I'll apply for the Economic Academy also!". And I failed, I got in the next year, after a year of Math tutoring, I said I need to prepare intensely, and that was when I really fell in love with Mathematics. I got in the Academy for Economic Studies the next year. Young as I was, there was no one else like me, I got into faculty!, I didn't quite hold on to school, I had to leave. After a year I went to the army because, well, I got drafted. So I served the country, "the Fatherland". And people say the Roma don't serve the country! So the Roma have been in the army also. I also worked, ever since I can remember, I've been working since I was twelve, meaning that in the summer I would go to work, in the field, various jobs... I would dig the beet, with groups of Roma, the so-called tent-dwellers, with two or three Romanians. After coming back from the army I worked, I saw what it means to deal with life. I came to Bucharest the first time to work, I came in August. After that, in September, I started from digging ditches. I dug ditches in Bucharest; ditches for pipes, for phone wires. I would do this thing, until the evenings, then I would go to my dorm, cook, eat, they would go out for a beer and I would start doing Maths and Physics exercises. I was preparing for the Polytechnics school. And I got in at the Polytechnics school because that was what I knew: Mathematics and Physics. And I graduated, because they have a saying there: "You get in if you want to and you get out only if you can". I took, for about two years, Romani classes at the University. I had gone there to look for Hindi classes, I wanted to learn Sanskrit,*

*and I saw, I think it was in '97, a note: "Romani classes" and an arrow. And I followed the arrow. Another arrow, on another wall, and so on, from one arrow to another I got to Mr. Sarau's class. I opened the door and said: "Good evening! Is this the Romani class, at the University?" I had no idea, I didn't know. I tried not to look surprised, I had been surprised until then, but now I was talking to a person and I wanted to be a natural actor. And Mr. Sarau told me: "Av andre. Beé tele!" ("Please get in! Take a seat!"). Where do you go to a class and instead of being told "yes, there is a Romani class, are you interested? If you're interested come between this and that hour"... No, he said "Come in! Take a seat!". I was working, I was going to the Polytechnics school and, twice a week in the afternoon I was going to Mr. Sarau's classes. And he says: "Are you working?" "Yes", "What? You went to the factory? To hell with labor! Go to Romani CRISS" "What's that?" "It's an organization". And I went to Romani CRISS and I stayed there, I liked it, again a very hospitable environment, they were all young, you feel good, you know? You see people like you, and a different environment. I wasn't in the factory, I was in an environment where I could see there are many Roma students, who had thoughts, who were working on projects (Oh, boy, what is a project?), who had an idea, had dreams. And you start to see, you start to expand. During Polytechnic I started to get involved in the student theatre bands. After I graduated from the Polytechnic school I immediately took the exam for the National University for Theater and Acting, right the next fall. I got in because I wanted to be an actor. Starting the second year, it was actually still summer, we started the rehearsals for "Carnival Adventures" at the Bucharest National Theatre. During my student years I started to collaborate in three shows at the National Theatre, I was an extra, but to play at the National Theatre during your second year, even as an extra, it was something! I was also making some money. One night, during the fall, my professor Gelu Colceag called me. I respect him, he's one of the few people, the few people who have been and still are important benchmarks in my life. Professor Gheorghe Sarau is such a man, there are a few more, very few, you can count them on the fingers of one hand. That's how I started, at ten o'clock in the night, my professor Gelu Colceag called me to tell me: "Look, they're rehearsing a show at the National – another show, I was already acting in "Carnival Adventures" – if you're available..." I say "Sure!*

*Gladly! Thank you so much for calling me". I went. Then, during rehearsals, George Ivascu tells me: "They suggested you act in a play", this time I had a part, I mean a talking part. I was somebody! My entire appearance in the show was for three minutes, but you feel so proud! Just to be able to act next to Mircea Albulescu, Ion Lucian, Dinulescu, Claudiu Bleont, George Ivascu, Rodica Popescu – Bitanescu, on the same stage, a poor student, who at a certain moment is up on that stage and all eyes are on him, it's no trifle, at least not when you're in the second year of faculty...I also did a Master's program, after graduating from university, I went for a Master's in theatre also, "The art of the actor and teamwork". During this time I went to some rehearsals at Masca Theatre and Mr. Mihai Malaimare suggested I remain an actor there. I've been with Masca ever since, since 2005–2006. Since 2005 I became a host of the show "Romas' Caravan" produced by Pro–Europe Roma Party. In 2008 I established, together with a few people, the Amphitheatrom Cultural Association and, in 2010, we managed to do something that has never been done in Romania, never: the first play in Romani language, with Roma professional actors. "A stormy night", which I've translated, I am proud I've translated it and I take pride in this, translations are one of my great passions that Mr. Sarau infused in me. There had been people, before me, who had dreamt and still dream of theatre in Romani, of a Roma Theatre. I have been dreaming about this for about ten years myself. I have it on my computer, from back then, I was thinking about a title for the project: "The Romanian Roma Theatre" or "Theatre in the Romani language". It took about ten years for this to materialize, through this show. We premiered at Masca Theatre on September 16<sup>th</sup> last year and it really was an historic event, without bragging. On September 16<sup>th</sup> 2010, the first show in Romani in Romania especially as we are so far behind on this chapter here, in Romania. The Russians have had a Roma theatre for almost a hundred years, which influenced the Roma culture, on one hand, but also promoted it, made it known throughout the world. They also got to Japan where they were very successful. In the former Yugoslavia, Tito allowed all the minorities in the federation to develop, to culturally express themselves in their own language starting from the sixties, and the Roma had the "Phralipe" Theatre, a theatre in Romani. I have found a book somewhere in the '80s, a Roma poetry book translated into Serbian. Therefore they were*

*writing in the '80s, they were writing poetry in Romani, literature, prose, and so on, and there was a theatre in Romani language. In my opinion it's unacceptable not to have a Roma theatre in Romania, a country in which the Roma are the most numerous minority and we have the examples of the other minorities. There is a Hungarian State Theatre, the German State Theatre, the Jewish State Theatre, it's just not possible not to have a Roma State Theatre, as it would play an extremely important part in uniting the Roma around common ideas, around a common culture. This is our goal: to promote the Romani language, to enrich it, to contribute to making this language more beautiful and to elevate the Roma culture, to present these elements of the Roma culture. We want to show the beauty, the beautiful part of the Roma. The others often don't see it.*

I remember all the people we've talked to so far. Many have said about having to show they were twice as good, as smart, as clean, as honest than their peers just to be seen in the same way. Because the others didn't see them for who they were. I think that the Roma culture is often wronged the same way. We know that the Roma women wear colored headkerchiefs tied behind their heads, coins braided in their hair, colored skirts. We know the way they dance. We think we know what is the typical Roma music. And yet, for many, this is not culture. I often hear that the Roma have no culture. As if culture is only high literature, or symphonies in four parts, or paintings classified by artistic streams. Roma have a culture also. There is written Roma prose. And theatre. And poetry. Not to mention the traditional music which some have charmed the Western world with. It's just that we don't know it because we limit ourselves to stereotypes. But I'm thinking that maybe soon, by the dedication of people like Sorin, there will be a Roma State Theatre, a Museum of the Roma Culture and the occasion to discover the Roma culture, beyond our prejudices.

*I get sad, sometimes, when I think about Teodora. My daughter is going into the second grade. Things like that have been happening to her ever since she was a baby. She went to my mother's, to Alexandria, and she was playing with my nieces, her cousins, my brother's daughters. At some point a girl, Romanian, the daughter of a neighbor, shouted to another girl, also Romanian, who was playing with them: "Don't play with them, they are Gypsies!" Any child born with a clear head is not born with these differentiations.*

## **What do you want to be when you grow up?**

*What I understand from this is: this idea has been inoculated in the family. Again, another moment with Teodora, she's a very smart girl. The teacher says: "I asked the children to raise their hands if they have another nationality. Teodora was the only one to raise her hand." "And what did she tell you, Miss?" "She said: I am Roma". I was glad, this thing matters, even though she'll surely be affected by this at some point. Willy – nilly, you are affected by the people's cruelty. That is why we're trying to educate her: "Honey, that's the way you are. If they say anything, that's their business. You are beautiful, you are smart". And she really is smart, because, at some point, she was the only one in the first grade in her school to go to the municipality stage of a contest, Smart or whatever they're doing, I don't know exactly what contest. General knowledge stuff or Romanian and Maths. You are so happy when your child is the only one in her class, in her school! Besides other competitions where she would get the maximum score in the group of the four – five children in her class who went to these competitions, how can you not be happy when your child is like that? And then you try to educate her in this respect. People are people regardless of their color! This is what we're teaching her, so she can pass calmly through her life.*

I look again at Teodora, playing with Louna and Yoshka. They are three similar children, even though Yoshka speaks mostly in French, Louna burrs, and Teodora understands Romani. Even though Yoshka has blue eyes, Louna has curly hair and Teodora is a brunette, they are all children playing together in the same way. Life has not created differences between them. And I really wish that the world my children will live in, together with Teodora, together with Geraldine's children, is a world where all the people understand – eventually – that we're all the same. That we stand to gain if our children play together.

*Do you know what happens? All people are smart and all people are stupid. All people are the same. They all have the same potential in the end. Life brings you to be different, that's another story. I have another theory, it's not mine, I assumed it, that we're not born quite equal as an immediate, real situation, but we are born equal in potential. I mean, if man walked on the moon, Armstrong by his name, it's also the man, this time by a different name, who can also go to the moon. I could be that man. If the man accomplished something, it's still a man, another, who could do the same thing. If he*

*did it, I can do it too. This has been, for instance, one of the reasons that gave me some courage. I once told a friend in high school: "I'd like to go to Theatre school" "Yes, dude, but you need talent there, not everyone gets in, it's hard", whatever. He completely burst my bubble. I never told anyone about this until I got admitted into the theatre school. And when I did take the exam, I think only one person knew, I was putting together my file and he saw me. After seeing "Liceenii" and after what my father had told me "Yes, Stefan Banica is one of ours!". And when he told me this thing that Stefan Banica senior is one of ours...what do you mean, an actor of ours? That was unconceivable in my mind! And I said to myself: "If one, a Roma, a Gypsy, became an actor, this means that another one can become!" That was my argument, for myself, saying: "Yes, it can be done! I won't give up. I will succeed in the end!".*



*“The Romanian language teacher motivated me, he showed me how good it is to study thoroughly”*

**Daniel Ganga,**

31 years old, orthodox priest, Bucharest

This is my first contact with father Ganga. The big, brown eyes, kind but penetrating are the first thing I notice. And his shyness. He talks slowly, measures his words, he doesn't want to bother anyone with his voice nor his talk. He sounds soothing from the very first encounter. I know that he's reputed among the Roma as, if not the only one, at least one of the first priests to openly assume that he is a Roma. I can't stop thinking about the believers who go to the churches where these priests serve and I wonder if they know they're kissing the hand of a Roma at Christmas; if they know they confess to a Roma, that a Roma is praying for them, for their living and their dead; if they ever think that the grace passing through a priest does that regardless of his ethnicity; if they ever look at him as if he were a “nasty Gypsy”. We sit at the table, in the yard near the Tower, a heavenly spot in the middle of an otherwise hectic Bucharest. The tranquility of the father rubbed off on me. I go back to the interview and ask him to tell us about his life, from the beginning.

*I was born in a village near Urziceni, it was called Malu Rosu. My grandparents from my father's side, who were living there, were actually from Ardeal, because my great-grandfather received a plot, he fought the First World War and he received a plot. The first to be appropriated, to receive land here in the Kingdom, in the Romanian Country and to come here, the grandfather from my father's side fought for the Romanian state, for Romania. He had been a prisoner with the Russians for four years after the weapons had been turned and he came back in '48, and my grandmother had a hard time during this period with two small children. My father was born after my grandfather came back from detention.*

Two generations of the father's kind have fought wars for Romania. My mind runs to war scripts, I see the black and white movie of the great-grandfather fighting the First World War. Against the same noisy background of gunshots the scene of the grandfather fighting on the East front follows. My grandfather fought there also. Had they met? I imagine my grandfather telling me about his arms buddy, Ganga from Malu Rosu. A madeleine taste wakes me up, but it seems bitter. I remember how, about two weeks ago, I was talking to a young man who was upset with one of my comments. He was talking about the special spots for Romas reserved in high schools and faculties and about how it doesn't seem right that, in his own country, another ethnicity has more rights. I asked him whether this country was also "their" country. He explained to me, as if I had a limited understanding of things, that no, obviously not, as it is not the country of Hungarians or Jews. What an odd thing to do, to go to war for someone else's country.

*He settled down in a Romanian village, there were only a few Roma families. There were about six or seven Roma families in that village that's not far from Barbulesti, about 5 km away. Barbulesti, if you know, is a Roma village, but they had nothing to do with the people there. I went to the school in the village, during the school years I had some identity problems, myself and I, because my parents didn't speak Romani. Just the generation before them, after that they didn't speak the language anymore. Neither the family on my father's side, nor on my mother's side, who come from a place in Buzau county, it's called Scutelnici, that's where they're from, it's a Gypsy land. A Gypsy land is, I think you know, a wide space where many Roma families live and usually in the Gypsy land they speak the language and keep the customs and the way of life. But my mother didn't speak the language, but for a few words. The problem was that the others we talked to, the children we played with when we met at school told us we are Gypsies or "crows" – we were five boys, five brothers – yes, that's what they were saying, whenever we got mad, when we fought, or argued, then we were Gypsies and it was absolutely dreadful, it was very difficult to bear. So I really didn't have anything to say to that, I'd run out of words.*

The presence of the priest among us causes my ideas to turn to religious themes. I see words that hurt, words after which the words run out, like spikes that crucify the other on an invisible cross and clinch him there. And

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if he manages to get off the cross and you look at his hands you can see the stigmata. Some heal easily, a respect pill from the others, a band aid with self-esteem and that's it. Some remain. How easy it is to offend: "Gypsy", "filthy Gypsy", "crow", a nail in the hand, a stigma you risk to give a child for life. I took another bite from a bitter madeleine: "Don't play with them, do you want people saying you're a Gypsy?" No. I don't know what that means yet but it sounds pretty bad and I don't want to.

I remember the travel journal of an Englishman who visited our country in the beginning of the XIX century: "although the Gypsies make up for such an important part of the community they are regarded with the highest contempt by the other residents, who, indeed, treat them a little better than they treat their animals; even the insulting epithet of "thief" could be more easily tolerated than that of "Gypsy"." I'm thinking that these lines have been written two centuries ago: a simple browsing through the current press shows that not much has changed ever since. And the offence that the word "Gypsy" bears is the same as it was back then.

*During the classes my teachers would always talk about Gypsies, but when they were saying Gypsies they meant those in Barbulesti, and it was obvious that the Gypsies were some people who would only do harm, spit, talk dirty, steal chickens, come by the village and tinker, they would sometimes come during this time in the summer, pass by the village and camp there and from their camp they came to the village and shouted: "we tinker pails, we tinker!" and they wanted to tinker and wash the pails, the pots and they would give them and they would receive in return cornstarch, yes, lard, soap, homemade soap, yes, and they were considered to be very... second hand people, who were just tolerated around there. Well, that was pretty much what I knew about Gypsies, which made it pretty difficult for me to identify with them. Even though my mother – especially when some relatives of hers came by and used to say to each other that they are Gypsies, my father not so much, he would seldom talk about this, he didn't assume it. In the family neither, it's rather vague, he doesn't clearly know who he is, what he's like, we are but we're not. My father was a laboratory worker, he went to a vocational school and to high school. He had, indeed, a statute and that's why he would rid himself from this. From my mother's side, my grandfather was a fiddler, he played the violin, he stayed connected more to the community, and among the uncles from my mother's side, my*

*mother's brothers, some have sang... They tried to have a job at the same time, as it was difficult to live off singing. My mother never worked, she only went to school for seven years. Instead she was a simple person who assumed the whole, the simplicity; she never tried to pass for someone else. Living in the Gypsy land, she was more connected than my father, torn, but she wouldn't talk proudly about this thing unless she was asked, she would say: yes, I am a Gypsy, but I mind my own business. My folks used to go to church, they were very religious, among the few families in the village that went to church, old ladies and very, very old people came to church to... They simply sat inside the church. I wouldn't understand a thing during the church service because the father was old and talked indistinctly. On Sundays my father came and asked: Who wants to go to church? The youngest, the youngest brother, the youngest would go until they were 8-9 years old when they already wanted to sleep on Sunday mornings. And the youngest would get up, and prepare, and we, the rest – nothing. He would come a second time: Who wants to go? What the heck, let's go to church! And then there were such tricks, wait I can't find my socks, my shirt is not ironed. Mother solved them on the spot and sent us to church. And we used to get so bored during the service, staring at the walls...*

- So you can't say you wanted to be a priest since then?

- *No. I clearly didn't want to, although my parents were true believers, they were very religious, they used to fast like nobody back then... And we would never swear, and we had plenty of occasions to throw words like children do. Especially in the countryside people can talk really dirty, but not us, we couldn't, because if we did, another would mention it at home, and we'd get beaten. We preferred to not talk that way and that made us weird in a way, we were weird for the others. We refused to talk dirty, we were Gypsies, we went to church, pretty weird, they would call us repented and I wouldn't understand what that meant, to be repented, I later understood that repented actually refers to neo-protestants, but for the people in the village we were repented because we didn't do what people usually did and we used to fast, so when they heard we weren't eating meat or such, "Aaa, they are repented!". Yes, and that's why my mother always said that we are people, we are Christians. My parents wanted me to go to the theology high school. The year I finished secondary school a*

*theological seminary was being established in Slobozia and there was also the episcopate, it was the most suitable place for me to go to. But I didn't want to, because at school my classmates always told me, as they knew we went to church, we were like that, "Dude, you'll become a priest" and I didn't like the idea of being a priest with a long robe. And there were times when I watched a lot of TV and saw American cop movies, that was pretty much all we could see on TV and I wanted to be a policeman or a soldier, something in that area. And I took the exam for the military navy high school in Constanta. My mother has a sister in Constanta. And I say "This is what I'd like", although my parents would have wanted me to go to the seminar, they couldn't get through to me and, as a last resort, they took me to the enrollment. I failed with very low grades, it was a shock for me because in the countryside I used to have... very good grades and this time it was a complete disappointment, I failed with four point something, I couldn't believe it. After that I enrolled in high school in Slobozia so I didn't have to stay home. It was a mechanical-profiled high school, industrial chemistry. There are about 60 km from Urziceni to Slobozia and it was difficult for me in the first year to be so far from my folks. I was 14 years old – only a child – taking care of myself...in '94 I graduated and from '94 to '98 I went to high school. There I met other Roma young people, not many but enough to think it was not that bad being a Roma. Here in Slobozia there were some, like that, united and they formed some sort of a clan, they used to solve any conflict that might appear, so not only did it feel good, but it was a privilege to be one of them.*

*During that same time I fell in love – at 16 – with a girl and I said "I want to do something else", I felt inferior, in that mechanical high school...and I tried to go to the pedagogical high school – she was going to the pedagogical high school, a better high school, so I was also aiming higher, I wanted something better. And I went through: I couldn't go to the pedagogical high school because I was a boy and they only had girls, there wasn't another high school, but there was the theological seminary and I said I wanted to study there. My parents were very surprised and they didn't ask me why, but they were glad. My mother was very proud, I've seen her several times then when we were talking about the seminar, about what it would be like for me to become a priest, she was really happy. She was very excited, although her illness would worsen by now. She had been*

*sick for a while now, she got sick in '92, she had breast cancer and although she went to the hospital a lot and get hospitalized, she didn't stay there enough because it was hard for her to stay there, she was thinking about us, we were five boys at home and there were a lot of things to be done around the house, washing, cooking, and she just couldn't stay there, she used to cry all the time... We, the boys, had started to do our own washing and cooking. But they wouldn't be done quite right... And, whenever she came home, she didn't even recover properly and she would clean and do everything. Maybe that's why her condition worsened and the year I took the seminar exam her illness had worsened and in the winter... she passed away. So that's the story with my mother and her desire that I become a priest. It marked me.*

*During the summer I stopped at the exam for the seminary, I was already in the tenth grade in high school but I took the exam and I failed. I failed, I was so close to getting in, yes, and that was just with what I knew, without any help from anyone. The next year I didn't take the exam again. My father had promised he'd help me get tutoring for the exam discipline, for the admission, to finish high school and then go straight to university.*

*During high school I met a person who also marked me, a Romanian language teacher, a very gifted one, a poet, he had written some poems, and he motivated me to want more. The teacher invested very, very much in me, he treated me as if I were an intellectual, although I was just a 16-17 years old boy.*

*- Did you like reading?*

*- Yes, I did. The teacher motivated me, he showed me how good it is to read, how good it is to study, to study hard. He tutored us in grammar, thus I got a 9 at the admission exam. And for the baccalaureate exam he was also very helpful, but besides that the teacher encouraged me to do this thing, to come to theology, and he taught me to expect a lot from myself. It's been a privilege for me to be among his close people. I visited him in his house, he sat me down at his table, he realized when I was hungry and asked his wife to give me food. So he treated me as a friend, as I said.*

*We kept in touch after I took the admission exam. He had been my father's teacher also, so he knew my father because he had been a teacher in the countryside in his youth and now he was the principal of my high school, and just because he remembered my*

*father and my father told him a few words about his life and then, somehow, he would be touched by the fact that my father's wife – my mother – was ill, that we were five boys and we had strived to do something and that impressed the teacher and he accepted me among his close persons, among his friends, and we stayed friends. I can say he was my role-model, or even like a parent.*

*After graduating from high school I stayed home for about three years, I took the admission exam for the faculty, I failed and then I had to work, because after the death of my mother my father remarried against our will and there was a rupture. He went to live with his new wife and we left our natal village for Urziceni, my parents had bought a house plot in Urziceni, somewhere on the outskirts and I started to build the house, it wasn't finished, but we moved there. We were basically living alone. We had to work. I started to work in a textile factory and during this time I also tried to study, but it was very difficult for me, it was practically impossible to study... And after about two years of working here I got admitted to the theology faculty.*

*During the first year I had an incident with a priest who was also a music teacher (paradoxically, no, I didn't have a talent for music, I was on the outside. Even though we had singers in the family and in my childhood my mother, among other things, wanted me to be a violinist. She had kept grandpa's violin). At a summer session exam I was wearing some lighter clothes, beige pants and a white shirt and I have a darker complexion and I also had a tan, I was quite dark. When I entered the exam room and he saw me he went to the back of the room and he asked me: "You, you are hiding, why do you want to hide there?" And I didn't know what he meant, whether I was hiding my identity or that I wanted to hide so that he wouldn't see me. And: "No, father, I'm not hiding". And I didn't get to say anything and he got up from the table and he said: "This is what you always do, that's the way you are, I can't keep my service in my church. You come there and make a scandal and people can't give away while you're there, you don't work, no" and he going for I don't know how long. And after the father finished I told him: "Teacher, I believe that beyond this tough attitude, yes, I believe you are a good person, you're preaching the message of Christ, so you can't be a bad person". And he was a bit surprised by my reaction. Because as he was talking I was thinking: "What do I do, should I get out now and tell him something or stay here?" God inspired me. The father then said:*

*“Yes, that’s pretty true. You know, I actually know some girls of your kind in Targoviste and they actually lead the choir” – he had a choir there – “and they sing very well, they are good girls”. Then he sat down at the table and he said: “I like the way you answered, I allow you to sing whatever you want”. And I sang something that I knew the tune of, I didn’t know the notes at all, not at all, I would just stare there. And he gave me a pretty high grade, 7, I wouldn’t even have dreamt of it and after that at the arrears session he remembered me and I passed, I had no problems anymore. After that we came to know each other, and greet each other.*

*As I go to church here, in Bucharest, I saw our kind sitting on the church steps, begging, they are poor and they seldom get to be part of the church structure, somehow, and if the priests ever tell them something they are very pleased and if one caresses them on the head they are ecstatic, but these things seldom happen, on the other hand there is also racism. I mean the priests are not a particular species, they come from the simple people and come to priesthood with their prejudices, their family habits that they have from home, and they somehow end up captive in this way of thinking. Very few overcome them and manage to assume priesthood to its full extent, to be completely open to all people, without hesitation. Most don’t have this attitude. The most I can say is that they are also people, indeed.*

I suddenly remember the story with the neighbor.

And Jesus answered, "A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who both stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance a certain priest was going down that way. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. In the same way a Levite also, when he came to the place, and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he traveled, came where he was. When he saw him, he was moved with compassion, came to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. He set him on his own animal, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. On the next day, when he departed, he took out two denarii, and gave them to the host, and said to him, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond that, I will repay you when I return.' Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?". He said, "He who showed mercy on him". Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise." (the Gospel of Luke 10: 30-37)



## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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The Jews (Jesus was part of that kind) despised the Samaritans, they considered them inferior, avoid them (aberrant phrase: the Virgin Mary: “Don’t play with them, do you want people saying you are a Samaritan?”) and yet Jesus is talking about Samaritans, to the Samaritans, he even calls them our neighbors. In fact it’s easy to love thy neighbor, who listens to the same music you are, looks like you, talks like you, votes for the same party. Maybe the commandment should have been, “Love thy *distant* as you love yourself”. That’s the hard part: to love a man you perceive to be distant from you. Who lives in a different way. Who listens to manele music. Who speaks a different language. Who is not like you. Or is he? Maybe that’s why he’s my neighbor and not my distant? The neighbor we’re so distant from?

*I am sure there are a lot of believers who are open to God and to people, to the others. Well, I am sure there are many, many such people among the Roma, and that God expects us to assume our Christian condition and to steer toward the other. Many are aware that we have a good heart, the Gypsy heart is a good heart, kind, if they have a loaf of bread they’ll share it with the other, regardless of whether they have eaten or not, whether they are full or not, but they remain at this level. Well, God wants something more from us. The church is our home, for all of us. In church we are all the sons of God, here we can look each other in the eyes, all, without complexes, without frustrations for coming from where we’re coming, and here we can rediscover the truth. The truth from which we can start to live life: we are equal with the others, we are loved by God. Christ has lived and died for the poor in the first place.*

*“It’s all about wanting something really badly and about being aware of the pride your parents feel for you”*

**Georgiana Gogor,**

24 years old, trainee lawyer, Bucharest

I have no idea how Georgiana looks like as I’m waiting for her in the street; we had talked on the phone a few times and I knew she has a friendly voice. It is hard to overlap the image of the yuppie young woman I think about when I hear about her being a lawyer over the image of a young Roma woman, an image that had started to mean less and less anyway. Despite the general opinion that you can recognize a Roma if you see them on the street, probably not many would have recognized a young Roma woman in the elegant young woman, dressed in a blue jacket, with discreet high heels and a matching purse, who approached me. Georgiana greeted me with a confident but warm tone, anticipating the feeling that we’ve known each other for a long time which we were both about to experience in a short while. We must have seemed two girlfriends who haven’t seen each other in some time and who were going out for drinks after work, as we were walking together having an incessant lively talk, and laughing, towards the same house with a garden of Geraldine’s parents. Those who could have seen us from afar – Georgiana, Geraldine and myself – talking vividly in front of our coffee cups could have compared us to the stereotype images in women’s magazines. It’s just that we were not talking about the topics that these magazines assume young women talk about, like work trouble or love trouble or the fashion trends of the fall-winter season, but about the childhood of a Roma girl from a family with five children in Budesti town. “I am proud of my family, it’s thanks to them that I am here, they did tremendous sacrifices. I didn’t get here just because I was ambitious and because I wanted to, I got here because of them,” Georgiana says several times. A simple *rudar*<sup>8</sup> family, two parents who did eight grades and are unemployed, own of a small furniture shop, like almost everyone in the area,

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<sup>8</sup> *Rudari* or Boyash are a much-discussed Roma branch, who are traditionally known for processing wood.

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parents to five children, out of which Georgiana is, for now, the only one to pursue higher education; her two younger brothers are also preparing to go forward. Georgiana's father is the one who wanted her to become a lawyer – she dreamt of being a pharmacist, but she allowed herself to be pushed by her parents' ambition and her own desire to be something different than her parents, even though in the beginning, for lack of role models, she didn't know just how far she could dream and which way her aspirations could go:

*I was always aware of the hardships my folks were carrying. And when I say "hardship" I don't mean that we had a hard life, but the work they are doing. That motivated me, I respect my folks for working so hard but I've decided since I was a little girl that I wouldn't do this work. It's not a woman's job to make furniture. So I've always wanted to learn more, I don't know if I actually wanted to go to university, I was not informed back then, and I also didn't have anyone in my family to ask about becoming a lawyer or a teacher. Graduating from university is something extremely big in Budesti. For those who live in big cities, who read and go to the movies and to cultural events it's hard to imagine a life without any success models, even though some of us have forgotten our teenage role-models. And for those who live in the narrow world of a depleted town, with no role-models, it's difficult to imagine another life than the one they see around them.*

But, with a lot of effort – and not just of imagination – some of them manage to dream about what they want to be when they grow up. Until a few years ago Georgiana followed her goal to study and to get beyond the family living standard out of a sense of duty to her parents. A duty so strong that, although she sometimes felt like she was stuck or the road was hard, she never gave up.

*The first times I entered a court room everything seemed hard, I didn't understand the terms, it's completely different than at the faculty. I felt so small, everybody was dressed elegantly, they were all wearing suits, and talking about big stuff that I didn't quite understand. But I wrote down all the words I didn't understand and looked them up in the dictionary or ask my colleagues. I didn't want to seem so... dumb. I had this ambition, to never ask the daughter of my neighbors in whose office I am doing my practice, she took me in*

*without money, and I want to prove to her that I can do it, I don't want her to ever feel sorry she took me in and helped me.*

It's not easy to find an office to do your internship with and Georgiana didn't have the money that these usually require to admit you. But she had the chance that the daughter of a neighbor had a law practice in Bucharest and Georgiana did her internship there, commuting to and from Budesti daily and helping her parents every time she could, working in the furniture shop, even though they've always spared her and put study first.

*It's all about wanting something really badly and about feeling the pride your parents feel for you. When you hear that one of your parents is proud and everyone knows about daddy's little girl, you don't know how you manage through everything. When you are ambitious and will anything is possible, anything. You always have to be aware of the possibilities you are given, of the trust and sacrifices being made so you are where you are. Believe me, you don't feel like buying an extra cake, when you were given the last money in the house to go to school. And you can't waste time and money while you are in university, if you know, like I did, that your father is walking in broken shoes so he can keep you in school. I pray to God that all children have parents like mine, I am here thanks to them; I hope God will give me the patience and ambition to educate my own children not more and not less than my parents have educated me. Next to your parents, who give you the first direction in life, the first support, the friends, your entourage, the people you mix with are equally important, says Georgiana, proud of her friends and of her boyfriend, who respect her for what she's accomplished so far.*

*I had friends I could learn from. It matters a lot what entourage you have, your friends, your acquaintances, your boyfriend, they play a second part in your development. I have a group of five-six friends from faculty. We were the poorest, we were the only ones to get off the tram, everybody was getting off foreign cars. I went to a private university, it was full of stars there, and we were the only ones to mind our own business, the only ones to stay in the library because we didn't have money to buy the textbooks.*

For her friends it's not important that she's Roma, says Georgiana, "because they are educated people and educated people don't make such

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differences". For her the ethnicity of the people she's talking to is not important either. In fact, no one has asked her about her ethnicity, and those who she told didn't believe her. Because it's still difficult for many to overlap "lawyer" with "Roma woman". 24 year-old Georgiana is satisfied with herself and with what she accomplished. I seldom heard somebody so young to be so firm about their choices and so aware about the good things they've done. But Georgiana is a pragmatic nature and can't afford to indulge in more or less imaginary crisis other young people her age suffer from.

*I don't need anything right now... honestly, I don't need more money, I don't need more assets, I don't need anything more. Children should be educated since kindergarten to have this ambition instilled, that they become someone in life, to be told how good it feels to be respected, how nice it is to have your door opened for you just because you have a good job. No one can give you the satisfaction and contentment in your heart of getting there on your own, in any field. No money in the world can give you the peace of going to bed at night and saying, wow, look who I've talked to today. We have major clients at the firm, important people, and for them to call you on your birthday, a poor child, a Roma from Budesti, who went to school with broken shoes, and look who's calling me or look who I'm around. No one can give you this pride. But you can't do anything without education. That's why a child needs a lot of support from home and a lot of personal ambition, to have a dream in their souls so nothing seems impossible, to have that drive to succeed in life. To be aware that a good job you can only get with a lot of education, and that it will provide not just financial satisfaction but also joy in your human soul.*

*“The current situation of the Roma is the consequence of a past of marginalization”*

**Ion Sandu,**

40 years old, History teacher and school inspector for minorities,  
Slobozia

When I contacted Ion Sandu from Slobozia and I requested an appointment for this project, I felt in his voice a mix of surprise, pride and apprehension. He agreed to meet us, but he suggested we should meet other people that he thought would better fit this project. When we arrived at Slobozia, Ion Sandu insisted that he would be the last person to interview. He first introduced us to Flori Ancuța Gheorghe, Arts high school graduate, vocal music class. Only after I had interviewed her did Ion Sandu agree to tell us his story; which, he insisted, is not an impressive one; nonetheless, it did captivate us for almost an hour.

*“I was born in a modest family of sedentary Roma. I have 3 brothers, I am the eldest. A modest family that faced some problems: my father, who was a mechanic and a crane operator, was involved in a work accident and became handicapped. So when I was pretty young, 6 years old, we had to deal with this huge problem in my family, because my father couldn't work anymore. He went into disability retirement. Maybe the fact that I have worked since I was very young could explain why I managed to go beyond my status, that is, to graduate high school and university. My high school years are a beautiful memory, when my passion for history was reflected in the awards I got in the national History competitions. My parents wanted me to become a vet technician or a veterinarian. This is why they guided me towards an agro-industrial high school, but my passion for history was stronger; and this is why I chose a career in this field. When you are a child, or a teenager, you look for role models, and for me it was my History teacher, Vlaicu Ion, God rest his soul; he was a special person who, unlike other teachers, managed to see beyond*

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*the image some people have towards some... young people, some pupils..., meaning that he didn't see me as a Gypsy, but as a young man who could be the best. He was not prejudiced."*

Indeed, it seems to be a typical story: a child from an underprivileged family follows his dreams; with huge efforts and with the help of a dedicated teacher, he becomes a teacher himself. After all, why would we need an overwhelming story? Most of the times, simple stories are more persuasive than dramatic ones.

*"During my college years I had to get a job as well, although I got the best result in the entrance examination for the History faculty at the University of Bucharest. But I had to get a job, I couldn't just spend all my time studying, so I could help my family; my brothers were younger than me, they were in high school, there were hardships. I worked as a sales agent, then for a warehouse... Honestly, my college years are not a beautiful memory, because I had to struggle. After I graduated from the History faculty, I also got the best result in the tenure exam. Now I am a teacher at an educational institution in Slobozia and I have been a school inspector for the minorities for five years."*

It is a journey like many others which I'm sure you've heard of before. And you could wonder what sets Ion Sandu apart from the thousands of young people, not necessarily Roma, who got an education under similar hard circumstances. Ion Sandu answered without us having to ask this question:

*"In our family we didn't talk about promoting the Roma identity or ethnicity, although we didn't avoid the topic on purpose; we just didn't talk about it. However, there is one thing I understood from my parents: it is very important to be well prepared and to work so that you can have very good results. We have a saying: 'a Gypsy must work twice as much as a Romanian in order to be perceived the same way the others are'."*

"The same as others" – I keep going back to this standard of normality and, the same as I have heard in other stories, the need to make extra efforts to achieve it. It isn't easy for anybody to have a job during college, but the need to work "twice as much as a Romanian" has been a recurrent theme in my discussions with Romani people. Contrary to what one might think given the

etymology of the word or the easiness with which most of us use it, normality is not the average status. For some of us, normality is not something we are born with, but a goal in itself, which requires sustained efforts and repeated demonstrations. And maybe it's not surprising that, under these circumstances, most of the Roma have few chances of becoming something to be proud of, and even less to pursue an academic development. For Ion Sandu, but for others as well, after some searching and going back, being a Roma has led to the materialization of an intellectual endeavor.

*“After I became a History student, I admit I didn't know many things about my people. By accident, I came across a book on the history of the Romanies; it is called “The Gypsies”, and it's written by Lucian Cherata, PhD, who is now a good friend of mine. Hence my passion for studying the history of the people I'm part of was born. I accepted my identity very late, officially speaking. An inner acceptance had happened, yes. But a public one...– I mean, even if I used to write about the history of the Romanies, I would hesitate when I had to sign the article. I managed to do that much later, after I graduated, after I met people like professors Burtea Vasile and Gheorghe Sarău. You know, maybe it is a collective mentality problem for our ethnicity, because the current situation of the Romani people is the direct result of a history of social marginalization. When the word ‘Gypsy’ is associated with the worst things possible, a young man undergoing a personality development process can go through moments of... of shame... of embarrassment, of a stigma. But by studying and meeting people that convinced me – without meaning to, just through the power of their example –, that accepting your identity is an absolutely normal and natural process, this is how I was able to accept who I was. What the Roma are lacking is an awareness of their past. The Roma don't have a historical awareness, they are not aware that they belong to a historical past and to a people. This is how, maybe in time, we can promote the change of going from the status of an ethnicity to the status of a nation. Knowledge can demolish prejudices and stereotypes, all of which stem from not knowing the customs, the cultural historical values of some people. In Ialomita there are traditional Romani communities, where... when you go there and learn about their customs, about their traditions, I for one feel like I am travelling in a time machine and*



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*going back a long time ago, to a period that reminds me of the beginning of the Romani's past."*

Most Romanians don't know a lot about the Romani's history. The History textbooks – some of them even called, in an abusively generalizing manner, "The history of the Romanians", oblivious to the existence of other ethnic groups within the same geographical coordinates – ignore the more unpleasant parts of Romania's past, such as slavery. Let us not wonder, then, that a survey carried out by André Stănescu – true, not a rigorously scientific one –, estimated that half to three quarters of the Romanian population know nothing about slavery<sup>9</sup>. The author underlines the paradox of the Romanians' ignorance regarding the Romanies' past as slaves, as on the other hand they know very well that the Afro-Americans were slaves in the USA, for example.

The slavery of the Romanies on Romanian territory lasted for over five centuries. For five hundred years, people were treated as objects. In Muntenia, an article in the criminal code in 1818 stated that: "All Gypsies are born slaves". There were auctions to sell them, and the posters mentioned, in order to advertise the "product", that all those up for sale were in "a fine condition", i.e. able to work, able to be abused. I also discover that Romani slaves used to be sold for a lot of money, which demonstrates the strong financial interest the dominant class had in maintaining slavery.

Following the waves of changes that washed over Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more and more Romanian intellectuals who had studied abroad started to consider, the same way as Europeans did, that slavery is a barbarian custom. While addressing the Romanians, a Swiss intellectual wrote in 1841: "Would you dare count yourselves among the civilized nations as long as one can read in your newspapers: 'Young Gypsy woman for sale?'".

This word, "civilization", gets me thinking. A few days ago, I received a lot of requests to sign one of the tens of petitions one can find on Facebook: An educated Romania. Its message is: "We want the whole world to discover Romania through its culture, art, literature, architecture, philosophy". We want the world to see us as civilized. And again I go back to what Gandhi said: the degree of civilization of a nation is measured according to how the government takes care of its weakest and most vulnerable citizens. A mentality built on genuine care, and not on revulsion, for the most disadvantaged members of

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<sup>9</sup> 2 <http://www.Romanes.ro/sclavia-romilor.aspx#int1>

our society would soon give birth to a culture worthy of respect. Maybe the world would finally see us as a civilized country.

Yesterday I met two French students who were visiting Romania for the first time. I ask them what stood out for them the most. They answer me, embarrassed: "How many of the Romanians are racist." Yes. I can't look them in the face.

*"Not many Romanians know that, besides Jews, the Antonescu regime deported Romanies as well. During the months of July and August 1942, 11.441 Romanies were deported to Transnistria. Out of these, 6.714, so more than a half, were children.*

*In total, in a year and a half, almost 25.000 Romani were deported. Many lost their life in the concentration camps. Many mothers lost their children."*

For Ion Sandu, it is important that these things be taught in school:

*"It's important for people to understand that a favourable educational environment for these children is an environment they can relate to, where they could find their cultural values, their history. So it is absolutely necessary that in the schools that Roma children from traditional families go to, they can study the history of the Romanies, the Romani language. The Romanian system of education has a non-cultural characteristic, based on promoting the cultural values of the majority. At present we talk about interculturality, mixed knowledge, and this is why I think that Romanians should also learn the history of the Romanies, so our common journey could be understood.*

*The educational aspect is essential to the personal development process; every child must understand that success is related to academic studies; they must understand that during this process it's normal and healthy to accept their identity, not to feel inferior, to have the strength to go beyond the prejudices and stereotypes that society throws against them; and to know that if they learn well and accept who they are, they will be successful."*

*“My mother would even threaten me, when I didn’t have good results, that if I didn’t study, she would send me to make bricks”*

**George Lacatus,**

33 years old, journalist, Bucharest

*“I was aware that if I didn’t do something to elevate myself, people will say about me ‘he’s just another Roma – or a Gypsy, as Romanians like to call us”.* George Lăcătuș doesn’t look at me when he says that; he looks at the camera. Later, when I look at the recording, I feel that this way he can, although through a technical medium, look me deeper into the eyes than he could have done directly during the few interviews we had for him to tell me his story. And he knows that, during the four years when we were colleagues at university, I was one of the Romanians that would say “Gypsy” more often than “Roma”. Or one of the Romanians that wouldn’t even entertain the notion that George Lăcătuș could be a Roma, because I saw no connection between being a Roma and going to college or working for the most important newspaper of that time. I feel ashamed of telling him all these and the fact that he already knows them doesn’t make me feel any better. I am actually embarrassed by my presumptuousness back then; I had read about ethnic minorities and their rights, among which the right to choose their own ethnonym, but the word “Roma” seemed to be an artificial caprice born out of the political correctness trend (as if we wouldn’t need more political correctness in Romania).

It took rediscovering George as a participant for this project for me to reevaluate my ideas since I was a student. When I met him, when we were both Philology students, I knew that George worked for the “Cotidianul” newspaper. I didn’t know he was studying the Romani language. Or that he was older than most of us because his parents couldn’t support him through college right after he finished high school. Actually, his parents wanted him to become an officer, because that would have saved them the expenses with his studies and they would have been sure that he would have a job after graduation. After graduating from high school in 1996, George took the exam for the Military Academy in Sibiu twice, but he didn’t pass. He took exams for

the same subjects at the Psychology faculty, where he got in. But on the same day he got the results his father was laid off from the factory he worked for. So he had to adapt and went to a pedagogy college; after that, he taught English for a year and worked as a reporter for a local radio station. Then, out of the blue, in 2000, he found out that the Independent Journalism Center was starting a program to train ten young Romani.

*“The requirements were that the ten young people have the high school degree and some media experience; that would be an advantage. I had already started to work for the local radio, a friend helped me get this job; I had a show and I was a reporter. And this is how I arrived in Bucharest, at the Independent Journalism Center, in May 2000. I went to an interview; we were about 100 young people from all around the country. I think my advantage was that I was a little more outgoing, I could speak English, I had experience with the radio. And after three or four months of intensive journalism classes the ten of us have found internships with various newspapers; out of the ten, I was the first hired for the ‘Curierul National’ newspaper. Here I realized that I had got an opportunity – if I take advantage of it, good for me, if not, I go home, that’s it. This is why I worked hard. Meanwhile I got into college as well, I studied English and Romani, but after two years I dropped out, because I couldn’t manage both the studies and the newspaper job. Since 2000 until September 2004 I stayed with ‘Curierul’; after the owner, Valentin Păunescu, died, the newspaper took a hard hit. The ‘Cotidianul’ newspaper was relaunching back then and it was looking for the best in all areas. I went for an interview, which lasted five minutes, and they told me to come and start work the next day. In 2004 I also got into the Philology college, to study the Romanian and the Romani languages; I graduated in 2008. In 2009 I went to work for the ‘România liberă’ newspaper, where I have been working so far.”*

In 2007 George Lăcătuș was awarded, along with the newspaper he was working for, the Grand Prize for Written Press of the Romanian Press Club, for the articles they wrote about the illegalities carried out by the former management of the National Lottery. The Lottery management was fired, and the deputy Prime Minister back then, George Copos, was forced to resign after the state prosecution started an investigation following the articles in the media. “I think that was the best investigation in the last years’, says Lăcătuș;

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“it’s the only national investigation that forced a minister to resign”. I remember the beginning of my conversation with George, when he told me, after mentioning his name and occupation, that he came from a traditional Roma family that was forcefully assimilated in the '70s.

*“The first generation from my family that didn’t make bricks is that of me and my cousins. We don’t know how to make bricks, my father was the last one to do it. Mother would even threaten me, when I didn’t have good results in school, that if I didn’t study hard she would send me to make bricks. And I didn’t want that. Even now there still are people who make bricks in my neighborhood; it’s very difficult, it’s a lot of work and very little money; you depend on others, they don’t give you as much money as you ask... So it’s not a secure income, you’re not respected, you’re a nobody.”*

George’s parents chose for their only son to go to a better school than the one in their neighborhood, where students were predominantly Roma and so good teachers would avoid it. George went to School no. one, where Romanian students went and where teachers seemed to be more involved. But even if the teaching was better, there were other challenges:

*“I was the only Roma in my class and... children discriminate. You learn about discrimination starting from kindergarten, from school... You don’t understand at first why the other children look at you and start imitating the sounds of a crow or I don’t know what... I was a really good student, I was in top five in my class, the same as I was in high school and everywhere. So I wasn’t just average, I was good, I went to competitions. I was a very good athlete, I was the captain of the football and handball teams in secondary school and in high-school... And I had Romanian friends as well. It’s true that, when you see that a Romani is smarter than you and has better results than you... there are many people who are jealous. And you could feel that, when they organized parties and you were not invited, or when they talked behind your back, gossiping and stuff. And not only in school, it happened later as well; I was working for the ‘Curierul National’ newspaper and one of my colleagues had received a pen that she liked very much from a company. When she couldn’t find it one day, all the colleagues looked at me. It was instinctive. And the pen was under the chair. They realized immediately that it was a*

*stupid reaction, but you can't blame them for that. Unless they do it intentionally. And if this happened, although rarely, to see things like these done intentionally, I reacted. If you are strong psychologically speaking and can move past that, you win."*

George doesn't want to dwell on the discrimination topic; he doesn't turn himself into a victim, and for the daily samples of racism he has found a simple but functional explanation:

*"Generally speaking, it is stupid people who discriminate. Intelligent people will never judge you based on the color of your skin, if you're gay, if you have HIV or I don't know what handicap. Intelligent people will always judge the quality of your work. And stupid people will discriminate against you because you're different."*

However, he's aware that sometimes being a Roma can be perceived as a handicap, especially by children; these children must know that it doesn't mean you can't succeed in life, says George:

*"You'll never be able to do anything with your life unless you get an education. If you want to make good money and be respected, at least in the neighborhood that you grew up in, it's important you get into college, especially now, as there are more opportunities for the Romanies that didn't exist 11 years ago. I know that when you are a kid all the family problems related to poverty take a toll on you. I felt that myself, and I can still see it with my poorer relatives. But these children who have potential, who feel marginalized and discriminated against, who somehow feel they have a hopeless future, they mustn't lose hope. When you expect it the least, the opportunity to get out of that situation can arise. The point is to not resign themselves and say they have no chance. The chance will come when you least expect it. No matter how poor you are, it's impossible not to find an organization that could help you. 10-11 years ago, things were different; 20 years ago, the same. But today, there are people who can help you. But only if you want them to".*

Although he hasn't spoken much about it, George knows what it's like to have a "hopeless future", beyond your ethnicity. But he also knows that if

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you manage to go beyond your difficulties, no matter how hard they seem to be, you'll know it was worth it:

*“I also wanted to quit a thousand times. There were days when I would only eat cream biscuits and drink water. I would eat five cream biscuits a day. But now I can help my mother; I’m really happy I sent her money now to buy a new stove; the old one was a hazard. Some people are happy with all sorts of cars or jewellery. I’m happy when I make other people happy. And I think that poverty continues to be the biggest problem of the Roma communities. A lot of families and children can’t go to school because they are poor. I think of my own case when I say that – my parents, even if they had two jobs, couldn’t financially support me in school or college. There are poor children, especially in the villages, who can’t even go to secondary school. I was involved in a case study in the Danube Delta. The people there are extremely poor – regardless if they are Lipovan, Romanian, Turkish, Greek, or Ukrainian... There poverty is not related to ethnicity or nationality; they are all as poor as the next person. I even met cases where a child would go to school in the morning and his brother would wait for him to come back at noon because they had to wear the same pair of boots. These are not just stories.”*

*"When there is a storm at sea and the ship is screeching, it doesn't matter anymore if you're a Romanian or a Gypsy..."*

**Marian Duminiță,**

44 years old, border patrol officer, Mangalia

Together with some friends I left for Mangalia, where I was supposed to meet Marian Duminiță. It was a summer weekend - a good opportunity to get a day or two of sunbathing. We arrived on Friday evening and we went to my friends' holiday apartment. We were five in total. They decided to leave for Vama; I did not join them. As always before an "on-site interview", I was tense. I don't know what type of people I'll meet, how willing they will be to answer all the questions I need to ask, how difficult or easy it will be. The only thing I knew about Marian Duminiță was that he is a border patrol officer at sea, a sailor - and that he's a little over forty years old. And that he would be expecting me the next morning at ten o'clock, at his house. Before going to Vama, my friends showed me around: here is the kitchen, if you want to make a coffee in the morning; this is the bathroom, you have hot running water. "I don't think I'll have time for a shower before I go", I said, "probably just for coffee". "Why take a shower anyway, you'll be going to a Gypsy's house", one of them joked. A joke I would have laughed at a few months ago, but this time it felt out of place; I haven't known this friend for a long time, but he seems to be an open-minded person. However, here, in hospitable Romania, no one has any problem making jokes about ethnic minorities.

A few months after this trip, I met a Dutch writer in Bucharest. We went out for lunch and towards the end of the evening we started to explore the inexhaustible topic of cultural speculations offered by the jokes and profanities of each language. Before saying a joke, the writer asked, thus giving away the punch line, if it would bother us to hear a joke about Moroccan people - a minority considered a problem in her home country.

On the morning of the interview I set off for the street where Google Maps indicate that Marian Duminiță's apartment building is. I had made sure to pack a more sober dress in my beach luggage; I had thought about the fact



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that the man is middle-aged, a Roma and a member of the military – maybe something from all these, or all together, makes him more conservative. I had even managed to take a shower, risking (or maybe wanting) to wake up my friends who had returned from Vama a few hours before, to somehow let them know, without playing the moral superiority card, that the Gypsy joke was nonetheless a bad one.

As I keep going on the alley between the blocks, I try to put myself in an anthropologist's shoes: I look curiously at the dilapidated blocks of flats, all cramped together, without any balconies, with clothes and sheets hanging out of the windows. It's almost 10 a.m., children are playing, people are sitting on the benches in front of the buildings and staring at me. A few times I can barely stop myself from saying "Good morning". Halfway down the alley, I stop to ask where the block is; people ask me, the same way they would in a village, who I am looking for. I tell them and they confirm the block is at the end of the street. When I get there, I stop to wait for Géraldine, who was arriving directly from Bucharest. Domestic sounds come out of the open windows: a turned on radio, the noise of cutlery and plates, voices of children and adults - a soundtrack that reminds me of my own childhood among blocks of flats; I sometimes start looking for it in Bucharest, on a Saturday or Sunday morning, sniffing, listening and imagining how people behind the walls make toast, are calling each other to come to breakfast, make coffee, scrambled eggs and weekend plans.

My domestic daydreaming while standing in front of the apartment building is roughly interrupted by some cursing coming from a nearby window. A man is passionately cursing at someone inside the flat. I start thinking he may be the man I'm looking for – he's a military, so he's a tough man, and he's also a Roma, so he must curse. It's a thought that I am not ashamed of immediately, I even consider it seriously. Actually, I feel ashamed of thinking like this only after I meet the hero of this story.

Marian welcomes us properly and cheerfully; he's wearing a white shirt, not sloppy house clothes. He introduces us to his wife, Angela, and his daughter, Ana, who was waiting for her high school graduation results. He makes us coffee and he apologizes for inviting us into the kitchen - the living room is occupied by a sort of a permanent tenant, a German or Austrian old man who has no one left in his country and who has been living with them for some time. The man is old, he lived through the war in which his countrymen ordered and largely carried out the deportation of Romanies. And yet here he is, in Romania, in the house of a Roma, like a second grandfather; for his sake, the Duminičă family learned to speak German.

The kitchen is recently furnished and spacious. Five people can fit in it. Moreover, it is lit by a pleasant sun, a morning sun still. The coffee machine is working. We sit down. I turn on the voice recorder:

*"I was born in Galati, in the city, in a Roma family; I was the second child out of the five my parents had. Actually, I became the eldest brother eventually, because my older brother got sick with leukemia when he was 13 years old and he died; I was about 11 then. He was 13".*

I draw a deep breath and try to diffuse the tension that has suddenly appeared in the sunny kitchen. "And what did your parents do?" I ask, textbook-like.

*"It was hard for my parents then, only my father had a job".*

*"How did he make a living?"*

*"My father worked as a sales agent, a sales agent for a company that exported timber ... and he was in charge of many people, thirty or forty at one point. He worked hard, all day long, so he could bring home a piece of bread for his children."*

The well-built and cheerful man in front of me suddenly tears up. He apologizes: *"I don't really enjoy talking about this... Dad died a year and a half ago..."* We met just five minutes ago and I don't know what to do. I don't know how to diffuse the tension this time. Angela says, both firmly and sympathetically: "Let's try to relax". I know from experience that, although most people are tempted to change the subject when it comes to trauma, the one who talks about it somehow wants to keep going.

*"And you two were close, right?"*

*"Yes, he and I had a special bond."*

*"And your mother?"*

*"And my mother worked as well, anyway... When we were children she stayed at home for a while, a year or two, and then she went to work, because it was hard. All of us, the children, we went to school, so none of us stayed home, we went to high school, we went to school. Dad borrowed money every autumn to buy things for us ..."*

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There follows another pause in the conversation. Marian dries his tears. This time I try to change the subject a bit:

“Did you live in a Roma neighborhood?”

*“Yes, yes, a neighborhood with Gypsies, of course, who came on Saturday, on Sunday, for a drink or a party... My father was respected by all because he was the only one who had a degree and a decent job, the others were working in city sanitation or I don't know where... When he came home from work, he went to his shelves full of books; I don't know where he got his books from, but he had his books, he used to read Alexandre Dumas, and many, many other books in the evening. With Gypsies you rarely see one coming from work and starting to read a book. Well, Dad did not study much as he became an orphan when he was 14, and he managed on his own, without any of his parents, to finish secondary school; the circumstances were such that he joined a group of people at work where he fit in well, but he was a capable and smart man. He started when he was very young as a dock worker for a factory; but slowly he came to be in charge of a huge, huge inventory; he was responsible for hundreds of cubic meters of timber which he had to provide with input and output documents, shiploads; he worked a lot with foreigners, with foreign ships that came with the cargo, that carried timber; he had a good job. I often went with him to work, he used to take us to show us the ships when we were kids. Perhaps that's why I wanted to become a sailor. That was what I wanted then, to leave and travel the seas. This is why I attended the Navy college. But I had a setback with my mid exams, in my time you had to pass an exam after two years of high school, and I failed it; I had a tie with a colleague for the last position, we retook the exam and I failed; and so I continued to study at a high school with an electronic/ technical profile until I graduated. Dad insisted that we went to school, that we learned. Mother wanted us to become musicians. And this is why me and my siblings can each play an instrument - well, not professionally, just for us, as a hobby.”*

“And what instrument did you play?”

*“I played double bass, bass guitar and also the piano a little. At one point I had this choice to make; me and some colleagues had a band, we had some gigs, we would go to shows, concerts, even played at weddings for a period when I was young; but at one point*

*I had to choose what to do next, focus on my studies or become a musician; I took a good look at myself and accepted that I wasn't a very good musician, and musicians must be good; so I decided that if I can't be very good at this job, I should choose the other path. Plus my dad told us not to live like a grasshopper, singing in the fall to save up for the winter; we must have a stable job and study well... And in my home the parents were going to work. I was the oldest, so of course I looked after my younger brothers, I used to cook, clean. One of my youngest brothers liked to go to the market, he didn't like to clean or to cook; he used to do the shopping and look for the cheapest prices and he would save some money he could spend for himself. Yes. My mother taught us how to iron, so we ironed our own trousers, shirts, we washed our own socks, by ourselves. My mother worked as a cleaning lady, at the railway company and the Navy college, then she came home, she took her bag of seeds and went to sell them so they could cover all expenses; they had to support 7 people who ate a lot, we were all boys..."*

*"My mother-in-law was very particular", Angela adds, "that is, my father-in-law's clothes were always prepared and ready; so was his lunch box. I would look at my father-in-law, he was an older man, but he didn't go out without an ironed shirt, he wouldn't go to work unless he was smartly dressed; and I used to ask him: 'Why is this so important, you're not the manager?' I sometimes disagreed with him and he would say: 'No, you must be well-prepared and ambitious and responsible, but you must also look the part; it doesn't matter if you're smart if you don't dress accordingly'."*

*"If you want to fit in, you sometimes have to make compromises and probably... actually, now as well, to fit in with the Romanians you make some compromises even if they say you're Gypsy", Marian continues...*

*"What type of compromises?", I ask.*

*"I mean, you give up your identity, partially, for the sake of the world; I don't admit to being Gypsy because I'm afraid I have something to lose, I don't want people to look at me or to treat me differently".*

*"But what did you say you are in the 2001 census?", I insist.*

*"Oh, then it was great. My father called me: 'Marinică, how was it, did the census committee come to you?' Yes, dad, they did.' 'And what did you say you are'? He knew that I have lived for so long*

*among the Romanians, he knew the job I had, and he imagined I was ashamed to say I'm Gypsy; and he asked me, 'So, what did you say?' 'Dad, I said I was Romanian...' 'Oh, wait till you come to my house, you won't hear the end of it, don't come to visit us the Gypsies again!' Of course he made fun of me for about two or three days because I said I was a Romanian."*

*"He was very different", Angela said, "at work and everywhere, with his calm way of discussing things, of rising above some jokes that others..."*

*"...Others would have been bothered by, because it is distressing to hear 'hey, you, Gypsy', or I don't know what, 'nigger' or similar 'endearing' words. Of course it happens to be called 'hey, you, Gypsy', or when I was a musician and I was playing... oh, then it was completely normal."*

*"Or the Romanians consider they could insult him by telling him 'Hey Gypsy,' Angela adds, decidedly. Because if he rose through learning or responsibility, if he was awarded or complimented, others, who are jealous, who are frustrated or lack character, they believe this is what it takes, I offend him, I attack and humiliate him if I tell him this..."*

*"Anyway, for a Gypsy to be included among 10 Romanians, he must be twice as good as them ... in my opinion".*

Once again I hear that, if you are a Roma, you must be "n" times better than others. And I hear this from a Roma who has lived his life guided by this principle. And it went well for him, he has the job that he wanted and a great family, but I can't help thinking it's a waste of energy to have to be ten times better in order to be, in fact, the same as others; not ten times above them, but in the same boat. So that only when the boat starts rocking and their life depends on you as much as yours depends on them "they" can realize that it doesn't matter what you are.

*"Isn't it tiresome to live under this type of pressure?", I ask.*

*"No, because at some point it becomes part of you, you don't pay any attention anymore, that is, you do it automatically, because that's normal, I'm always clean and smart. Although the wickedness of people... I mean, they can still snap at you, you could be the best, but if you bother them..."*

*"And how did you get this job?"*

*"I did my military service, and I also did inventories and worked as a laborer; I eventually finished high school by attending evening classes, I couldn't go to day classes because I had failed an exam, there was hardship at home, and all this... I decided, I'm going to earn money and attend high school at the same time; in the evening I went to school and I finished high school, I graduated; then they took me for the military service, and I did it here, in Mangalia, with the Coast Guard, two years and one week of military service. Well, in the army there are all sorts of people from all around the country... there were here also all kinds of Gypsy jokes, but they didn't bother me, I would also sing together with them; you adapt, there's no other way when you live among people... It's a mistake to see yourself as a victim, you can only lose, this is who you are after all... Anyway, after I finished the service, I went back home to Galati and I got my old job back. My younger brother was doing his military service here in 2 Mai; after 1990 they started to hire people in the army with a contract. I was then working in the light industry for very little money. And my brother told me that they were hiring sergeants and that I should come so we can both get a job. We thought about it and then I chose to come and get the job... I came to my old unit where I had done my military service; as people already knew what kind of person I am, they welcomed me with open arms, I had no problem getting the job... Within a week I moved here and was employed as a sergeant; then, in '94 they offered some qualification courses which helped you get a promotion; I had the opportunity to go to the course and did general and specialized military training for 6 months; then I became a staff sergeant, and so I was promoted; I enlisted in the military, now I work on an operational ship, loading, with the Coast Guard, the Border Police... I had many interventions, missions, I was awarded a distinction in '96 during the floods in Costinesti, when I received a rubber motorboat and I was the first to go in Costinesti after the floods, and I saved about 11 people..."*

Have you considered a Roma could save your life? Or that the bus or taxi driver who is responsible for your life for several minutes might be a Roma? Or that it should not matter whether or not he's a Roma? Because neither the professional performance of some, nor the crime level of others depends on their ethnicity? When will you also see the Roma who work beside

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you, not just the ones who are always on TV or who beg for money at crossroads?

Marian gets excited and continues talking about his job:

*“Then you have sea interventions, to rescue people, job stuff. But it's always about teamwork, you work in a team and your life actually depends on somebody else; if someone makes a mistake, the entire crew suffers. I lived through moments of 6 degree storms on board of an old ship, everything seemed to fall apart, you could really feel parts of the ship screeching... then it didn't matter if you were Romanian or Gypsy, everybody crossed themselves and prayed to God; we wondered if we could make it to shore or not... Stuff like this brings you closer together. Plus the adrenaline levels are so high.”*

*“And there is also the uniform, which makes him look more stately”,* said Angela.

*“I imagine your father was very proud”,* I say.

*“Yes, I didn't dress in my uniform outside my job, I wore it only when I went to work, and when I went home dressed as a civilian my father would scold me. My father was... how should I say this, he came from a family of Gypsies, but he didn't raise us in that spirit... we had Romanian friends, he sent us to school, we dressed a certain way. They worked very hard for us to have a minimum of conditions and we did, even if my parents always put us first; they didn't buy things for themselves; my father wore shoes during the winter, but we had boots.”*

Marian frowns a little; I think he feels like crying again and he tries to hold back his tears. His wife continues their story this time as well:

*“Their father was very strict, he was indeed the head of the family. On the other hand, at their house they would make cakes every Sunday, all would come home to eat. We went to work, or wherever else we went, but in the evening and on Sundays we all came home for dinner. When I found myself at first among them, all at one table, happy, talking and joking, I felt great. I didn't have something like this at home, I wasn't used to it, I came from a different environment, with other issues.”*

I have always been fascinated by the dynamics of a couple, how two people manage to coordinate not only their lives, but even themselves when talking. Whenever I meet a couple, I can hardly stop myself from asking them how they met. These stories about how an arbitrary meeting of two men people to a relationship of several decades captivate me probably for the same reasons I seem to hunt for the sounds of domestic life among apartment buildings. This time I feel I can just ask them directly:

*"And how did you two meet?"*

*"We met by chance", says Marian, "through a mutual friend, I had an army colleague whom I became friends with and he's actually her cousin. And we met while we were out, by accident, she was out with her cousin and a friend of hers, I was alone; her cousin introduced us, we became friends, we met at some parties we used to go to back then, on Saturdays, on Sundays and we went out – for how long, three months?"*

*"Two months", says Angela.*

*"We went out for two or three months, that's all, then we got married. Love at first sight."*

*"Yes, well, I liked him because he was very good-looking and very cheerful..."*

*"Well, I told her from the beginning, 'You see, I'm Gypsy, is that a problem?'"*

*"And his parents were very fair to me, they told me that if I am serious about him, 'We want you to get to know us, look, we have a wedding in Tecuci, we would like you to come along with us to meet everybody, so you won't be sorry later, so that you won't have any regrets that you came in this family; maybe your parents won't be happy..."* Angela adds.

I have a feeling there's more to the story, from the way that, for a split second, a shadow passes over both of their faces. They give a little sigh. Then they start talking again happily and we laugh from time to time, as if the sadness was just an illusion:

*"Well, she fit in very well within the family", Marian says cheerfully. "When we were children, mother would go and sell sunflower seed so she could support us. She went with her seed bag to football matches, to factories, anywhere where she could find a*



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*place to sell seeds to be able to raise their children. When Angela came in the family and saw that my mother came back with money she said: 'Take me too! What, can't I sell?' ...*

*"I had a job", Angela said, "but when I saw that every day she went there, to the factory, and she came back with money in the evening, and everybody gathered happily around her and started to count and sort it, I said: 'Wouldn't it be better if she took me along with her?'... But when I went, sitting there with the same seeds, so from the same person, all the Romanians, all the people who got off the bus, all of them went to buy from my mother-in-law; nobody came to buy from me and at one point I started shouting, 'Come and buy from me too, my seeds are all from her!' Since then I didn't go selling seeds anymore..."*

I've heard just one side of the story: how Marian's parents helped Angela fit in. I would like to hear now about her parents.

*"And how did you get along with your wife's parents?"*

*"At the beginning not very well", Marian admits, the discomfort again visible. "They have never told me a bad word to my face, no, but there was always a distance between us..."*

*"They were also influenced by the relatives in our village", Angela frowns. "The relatives, the neighbours, all were saying that I married a Gypsy, and I don't know what".*

*"I was disappointed because after I finished the tenth grade of high-school, I went all alone to high-school, I managed on my own, I didn't want to bother anyone. I took life in my own hands when I was about 15 years old, I studied well, didn't cause any trouble. My father, my stepfather, was hardly involved, and I loved my mother so much that I didn't want to create any additional problems for her. And I was disappointed because I was honest and told her he's the boy that I love and want to marry, he has the same financial situation as us, not great, so there will never be discussions among us; we will work together and what we'll manage to build will be thanks to our hard work. And then I said, 'I have never disappointed you; neither the relatives, nor the neighbors, nor other people in the village came to ask if I have something to eat, something to wear or a place to live, how I live and who I spend my time with'; and I asked her to continue to trust me; I said, 'no matter what, we should all be responsible for*

*our deeds, if I make a mistake or not I will deal with what comes next'... But there was this aloofness, this distance between us, not too big, but it was, and it caused me great pain..."*

They both stop talking and look at each other. I try to focus on the positive:

*"But everything turned out well eventually..."*

*"Yes ... there was a strong connection between us", says Marian. "Staying together for 20 years, through good times and bad times, and raising a child... But we did the housework together, that is, we helped each other, if I was home I cooked, did the laundry, things like this, which don't often happen with Gypsies."*

Angela is still thinking about the relationship with her parents:

*"People can't change the way they think, no matter how old or young they are... When my mother died two years ago, one of my sisters-in-law and my parents-in-law came to the funeral. They came then for the first time in 18 years of marriage. They had never come to visit, not because they wouldn't have wanted to, but they didn't want to create problems for my family. But they were very well received at the funeral; at the wake I think my father-in-law talked for two nights... Despite all the pain I was in, I was surprised... Then it didn't matter to either of them... All of them said: 'Oh, your father-in-law is so smart, what a great man, have you listened to him?... Have you heard all the stories he told us?' The same with my mother-in-law, everybody would listen to her. I was amazed. Oh, now I feel like crying, because at first I had a lot of problems with these things. So with all the pain I was feeling then, I stopped and wondered why things couldn't have been like this from the beginning, why some people, who were now listening with such attention and respect, had to interfere, why it wasn't like this when I got married, why they didn't say to my mother, 'Don't trouble yourself if he's a Gypsy or not, just make sure your daughter is happy and well-received in their family'..."*

Probably because of the topic, I suddenly remember, after a very long time, that the first boy I fell in love with was Roma. I was in the third or fourth grade and I shared the "secret" with my friends, who enthusiastically offered to

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investigate. First, they discovered that the boy was in the eighth grade, which significantly decreased my chances of ever being noticed - I was, if I remember correctly, in the fourth grade. But I insisted, so they went back to the small network that had been set in motion. Shortly afterwards, they came back even more disappointed: "He's a Gypsy!" they said, suddenly looking at me differently, as if I was suspected of a contagious disease. I barely registered the information, because he seemed to be the most beautiful boy that I had ever seen. But my friends withdrew their support and, finally, it wasn't meant to be. I think this moment is too serious to tell the Duminičă couple about my harmless little story; for them, remembering all these pointless difficulties is not easy. Again I feel it's better to change the subject. No matter how much I think about it, I can't find anything to say to Angela, who has suffered for twenty years now because of the prejudice of "good people"; a prejudice which, moreover, proved to be so easy to refute. I ask about their daughter, Ana.

*"She had a problem connected to this, to her ethnicity in high-school", Angela answered, "with that colleague who hit her. I went to school, met with the director and the head teacher and I said: 'Regardless if her father is a Gypsy and her mother is Romanian, you should not say in front of children, when an injustice occurs during class, when a child simply stands up and hits my daughter, you, as a teacher, you can't go to that child and tell him: 'Oh, you don't know, she's a Gypsy, their family will come to get you'", says Angela.*

*"And another time", Marian adds, "she got angry, stood up, and rebuked the teacher, and rightly so, for the injustice she did against the Romanies. For saying something like 'the Romanies should be deported, as Antonescu did'. My daughter said that so many Romanies were wronged when they were sent to Siberia; or something about Germans or Hebrews, I'm not sure what they were discussing there, but she felt it was such an injustice that she stood up to defend them and said: 'You are a teacher who judges people, you are racist and it's not normal'".*

*"Ordinary people, simple people who don't have an education, believe in the ideas passed down from generations, that all Gypsies steal, they are all filthy, and stupid, they are capable only of bad things", Angela replies. "You should think that there a lot of them who are not like this, or that you shouldn't blame the children that some do things like these. Look, when I was in school I had two Gypsy children in my class, one of them learned very well and was very*

*ambitious, and the other wasn't so good, not because he was a Gypsy, that was the best he could do... and he was insulted during the breaks and many girls didn't want to play or talk to them; but the children were not to blame, their parents were, because they were telling them at home: 'Don't play with that Gypsy'. Or: 'Behave, be quiet, or the Gypsies will come to kidnap you.' So that's what the children learn, it's not their fault, but you, as an adult, why do you have to use things that were used I don't know when, if you now live in better times?"*

We could have talked about this topic for a long time, but our "visit" was over; it was time for lunch, and the grandfather from Germany had wanted to drink a cup of tea for some time. Ana made him some, while I and Géraldine said good-bye to our hosts as if they were some old family friends.

After several weeks I called Marian to ask if he got the permission from his institution to appear in our film dressed with his military uniform. He had, but he managed to surprise his superiors, who hadn't suspected Marian is a Roma. I like to think that after this surprise, Marian's superiors and all those who don't see the "invisible Roma" around them, will be able to see not only the Romanies stereotyped by the "common sense" and the mass-media, but also those they hadn't seen before, but have spent years in the same boat with.

*“First of all, we are all people – that’s what our parents told us”*

**Luis Turcitu,**

25 years old, Journalism student, Iași

Luis embodies the invisible Roma. Blonde, blue eyes, white skin. Once you hear him saying “Me sôm rum”<sup>10</sup>, you wonder what foreign language he’s speaking. Is he Swedish, Norwegian, Russian? He’s a Roma. He’s invisible to all those who see only the dark Romani. And even more invisible to those who see the Roma around them only as criminals, beggars and uncivilized. There’s no beige in the white of his eye, his palm lines are not brown, nor are his gums black. As he says it himself, he was always a good boy. He contradicts even the stereotypes related to the appearance of the Roma, and the prejudices about their “physiological” criminality.

*“My name is Luis Turcitu and I’m not afraid to admit to being a Roma. Since first grade, since school, primary school, we all lived in a community - not necessarily compact - of Romanies, but we were many cousins and many relatives who went to the same school, and it was impossible for everyone not to notice that we are Romanies. That wasn’t necessarily a bad thing, because we, of all the children in our apartment building, had the finest clothes, the finest toys and so on, and that’s because our parents were doing commerce. So since first grade everybody knew we are Romanies, we admitted it, we had no problem with that and it didn’t influence in any way our psychological development, which was harmonious, nor our self-esteem.*

*“Our parents spoke Romani when they asked us to do something, you know? They didn’t speak it constantly, but when I was 12 I went to live with my grandparents, because our parents were doing commerce. And they spoke only Romani, and when they would*

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<sup>10</sup> It is pronounced “siom” and it is specific to the Ursari dialect. In the Romani language they say “Me sem rom” and it means ‘I am Roma’.

*send us to do the shopping or bring them a cup of water they would say: 'An manqe jekh Kuc bakery', meaning 'Bring me a glass of water'. And hearing this every day we learnt what it means."*

Luis talks briefly about primary school. It's a story similar to others, nothing special. A "normal" child, an environment without problems, a quiet childhood. The journey of every Romanian child, blonde with blue eyes, or however they may be. I wonder if Luis' journey would have been as uneventful if he had had dark hair and a darker skin. If he had been poorer. If he had born the stigma related to the color of the skin or poverty like many I have talked to had.

Luis was good at sports from early on. In the fifth grade he wanted to transfer to an athletic high school, where he had a cousin who used to tell him about it. They played volleyball, went to sport camps and competitions

*"I was fascinated, it seemed so cool, and then I said I would like to play volley too, but I had no idea what that meant. And I went to Doina - Doina is my mother, I call her so because we are very close - and I told her: 'Mother, I want to go play volleyball, to go to the athletic high school.' She didn't have so much time for this, so she didn't give me a straight answer. And do you know what I did? I went to the principal of the high school and said: 'Sir, I want to come here to play sports.' The principal looked at me, smiling. And he said: "Let's give you a list with what you need". He gave me the list, and I went and solved everything. I took care of the transfer myself, then I went to Doina and I told her: 'Mother, I transferred to play volleyball'.*

*"And this school - I told you that we lived in a somewhat compact community - and this school was downtown, it was far, in the town. I had to commute every day, together with children from my neighborhood; they all knew I was a Rom; I was friends with everyone and I never had any problems, the same with the teachers. Well, when we went to another neighborhood, people would look at me: 'What's the deal with the two of you?' It was just me and my cousin, he's a year older than me, we were in similar classes, we had the same timetable and we were both very good athletes. And these kids looked at us differently, I didn't know why. Then I realized: we are Romanies and that was why. We met with negative attitudes towards the Romani people, as even now one can find stereotypes and prejudices in the collective mind, but I have personally been very*

*appreciated in my class and I think I've changed a bit the perception of others”.*

*“During the eighth grade, when I had to choose my path in life, my parents thought: ‘Well, you are so well-behaved and smart, let’s make you a priest!’ I was an obedient child, I didn’t do crazy things, I didn’t cause any trouble. I didn’t say anything, but I was an athletic kid, I was used to kids’ camps and on trips. But I said: ‘If you think that’s ok, let’s do this.’”*

*“I prepared my file, I started to read the Bible, I read it four times, I started to prepare religious songs – these were the requests – I was ready. And we got there with the forms on the day of the examination; at that time they had created special places, affirmative measures for Roma children in schools and universities. I had heard about this and I wanted to apply for these positions, because it was important, if they exist, why not apply for them, especially because I am a Roma and it was a place for me. I registered my file for that place and I went to the exam, where there were all kinds of priests. All the children were with their parents, and with all kinds of tutors from the church. I was with Doina, the two of us, and we were waiting around. I was looking around and asking myself: ‘What’s my part in all this? That’s the life I want to live, as a senior priest of the church?’*

*“And these people got to my file, and they take it, browse through it and see that I had applied for the special places. Everybody gathered around that file, forming a small group; they looked at me, I had blue eyes, blond hair, a shirt and a jacket, I looked smart, respectable. They looked at me, then they looked at my grades – in the Romanian language exam I had obtained 9.20- then looked at me again and asked me: ‘Listen, are you a Roma?’”*

I can imagine those people’s surprise when they saw that a boy who was "smart", "respectable" and with good grades applied for the Roma places. I can imagine them measuring him from head to toe, going back to the grades from the file, then looking back at him, then at the file again. It was something strange. And, as if it wasn’t clearly written in the file that Luis was a candidate for the Romani place, the question was asked as well: "Hey, are you Romani?" Because you don’t seem to be one, I complete an imaginary conversation, which might as well be real. And even if the phrase was not uttered, I'm sure they considered it. Just as many of those we talked about so far tell us how surprised other people are when they say they are Roma: ‘How can you be a

Roma? But you speak English! But you graduated from university! But you work! But you'r beautiful and smart and clean! Are you really a Roma?' "I am very Roma", Marian Ursan would say.

I can almost hear Luis saying "Me sm rom" – as the ultimate proof that yes, Luis is a Roma – and I go back to his story.

Luis had no problem passing some of the exams, but the more he looked around the more he wondered if he really wanted to become a priest, if that was his path to follow. During the breaks between the exams, the children would gather and pray together.

*"During those three days I spent more time than ever on my knees, then back up on my feet, then on my knees again. And on the last day I said: 'Doina, this is not for me, this is not the life that I want.' Maybe if I had come from a normal high school, if I hadn't travelled so much, because at the athletic high school we travelled at least once a month; we went on a trip, to a camp, or to a competition in other cities. You spend three or four days or a week and you get used to that, you see other places, you gain experience."*

Luis came back to the athletic high school, back on the path he wanted at that time. It's true he his interests changed after he finished high school, but he had already discovered that, as a Romani, he had a responsibility beyond his colleagues' interests: *"I had to lead the way"*.

*"I look around and see that all kinds of cases are presented on television, and I think I have a responsibility, I have to lead the way; I have to do something to change or try to change things, to show people that not all the Romanies are like this. I'm sorry the bad cases are presented. The press and the media, generally speaking, look only for events that are, so to speak, spicy; no one in the media will present a Romani with a university degree. For example, something that comes to mind: the only Romanian who received a Grammy Award was a Roma musician. And that wasn't big news. There are a lot of beautiful things that happened and the world doesn't know about them."*

*"Our parents taught us this: First of all we are all people, all of us are people, and it bears no importance if you are Roma, Hebrew or something else, other minority or another religion, that was the message and spirit they raised us with. And that contributed to the harmonious development of our personality and character; if I look at*



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*all my cousins and, well, at the semi-community I grew up in, most of us have a positive attitude and are very open to anything. Again, as long as you know who you are, there is nothing to stop you from doing what you want."*

*"A lot of people don't believe I am a Roma, because they all have a gram of prejudice and a gram of stereotypes, but as they get to know me they realize that I am a Roma and they appreciate me admitting it. When you know who you are, things are simple and you don't falter, I am, or I'm not, or I speak, or I don't speak Romani. With me it's a bit exotic when I say 'Me sǎm rum', when you see someone blonde with blue eyes, who speaks well, it's trendy, you know?"*

"The university is a very long story," says Luis. After finishing high school he wanted to study journalism. He was more interested in investigative journalism, he wanted to do television shows. He started university right after high school, in the fall of 2006. But during the first year he started to receive offers from organizations that wanted to work with the Romani communities.

*"It seemed more interesting to get in touch with other Romani people and talk to them a bit about what we could do and what opportunities there are for them, so that they can evolve or be able to get to a decent level. In 2007, after my freshman year I left to do a sociological research in Valea Mare, in a compact community of Romani musicians; they are known for the Valea Mare band, from Vaslui County. That was a turning point, a very important period of my life. It reinforced all the ideas I had until then about being true about your ethnicity, trying to make something for your people."*

Then Luis postponed college for a while. "Not because I didn't have good results," he hastens to add. "But because I was able to help people in poor Romani communities". He speaks proudly of the achievements he has had thus far. He managed to get funds for paving a road, in the Zece Prăjini village (where many years ago Ovidiu Lipan "Tandarica" discovered the musical talents he introduced to the world). He managed to build a bridge for another community that ambulances and firemen can reach now. Things that can radically change the lives of some people.

Now Luis is involved with a project that aims to draw attention towards the value of the Romani traditional craftsmanship. To bring about economic

changes for communities that still make wooden spoons or cast iron pots for a market saturated with plastic and imports.

Meanwhile, he went back to university and he is determined to graduate. I ask him about his role models so far. He tells me about his cousin, who graduated the university and is very good in her job; she works to help the Romani as well. She's the one who motivated him to want to change for the better the lives of the people around him. *"If I had to choose my path in life again, I would make the same decisions"*.

I can't help but notice that Luis had an easier life than others. I think about the extra rocks in the others' bags. I remember Roxana's second teacher, who behaved as if neither she nor Marichescu and Jean in the back of the class even existed. I remember how the neighbors would tell Oana that nothing good would come of her, because she's a Gypsy, and Gypsies marry young and don't go to high school. I remember the school episodes Mioara told me about: the Maths teacher, the Geography teacher that almost prevented her from graduating. I think of Mădălin and the moment when he hears his classmate's mother asking the teacher not to put her child at the same desk with "that Gypsy", thus demonstrating that the color of the skin is much more important than what lies underneath it. I remember the absurd feeling, that something is not right, it's not as it should be, a feeling that I have when George Rădulescu tells me that he sometimes prefers to go to a restaurant and speak English with his wife, so he won't have to deal with the problems he might have if associated with the Romanians, once the waiters notice the color of his skin.

I also remember how Oana would take the dish detergent and rub her face so it would become white. And how relaxed she is because her son has blonde hair and blue eyes and "no one can say he is Romani".

They're right. It's easier to go through life as Luis has. The ease of his journey contrasts strongly with what most of my interviewees talk to me about. One thing is constant though: the concern of being an example for those around them, of stepping out of the pattern born out of prejudices, of "leading the way" for their people and to prove what many say: what should matter is not the color of your skin, but the kind of person you are.

*“Yes, we really are Romanies.  
And there are many like us”*

**Aurelia Dulgheru,**

Dentistry student, Physiokinetic Therapy and Medical Recovery Faculty  
graduate, 24 years old, Bucharest

**Corina Stanciu,**

Medical student, 23 years old, București

I'm getting ready to meet Aurelia and Corina. They are among my last interviewees and I have that feeling you have towards the end of a book, when you don't want it to end. There have been a few weeks full of meetings and stories: theirs, mine, those of the other Ana. There were exclamation marks, question marks, sometimes ellipses, and it's difficult to think that soon we will write a full stop. In a way.

I remember scenes, faces, a moment, some gestures or mimics that surprised me. I remember the stories that rendered me silent. I remember my own aggravation, a storm in a teacup, when the people I was talking to told me about the injustices they faced and left behind with a serenity I don't think I could have ever been able to achieve. I remember all the things many of them had to do without so they can get where they wanted to. The things their parents did without, to make sure their children can go to school. Marian Dumnică's father, who wore shoes during the winter so he could buy boots for his sons. Daniel Gangă's mother, running home from the hospital to take care of her five sons. The money Georgiana Gogor's parents saved so they could pay her school expenses.

I shake off all the emotions of my short flashback and I focus on my meeting with Aurelia Dulgheru. We sit down at the table in the same garden that has already heard so many stories. She gives me a friendly smile; I have probably conveyed some of the feelings that I have, even without talking too much, and we could get straight to the main subject; but we start, as the convention goes, from the beginning. I turn on the voice recorder and, smiling as if we share a secret, the story begins, conventionally, with the introductions.

Aurelia is a second year Dentistry student with the UMF Carol Davila University of Bucharest and, in 2009, she graduated the Physiokinetic Therapy and Medical Recovery Faculty within the same university. She was born in the Blăjești village, Teleorman county, in a Romani family with five children, of whom she is the youngest. She graduated from the high-school in Videle and she chose to study Medicine because it is a noble profession and because she likes to help people. In order to support herself through college, during the first year of university she worked in a beauty center. During the second year of the first college she was contacted by the president of the Association of Resident Physicians, Clara Matei, who told her about a mentor scholarship. She applied for this scholarship and she got it, which helped her focus on her studies. She also participated at various international symposiums and conferences. All her siblings have university degrees or are in the process of getting one. One of them got a PhD in chemistry in Ireland, and now he works in Belgium, at a famous company in that sector.

Aurelia tells me this quickly, in the first ten minutes of our dialogue. Meanwhile Corina Stanciu joined us, her fellow Medical student. A few months after our meeting Corina was to receive the Student of the Year Award, the Medical department, and the Award for Academic Excellence within the Romani Excellence Gala 2011.

But for now we are on holiday; it's summer, it's hot, both girls wear shirts. Aurelia wears a black pencil skirt and Corina a fashionably tailored pair of jeans. They talk calmly, professionally; they take turns, just like two bright students answering the teacher's questions.

I ask Aurelia what her parents do. She answers briefly that they don't work. And she continues:

*"But they have been a great moral support, and that counts for a lot, because we learned to go beyond our limitations, basically to reach beyond this pattern, these negative stereotypes we hear about everywhere, that the Gypsies steal, rob, etcetera."*

I ask her what effect these stereotypes had on her. And if they had any, actually, because she seems to be confident and decisive, she doesn't look as if she had any unpleasant episodes to speak of.

*"For example, teachers don't really expect us to shine. I have even recently heard a Romani colleague who said that once a teacher came in the class and asked: 'Can you feel how bad it smells*

## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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*when a Gypsy enters a classroom?’ My colleague said nothing, he continued to write. I think he was wrong, he should have calmly answered: ‘I am a Roma, I learn, so what’s the problem?’, or something similar. He could have said: ‘I can sue you for discrimination in a state institution’, for example, right?”*

I nod, but I don’t insist. I’m sure we’ll come back to this topic. For now, I invite Corina Stanciu to introduce herself:

*“I am born in a mixed family, my father is Roma, and my mother is Romanian. I have a younger sister who is a student in Cybernetics. We live in a predominantly Romani neighborhood in Ploiești, but it’s not a closed community. I attended the school from my neighborhood, where most of my colleagues were Romanies. It was a normal school, nothing special, but I had a role model in my family, which was my father. He is the only one in his family with a higher education, and regardless of the financial situation, sometimes better or sometimes worse, we have always been encouraged, me and my sister, to focus on our studies. He let us decide what we want to do and what we’re good at, of course, but it was made clear for us, ever since we were just kids, that we have no other chance to make it in life than through education, the best, if possible. I was thinking how lucky I am to have such models at home, because in school I had colleagues probably with the same level of native intelligence, but who, without support and guidance from their families, lost their way. I had colleagues who at 14 years old got pregnant and “wasted” themselves, meaning that they could have done more with their life; but they didn’t know they could aim that high, so they stopped where they saw that most of us do.”*

We are suddenly in the middle of the hot topic, and I think neither of us is ready; mostly because we have just started our dialogue, and the two girls somehow seem to hold back, as if they are in a professional meeting. I’ve heard about this “excellence syndrome”, but I can’t figure out if it’s an answer to the predominant cliché “he’s a nice person, you wouldn’t think he’s Gypsy”, or is a way of expressing relief at avoiding the pattern the society has prepared for people like you. So I decide to ask Corina how she chose to study Medicine.

*"I chose to study Medicine when I was in the second grade; I was a very decisive child. Unfortunately, my decision originated more in the negative experiences I had with the medical system. I was a sickly child and I spent a lot of time in hospitals... at one point you realize it isn't as it should be. And besides, every time we went to the hospital, no matter how sick I was, or if I was younger or older, my father put me in my mother's arms and she would go with me in the doctor's office. He was... I don't know... I haven't experienced discrimination directly, but I think that he has, so deeply, when he was a child and a teenager, that when he in turn had children, he excluded himself from the start, he wouldn't come to parent-teacher meetings at school, he wouldn't go in at the doctor's with us; because he considered that, in order for us to have the best treatment possible, people shouldn't know we are Roma children."*

That's how her paternal grandparents looked at life too, when they decided not to teach their five children the Romani language. And it's not the first family I hear this about: many parents and grandparents, traumatized by the deportation experience, chose not to teach their children and grandchildren their own language, afraid that this "distinctive mark" would cause them problems. I don't know if they felt their sacrifice was worthwhile when they realized the society would discriminate against them anyway; it would even push them towards other ways of hiding their identity or simply hiding from themselves. I can't shake off the image of Corina's father, always standing outside the school gate or the doctor's door, so that his daughters would not be perceived as Romani. But one of them is giving me an interview now about this – as a late reply for a world and a history that forced at least two generations in her family to hide themselves.

*"I grew up in my father's family and we have always been close; my grandfather was a musician, an accordionist, and all my father's brothers play some instruments. He was the only one who wanted to go to university and study... I don't think it was impossible to do both, but he chose to study. He went to the Oil and Gas college and now he is a drilling engineer. His professional career includes discrimination episodes on the job, but he was one of those who had the courage to file a lawsuit about it– a lawsuit that, of course, he had no chance of winning; but anyway, I am very proud of him that he intuitively couldn't stand for this, and he said something about it: 'It's*

*not fair, I have too many responsibilities, the salary is too low, it isn't as it should be...'. Then he worked in Ploiești for a few organizations and this is how I had contact with this world. I had applied for college and one of his colleagues who was then working for Romani CRISS told him about Romania Scholarship Programs that focus on the Romani students; he knew because his daughter was a Medical student too. And this is how I became aware of the things one could do, how much I could get involved... For example, the public health system. If the decision factors involved in the public health system would realize the importance of special assistance given to a certain cause or a certain problem, for example, prevention or general practitioners, making sure everybody is registered with one, checking their activity, so people wouldn't arrive directly in emergency rooms, which are very expensive and accessed pointlessly and excessively, especially by the Romanians, then things would somehow get better – this is just an example..."*

*"Have you had any other role models, besides your father?"*

*"Yes, I have, in different periods in my life I met all kinds of people that inspired me somehow. I was lucky to have had teachers and mentors that taught me a lot of things. Generally speaking, I had role models in my profession, at school: my Chemistry teacher, whom I'll never forget, who worked with me very much and inspired this love in me for a subject many consider to be impossible to learn. Or now, my mentor, who is a successful doctor; it isn't easy to graduate medical school and still enjoy what you do, to do it passionately. But from a personal point of view it will always be my dad. At home I learned that you must be very good, it's not enough to be average and be content... just to finish school. I think that came from the prejudice that if you're not the best, people will say you're a Gypsy. So if you are the best..."*

“...People don't see you as a Gypsy”, I want to add, but the two girls know this already.

*"I could tell you that in school I have always been the chubby kid who got the prizes... Yes, I can say I had very good results", Corina says.*

Then it's Aurelia's turn:

*"I wasn't very good in school, but then, in high school, I started to work very hard, because I wanted to study Medicine and I knew very well that studying was the only way I could get to do that. In the second year of high school I decided to study Medicine, although it was clear that it would be financially difficult; but, what can I say, I worked hard and I had moral support from my parents, who basically gave me the energy to escape this pattern. And I really wanted to be better than the Romanians or at least to contribute as much as them to the society. My opinion is that what differentiates us from them is just a painful past and the color of our skin. The rest are stereotypes. And related to those, the way you behave and tell people, that's what they see. So if you have no problem with the way you look, psychologically neither will they. And your studies and your education give you some confidence. Then, you start to become aware of the difficulties the Romanies face, but you also discover others like you. Then you can say, 'Yes, I'm a Roma, what's the problem?' But to get here, to have that confidence in all circumstances, you have to study. Education is the start of everything. However, I'm aware that not all children have their parents' financial or even moral support; but that's still a matter of education, because they don't have the necessary studies to work so they can make a living. To be honest, for me, my brother was a huge support. He worked too, as our parents couldn't help us financially, so he worked to support himself and he helped me too, he bought me books for the entrance examination and things like these. And he was a moral support as well, a role-model, because he had taken part in many regional and national competitions, and then he went to study Chemistry at university level and he told me, 'See, it's possible, you can do it...'"*

It's important to have someone to tell you that you can do it. Moreover, see it for yourself in someone close to you. That it's not mandatory to feel and be part of a group – the Gypsies – that not only you fail to identify yourself with ('But why one can see only one type of Romani on TV, why only the Romani are portrayed as criminals?...'), but which doesn't even really exist outside of some clichés. Why should Aurelia and many like her be automatically related to some criminals they accidentally share only their ethnicity with?



## **What do you want to be when you grow up?**

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*"I think the person who discriminates based on stereotypes is a person with little education, who uses prejudices to evaluate a person who belongs to a certain ethnic group. I don't know how I would react, honestly, if someone would come to me, a dentist, and would say: 'You know, I don't want you treating me, because you are Roma'. I wouldn't care, actually. This is why I study, and I want to be very good, to work and to develop myself intellectually. I guess that we, the young graduates, can help get rid of the old mentalities in the health system, because we know discrimination is still present in the Romanian hospitals. But we could also change the mentalities of our Romanian colleagues. Because now we know very well what is the mortality rate among Romani patients and the reasons for which they don't go to the hospital, because they are treated in a certain way and some doctors refuse to give them first aid."*

I reverse the parts in the scenario Aurelia mentioned, with doctors who refuse to treat Romani patients, and I ask Corina how she would react if a patient refused to receive help from her because she was Romani.

*"I think that at first I would feel offended, but I hope I will be so good that they wouldn't say this. If you come to see a great specialist, you come because he is a great specialist, not because he is a Roma or not. But there is this possibility, for this thing to happen, and I'm sorry for that patient. This is why I study hard, and I think it is very, very important to really know what you want to do. If you manage to identify the thing that is good for you, to choose the type of career that you want, an area that you want to excel in, all the sacrifices that you make at the beginning will materialize in much higher satisfactions. As a student, depending on the situation you have at home, you don't necessarily have the easiest life in the world. For example, I, as a student, never went out. I can't remember how many times I had to refuse an invitation to go out or I don't know when or to get a book I need for a course. But I'm sure that the free time that I sacrifice now, that I could spend or our colleagues spend having fun, later will... materialize as great satisfactions. Personally and professionally."*

"Was there a moment when, with all the difficulties you had, you thought about giving up?", I ask Aurelia in the end.

*"No, because for me it was very clear: if I give up, I will sink even lower. No question about it. I said that it doesn't matter if I have to work, I'll manage with the exams, I'll pass and graduate. And I did, I passed my graduation exam, I graduated, I should have enrolled for a master. But I didn't want to continue in that field, after I realized it's not what I want and it can't really offer me the security I need in the future and the respect I want from society. As a kinetotherapist, I don't know if you know, in the hospital they treat you as if you were a nurse. And I wanted to go higher, to have a status."*

Another topic we could debate for hours, and this time a neutral one, outside the ethnic theme. But I keep thinking of the accordion of Corina's grandfather. I remember that my mother's brother, who died before I was born, played the accordion. My grandparents still kept it in a corner of the house. I tried to play it a few times, but they told me "it's not for girls"; and anyway, my grandmother would start crying every time she saw it, so, after a while, the accordion disappeared. Another time I found an old photo, with my grandmother as a child in the arms of my great-grandparents. She was next to her older sister. Two little girls with dark eyes, and dark skin – or was it dark because of the scarlet shades of the 1930 photo? "Grandma, are we Gypsies?", I asked my grandmother then. I was six or seven years old and I had a vague feeling she wouldn't like the question. "What a crazy idea, of course not!", my grandmother replied sharply. Shortly the photograph disappeared as well from the drawer I had found it in.

"What does it mean to you to be a Roma?", I ask Corina.

*"It means to be different in Romania. And it's up to you to make a difference. I think it's good to be different, to have a variety of people and everyone could say: in my family we dress in a certain way, or we like a certain kind of music. My previous generations had values and traditions, they had specific jobs. Although progress means, in a way, uniformity. But exactly because of this, I think that if you know about your past, who you were, who you are and who you want to be... it's very difficult to explain how I feel about being a Romani, because if you live there, it's something that, I don't know, you just feel it, you feel you are close to them and the way they think, because in some ways they have a somewhat different mentality. They gave up their traditions and rules that don't fit in the modern life, but they still hold on to some; for example, they love their children a*

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*great deal; I don't know if you went to see a Romani family, to see how they raise their children, no matter their financial situation... You'll see they are very keen to have their children next to them, and I feel the same way and I'm sure I'll be the same way with my children. As for the discrimination, I have never had a problem to say I am a Roma, and I had a lot of reactions, from my colleagues or my teachers, saying that: 'I don't believe you... because you are so... and so...'. 'Yes', I would tell them, 'but I am a Roma and there are many like me.'*

There are many people similar to the characters of this book. Besides the twenty people included here, there are entire families that contradict the usual stereotypes about the Roma. There are the parents who gave up on basic things so their kids could go far in life – wouldn't you do the same? They are their children who try to protect the best way they can from the attacks of a society that doesn't seem to have any good thoughts about the Romanies – wouldn't you do the same?

And even the most common comment you hear, when you introduce one of the many Romanies who are different than the general negative perception, is to say that “you wouldn't think he is a Roma”, these people have no problem admitting that they are Roma. So what's stopping us from seeing them the way they are?

*“I only wish living in my country would feel like it’s my country.”*

**Nicu Ion Stoica,**

31 years old, jurist, Constanța

*“I was born in Constanța, in a Roma family. My mother’s family were musicians, my father’s, blacksmiths. I was born in a neighborhood with not so many Romanies, there were just a few families, which was an advantage, the fact that I wasn’t born in a community. It was an advantage because I had better role models. The lifestyle in that neighborhood, the neighbors, my playmates, they had other ideals, they wanted to be police officers, doctors.”*

Straight to the point. I’m glad Nicu says in his own words what we all think and what inspired us to take people like him in schools where Romani children attend. ‘Have you ever seen a Romani priest?’ is a typical question in many Romani communities, where financial worries place school second. Why would you need to study, it’s not like you’re going to be a priest. Have you ever seen a Romani priest? No. Here he is. You can touch him and yell: “he does exist!” Ask him how he did it. How hard it was for him. How he conquered prejudices and obstacles you yourself may have faced. The path he walked on, the paths he opened. The paths he opened, even if they are sometimes muddy when it rains, are the ones you can walk on too. You can be whatever you want to be.

*“I wanted to be a crane operator; it seemed such a cool job. Then, when I was a teenager, I wanted badly to work for McDonald’s, it also seemed an amazing job. Then, slowly, my expectations and my aspirations changed, but this was due also to the fact that I lived in an environment where people had high expectations from their lives, they had broad horizons, a perspective; and I thought I should do something with my life as well, even if I didn’t know from the beginning what it was. My father had gone to school for seven years, but I discovered it was just for six; he said seven, but he didn’t finish his seventh year. My mother stopped right before going to high*

school, and she regretted it, because she had good grades and potential; but she was born in a Romani community, girls were not supposed to go to school for more than eight years – even eight years were a lot. I have three siblings, two brothers and a sister, who's the eldest. Our parents encouraged us to go to school, they made efforts for us to go to school; it's not easy to have four children in school at the same time; at first you had one child in school, the next year you had two, after another year you had three, you realize what this meant... Three uniforms, three schoolbags, three sets of notebooks, three pencil cases... Then there came the fourth, also after a year or two, so it was an effort to keep four children in school. The advantage was that my father, as he was a good worker, managed to get his own business, which was very difficult in communist times. He had a crafts workshop where he repaired glasses, lighters, different stuff. So fortunately my father could afford to send us to school. School was the most important and our parents encouraged us to go to school: 'You have to learn, you must have an education, go to university, do everything we couldn't do', that's what they used to tell us... they encouraged us to go to school."

"I really wanted to go to school. I was really happy when they cut my hair very short, because until I was seven I had really long hair, and everybody would say I was a girl. The first days were great, we sang songs and recited poems, I thought school would always be like this. My biggest problem was that I am left-handed and in those times this was considered to be a handicap. I was forced to write with my right hand and it took me almost two years to be able to hold the pen in my right hand, it was a nightmare for me... The same way you would ask a right-handed person to write with their left, it was the same thing for me. It was horrible. I could write with my left hand very well, even in the first year I learned from my parents how to write in capital letters, I could write many words, but with my left hand, not with my right hand. The other children learned calligraphy signs, and I couldn't hold a pen. I would draw some horrible signs on my hands and the teacher would strike my hand with a ruler if they weren't nicely done. I was trying to tell her that I can't hold the pen in my right hand, but no... in those times people didn't understand that you were born like this, it isn't your option."

Some things are not an option. You can't choose the country you are born in, your ethnicity, your village, your family; it's not a life option to be left-handed or Romani or Romanian.

I remember a cartoon I saw when I was a child. It was called Oblio. It was about a village (let's call it Jokesville) where everybody had a conic head; one day, a boy with a round head was born. His mother knits for him a conic hat to hide that he was different, but even so Oblio is accused of not abiding to the law of the conic head and is exiled from the village. The story is long and meaningful, and I remember that back in the '80s, when it was broadcast in Romania, many interpreted it as a subversive message about the uniformity of the dictatorship at that time. I think that then uniformity was the state doctrine, it was an institution. Now it isn't anymore. Yet we still act according to the same dictatorial instinct of achieving uniformity all around us.

I remember one more detail. Oblio became an outlaw with the help of the Apathetic king, who didn't want any trouble in his kingdom. And by trouble, we mean differences. Because differences can create problems in the eyes of those who are not ready to accept them. Who want nothing more than uniformity. Everybody to be the same. Everybody with the pen in the right hand. Everybody with the same skin color. Who's not like us, is against us. Like Oblio. Some things we cannot choose. By the same token, being different is not against the law.

*"The first years of school were difficult for me; my mother didn't have enough time for me, to explain to me what I should do or to help me; she had all her other children to take care of, my older brothers were busy with their homework, and I had to try and manage on my own. When I went to school I was nervous, and frustrated, because I didn't have my homework ready, it was very hard for me to write with my right hand, I couldn't do my homework very well, my notebooks were a disaster, and I didn't have any self-confidence... In addition, there was the ethnic stigma, you felt there was something; some pupils were preferred to others. I sat in the third desk, the fourth was the last; it was difficult for me to see what was written on the board, but I don't know how they decided where we should be seated. Normally it should be based on height, but it wasn't like this, because I should have been in the first two desks; but I was seated in the third one... I didn't understand exactly why at that moment, I didn't understand why I was seated in the third desk, but it was difficult for me to see what the teacher was writing and explaining on the board.*

*I would see that some children received better explanations, I didn't understand that either; but I knew that I wasn't like the others; our parents told us that we are Gypsies, we are Romanies, that is what they said, Romanies. I actually remember a story with my sister. She heard my parents saying we are Romani or Roma, and she heard that Romanians come from Dacians and Romans; she went to the other children (she was in the first grade, I think) and told them: 'Do you know I'm your ancestor?', 'How can you be our ancestor?', Yes, we are Romani'. When the teacher came, the other kids told her: 'Tina said that she comes from the Romans, that she is Roman' and the teacher asked: 'Really, you are Roman?', 'Yes', she said, 'I even know Roman songs', 'What songs do you know?' – 'Whip me, mother...' (a famous Romani song)."*

*"For us it wasn't a problem to acknowledge our identity, we did it, but we weren't proud of it, we would rather not talk about it. Even our parents told us, 'Don't tell people at school that you are Gypsies... Say you are Romanian so that you won't be made fun of. For the first four years of school I was considered one of the weakest students, and I couldn't understand why; although I gave better answers than other colleagues in history, for example, I would get an 8, and others who gave worse answers than me would get a 10. Also, I couldn't understand why when I could do something I was given as an example, but only to embarrass the others, such as: 'Even Nicușor can do this!' It was something that used to discourage me, it made me feel bad, I was considered the weakest pupil in the class. The situation changed when I started the fifth grade, when we had a different teacher for every topic, and the evaluation was done individually and orally. It was different, you didn't have the same teacher; I remember that in the first or second semester, in the Romanian language exam, the best pupils from primary school got 3s and 4s in the test... I got a 7, but that 7 was the best in the class. And by the eighth grade I had results such as 8, 9, even 10; it was a clear progress."*

*After the Revolution the new economic situation caught my parents by surprise; they didn't expect certain changes, and my father had to close his shop; he didn't have enough money to buy the space where he had the workshop and he had to close it. Then we had a tough period, because he was the only one who earned money in our family, we were young, we went to school; mother didn't work*

*because it would have been difficult for her to work while raising four children, she was a heroine for us. It was difficult, but slowly we started to get back on track. My older brother quit high school after two years to get a job. I didn't, but I got my first job when I was 16 years old. I attended high school and worked in my free time.*

*Then I went to high school; there things changed completely, teachers appreciated me, I got them to like me. High school was a positive experience for me; the only problem was that I had to work and I couldn't always arrive at 8 o'clock because I had to do both. I had managed to get a job with a foundation where I did computer work – then it was something special to know how to use a computer. The teachers knew I had to work, sometimes they would turn a blind eye, sometimes not... At the end of the trimester I had to come up with 10 documents, 5 requests from my parents to justify me skipping classes, anything... And I still had a lot of unattended classes; but some teachers would not make a big deal out of it, because they understood I was working, I didn't really have a choice... They were surprised that even if I didn't go to school much, I would learn for all my classes. I remember a story from high school; my IT teachers had heard from my classmates that I was good with computers, and the IT teacher wanted to meet me. I couldn't go to class for about a month, these were the last two classes, but eventually I went. My teacher told me: 'You're the one that's good with computers? Come with me!', and she took me to where they kept the computers the teachers were using. These were the best computers and she said, 'Look, we can't access the Internet on this computer, all the IT teachers tried to make this work and they couldn't, maybe you can!' I looked to see what it was, it was something that had often happened at my job, I clicked a few things and the problem was solved. And the teacher said: 'Wow, you're not the computer prince, you're the computer king!', and she said then, 'From now on you don't have to come to class, you'll always have a 10; you should come only if you want to, to have a chat maybe'.*

*Already the stigma from secondary school and especially from primary school had disappeared; I knew I was Romani, everybody knew it, but all had a positive attitude towards me; I had been accepted as a leader because I had good results in school, I was sociable, I wasn't any different from them; I even had a better financial situation than many of them, because I had a job and a*



salary... I also used to repair computers in my spare time, I made good money with that, so I was able to support myself all the way through high school and even help my family; at one point I was the only one with an income, so I can say I know what it's like to provide for your family ever since I was 15 – 17 years old. I have always worked, for me work equals value, education equals value, and this is thanks to my parents who taught us that.

And so I became a teenager, and of course at that age your main interests are girls and relationships, or maybe boys for some, we don't judge. I for one like girls, and as I was living in a non-Romani environment I liked non-Romani girls, and I had many as my girlfriends. I wouldn't tell them immediately that I was Gypsy, but I used to take them home to meet my father, whose skin is really, really dark, you would say he's from Africa! So I used to take them home and then they realized that I was Romani; anyway, some problems would arise after that... some of my relationships didn't change because of that, others did. Shortly after I would bring them home, all sorts of reasons for break-up would appear, and I have always felt that.

After I graduated from high school, I went to Law school, and now I am a student in Political Sciences; I will keep studying for the next 10, 20 years, because I became accustomed to school, to the academic environment. I like it, I want to study as much as possible; I think you can never say you know it all, you can always discover something new; and the more you learn, the more you realize how little you know. I realize that education is the safest path to success; I get to meet families that lost their home, their business, it was all gone in a day; if I lost everything in one day, education is something no one could take away from me.

School gives you a good start in life. If it's difficult to accomplish something in life bearing the Romani stigma, it's even more difficult if you don't go to school, if you don't have an education; it's twice as hard to become successful; besides dealing with the complexes and prejudices you will face as a Roma, it will be much more difficult to deal with the fact that you have no education. Eventually an education will help you see beyond the limits others set for you. Without an education it will be much more difficult, although we are constantly presented with examples of people who became successful without having any degrees. But these are one in a million

*cases, they are exceptions; there are many more unwritten stories about people who didn't go to school and missed their chance to have a good life, a family, good prospects. Unfortunately, those who became successful thanks to their non-academic talents and skills are described as role-models; but you have one in a million chances to be like Gigi Becali, to be a shepherd and become a millionaire, how many cases like this are there? Actually the odds are even less, of one in twenty-two million. Without an education, your chances to accomplish something are greatly diminished.*

*One of my brothers married a Romanian girl, my sister married a Romanian man, so we had no problem with this; the problem has always been theirs, they had problems accepting us. I'm honestly telling you, at least when I was a teenager, let's say, I was thinking of marrying a Romanian girl, who would have blonde hair and blue eyes, but do you know why? Because I wanted to have children with white skin and blonde hair, who wouldn't have to go through what I went through, so they wouldn't be discriminated against. But there were many advantages to being a Romani; first of all, you have a huge cultural background; many people pay a lot of money for a Gypsy style skirt; we have a rich and beautiful culture. And all in all, being different is a good thing.*

*I get to talk to some people and I tell them I am a Roma. 'No, no, how can you be a Gypsy? You speak well, you have an education, you're not a Gypsy, Gypsies don't know how to speak...' Recently I was with my daughter at the clinic; another mother was passing by and was telling her child: 'If you don't behave, I'll send you away to live with the Gypsies!'; then she looked at me, I was looking at her and was smiling; I think she probably realized she had put her foot in it and she started laughing."*

Was it a polite smile? Was she laughing because she got caught? Was it the type of blunder you feel ashamed of for the rest of your life? Or was that smile just a reflex of two people making eye contact? Has that mother seen the Roma in the person standing in front of her? Or maybe the Roma was invisible, because he was decently dressed, he wasn't cursing or spitting, he wasn't trying to steal her bag, and he seemed to be educated and so different from the "Gypsies" that collect bad children? How could the person in front of her be Romani? She was talking about something else entirely.

## ***What do you want to be when you grow up?***

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I wonder if that mum has ever told her child again that she'll send him away to live with the Gypsies if he doesn't behave. I want to believe that she hasn't.

I wonder what will that child start to believe when he repeatedly, obsessively, hears the same threat from his mum and his dad, from his grandparents and neighbors, even from strangers on the street. Who are these Gypsies? It doesn't even matter. All it matters is that mom will send me away. For me, the child that keeps hearing "I'll send you away to live with the Gypsies", the word "Gypsy" will always be associated with something unpleasant, something to be scared of.

And even if later I'll try to overcome my childhood fear and I will want to know what a Gypsy is, I'll look the word up in the dictionary and I'll read that the Gypsy is a person with horrible habits. And then, when it's my turn, I will think it's normal, correct and educational to threaten my own children that if they don't behave, they will be sent away to live with the Gypsies.

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Shall we do an exercise in empathy?

Imagine you are in Rome. A mother with a child passes you by. The mother says, "If you don't behave, I'll send you to live with the Romanians". You're shocked. You wonder if it's a coincidence or it's obvious by the looks of you that you are Romanian. She looks at you. She smiles. You would like to say something, but the words won't come out. You would like to tell her that you're not a bad person, you have never killed anybody or stolen anything, you don't want to rape women. Even if there are Romanians who do all these things. They are so few, but the newspapers write only about them all the time. You are an invisible Romanian.

You look at the child whose hand you're holding hold. Your child. Has he heard that? Has he understood that for the other child she represents a monster? And you start thinking what you can do so he doesn't have to hear things like these again. So he doesn't have to be ashamed that he's Romanian, so that no one would be afraid of him, so that other children won't avoid playing with him, won't refuse to play with him, won't look at him suspiciously. So they would look at him and see who he really is. A person.

*“There is a speech given by Mihail Kogălniceanu, who was then a Prime Minister, in front of the Romanian Academy, ten years after the Romani emancipation; he talks about how Gypsy slaves were perceived, and he says that a Gypsy was not considered a person, just an object; he recollects how a daughter was separated from her parents and sold to some noblemen, a wife was separated from her husband and sold to a slave master; they were abused, beaten as if they were animals; and this is what Kogălniceanu said while addressing the Romanian Academy, it's not something that we say because we are Romani; no, these are historical documents that prove everything; after all, we are a historical product, each of us is a sum of experiences that influence who we are and you can't ignore that. We are a minority with problems, but these have a historical cause after all; we are a people of slaves who were emancipated 130 years ago. Even the Romanians were slaves in their own country, if we look at the serfs, they were peasants with no land; so eventually the Romani history blends in with the Romanian history, we have been here for a thousand years.*

*It's difficult for me to think that I come from India; my country has always been and always will be Romania. I feel like a Romanian, I think like a Romanian, when the Romanian team loses I cry, when a Romanian athlete wins, I'm happy, if I ever have to die for this country I will... Because my parents, my wife, my child, they are all here... I don't have another country, this is my country. I only wish living in my country would feel like it's my country.”*



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