

REPORT ON THE COVERAGE OF THE ROMA IN THE GREEK PRESS

DECEMBER 1999

(Comments in italics are made by the GHM)

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1.) Settled Roma (Agia Varvara) - reality and stereotypes
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4/12/1999: *Faces of the 21st Century*, [Natasa Bastea], issue No. 39, p.21-25

“The New Roma Generation”

We found ourselves in a photographer’s workshop in Agia Varvara. Our minds were full of preconceived pictures and stereotypes. We expected to find long colorful skirts and a lot of temperament. We only found the latter. We initiated a discussion with Mr. Stelios Eftstathopoulos. He runs the photography workshop for young Roma, which started in March 1999 under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture. Roma girls, in jeans, entered the room and brought us face to face with our own prejudices. The program started last spring. In the first three months, the girls, who had never before dealt with photography, attended only theoretical classes. After the first introductory classes, the girls, with cameras provided by the Ministry of Culture, went out in the streets and started taking pictures of everyone and everything. The program will end with a photo exhibition in January 2000. Two young Roma men also attended the classes in the beginning, but they soon had to give up for lack of free time. All of the girls seem to enjoy the classes and to have discovered a certain way of expression through photography.

They have a strong sense of identity. The tradition of showing in public the bloodstained sheet after their first wedding night does not bother them. On the

contrary, “it is our honor” they proudly state. Virginity is very important to their family and community; that is why Roma men prefer to couple with Roma women. They all get married young. “If you are 25 years old and still unattached you stay with your mother!” They believe that the man is the one to decide on family issues. Still, there are ways in which a woman can “guide” her husband towards the decision she finds most appropriate. They go to church every Sunday. Young men take part in church choirs. The girls come from families involved in trade. Their parents and relatives gamble on the stock market. They declare themselves to be as Roma as the Roma who live in tents. Despite their “lighter” accent, they speak Romanes just like the tent-dwellers. “You Greeks, you do not speak ancient Greek. Does that make you feel less Greek?” They may live in houses, they may dress in jeans but they feel Roma. “People tend to believe that true Roma live in tents. But we are here. We live in houses and we dress the way you do. We are not better than they are. We are more modern and advanced. We have chosen to live in a different way. But we are Roma nevertheless.”

Isn't this the first step towards assimilation, we ask? “We are a clever race but we do not take advantage of this fact. If all of us went to school, we would have conquered the world. Our bad way of living is detrimental to us. But some things are changing for the better, albeit at a very slow pace.” What about racism? Racism does exist; they all agree on this. They have all heard discussions about “Gypsies” from people who disparage their identity. These discussions take place in schools, in cafes, everywhere. “While I was looking for an apartment to rent, people were telling me that they do not accept Albanians and Tziganes [pejorative for Roma].”

What do they expect in the future? “We want 95% of the Roma to be educated. Nowadays only 5% attend school. We hope there will be no need, in the future, for Roma children to give up school, because they have to work for their families.”

A very positive report trying to break the existing stereotypes about Roma. The article is surrounded by lots of photos.

2.) Roma in Mytilini. Press coverage of the DROM, GHM and MRG-G open letter to the Prime Minister and the Ministers of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs

2/12/1999: *Eleftherotipia*, [Stratis Balaskas], p.8-9

“The Illegality”

Eleftherotipia was the first paper to write about the fine that the municipality of Mytilini had to pay for having carried out construction works without a permit in the local Roma camp. With an open letter to the Greek Prime Minister, the Minister of the Interior, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, three non-governmental organizations -DROM Network for Roma Social Rights, Greek Helsinki Monitor and Minority Rights Group- posed the following questions:

To what extent a local authority (such as a municipality) can be considered at fault for simply trying to carry out its duty in line with the constitutional provision on the state's responsibility towards its homeless citizens?

What is the legal importance of any urban planning illegality when it is the result of concern for people who are evidently in danger?

What is the state's responsibility when it allows the punishment of the indeed very few local authorities which try to fulfill their constitutional obligation, albeit in an imperfect way? And why is this done, while the state turns a blind eye on the numerous cases where authorities should be severely punished for failing to protect people in danger?

Should we join the above-mentioned NGOs and wait for an answer from the state?

A very positive report, making reference to the DROM, GHM and MRG-G open letter to the Prime Minister and the Ministers of the Interior and of Foreign Affairs, denouncing the selective sensitivity in law enforcement when it comes to Roma or authorities, which try to protect them.

Also on the same subject:

8/12/1999: Avgi, p.31

The report presented the open letter.

3.) A new book for Roma children in Xanthi

13/12/1999: Paratiritis [Andreas Sakellion], p. 9

“New Book for Roma Children Education”

Since the beginning of the school year a special program on the education of Roma children was started in Xanthi with the cooperation of the University of Ioanina. Using a brand-new book, two teachers in Evlalo teach their students. All of their students are Roma. The book is the product of serious work carried out by the University of Ioanina and some specialists in the field. What is different in this book is that it shows interest in and respect for the Roma way of living, the traditions and customs of the Roma, their songs and thoughts, as well as their ideas about the meaning of life. The aim is to smoothly introduce Roma children to school life and help them increase their self awareness and mental capacity by providing them with images, words and connotations which are somehow related to their own life. In this way, children learn, among other things, about the adventures of Ulysses. According to the teachers, *“Roma children show bigger interest and make a greater effort to accept the new book. Even the first graders can write and read.”*

The book and the teaching methods were presented at a seminar in the end of November in Xanthi. Some 100 teachers who work with Roma children attended the seminar.

A positive report, openly in favor of the initiative.

4.) Roma in Ano Liosia.

a) *Destitute in the “Simitis Ghetto”*

18/12/1999: *Eleftherotypia* [G. Dama], p.16-17

“Rats Are Still Eating Them”

They live away from other people, in a place of mud and dirt. Twenty Roma families with more than 80 children live abandoned somewhere between the rubbish dump and an old military barracks in Ano Liosia. The smell around the area is unbearable. People live together with rats in their old prefabricated houses and shacks. Children show the bloody marks of this coexistence on their rat-bitten bodies. Men take turns to sleep, so as to prevent the rats from striking again while the children are in bed. The Roma light fires in their houses to get rid of the rats and disinfect their places in one way or another. There is no water in the houses - only a tap outside the houses. This was the model camp the municipal authorities have been promising them for years - no infrastructure, no facilities, no school for the children. They called the mayor, the media, and the Archbishop to visit them and see with their own eyes where the Roma had been thrown. The teacher, Thanasis Nikolaides, enchained himself in protest against the despicable living conditions.

A positive and sensitive report. Not giving much of the rich background story of the camp, the report highlights the destitute and the lack of hygiene in the camp.

b) *The eviction from the “Simitis Ghetto”*

24/12/1999: *Avgi*, p.1, 13

“People – Kicked out; Rats Stay Behind”

The “Simitis Ghetto” will soon cease to exist. The mayor of Ano Liosia, using the good old recipe of “divide and rule,” evicted about half of the residents -ten out of twenty families- and kept his promises for relocation to decent prefabricated houses only to those who are registered citizens of the municipality. The rest ended up in the nearby camp in the area of the garbage dump. There, once more they found themselves face to face with the rats and the cold. The strong wind has already destroyed three of their shacks. The place, full of mud and garbage, was the only place for those who had no papers to claim registered residence in Ano Liosia. Reportedly they were given 300,000 drachmas by the municipal authorities to leave the ghetto. Now, together with the residents of another 60 shacks, they live with the hope that the municipality of Aspropyrgos (the authority responsible for the camp around the dump) will clean the area at some point and provide them with some infrastructure. The starting point for the eviction from the ghetto was related to the despicable hygienic conditions and the complaints of the Roma. Rats attacked everybody, especially children. The mayor, embarrassed by the publicity given to these incidents, promised to take care of the issue and provide housing within three days. What was never publicly told was that this was meant only for some of the Roma... A week later, the Greek Helsinki Monitor, together with the victims of the mayor’s inhuman policy, found out that some Roma

would simply change the place of their shack. However, the scenery of misery was to be the same. The rats were to stay too...

A brief but to-the-point report, highlighting the racist practice of the mayor and the indifference of the “privileged” Roma towards the rest of their brethren. Telling pictures taken by the photographer Lambros Papanikolatos, who was hired by the GHM, were published in Avghi:

<http://www.avgi.org/avgiphoto2/199912/945988424-00284.jpg>

<http://www.avgi.org/avgiphoto2/199912/945988466-00267.jpg>

<http://www.avgi.org/avgiphoto2/199912/945988504-00277.jpg>

5.) Roma in Evosmos

24/12/1999: *Eleftherotypia*, p.47

For yet another year, the Roma in the drowned bed of the Gallikos River will celebrate Christmas in the mud... The river overflowed; water and mud got into their shacks. Members of the non-governmental organization DROM for Roma Social Rights, together with employees of the Prefect of Thessaloniki, visited the Roma to wish them Merry Christmas and offer presents to the children. Everybody’s wish was the same: to finally move to the former military barracks of Gonou and start a new life. Last year they made the same wish.

25/12/1999: *Avgi*, p.47

“In the Drowned Bed of the Gallikos River”

The Roma who are still waiting for their transfer to the new self-managed camp in the former military barracks of Gonos are going to have yet another Christmas in the drowned bed of the Gallikos River. The works at the former barracks are not over yet. The cost, in the worst case, will not be more than 900 million drachmas.

28/12/1999: *Eleftherotypia*, p.8

The president of the Progressive Left Coalition Party, Mr. N. Konstandopoulos, will visit his godson in the drowned bed of the Gallikos River. Last Christmas he offered him a pair of shoes, wishing him to get a chance to walk in better streets. The wish did not come true, despite the interest of the government and the good will of the Prefect of Thessaloniki. Roma have not been transferred to the former military barracks of Gonou yet.

All three reports are positive.

6.) Reproduction of an article of the extreme right in a local paper

A November 26, 1999 article on the Roma, published in the extreme-right newspaper *Chrysi Avgi* was reproduced, without any reference to the original source, in the local

paper *Proini* in Korinthos (Continental Greece). The article was published under its original title in two subsequent parts on December 15 and 16, 1999. The name of the columnist who presented this as his own article is Spyros Pantazis.

“Let’s talk about... Gypsies”

The “white nations” are dying; the population explosion in Africa and Asia and the subsequent migration movements towards Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia leave no room for hope. The White Man will disappear soon from the earth and its history. Moreover, there is an ethnic bomb in the heart of most European countries – a bomb put by a minority whose members have been given the privilege to be citizens of those countries. These are the Gypsies. They are abnormal hybrids of the three races: the yellow, the black and the white. They originate from India and Pakistan, countries, which have always been meeting places for all races. Gypsies have combinations of the Negro, the Mongolian and the White characteristics. In any case, they are all tasteless, unable to organize themselves and produce spiritual work; they are liars and dishonest people. They are parasites, living at the expense of the others, which is visible in their “artistic” contributions. They have polluted the European culture and tradition, similarly to the Jews. They have never cultivated the land, they never had animals and they always dealt with parasitic trade just like the Jews still do, even though the Gypsies are less professional and more dangerous. In Greece, they were the main polluters of our traditional folk music, because they were frequently playing in musical groups, taking up a job, which was considered to be deprecatory at the time. Similar and even more catastrophic have been their services to other European countries. It was a real fortune that for years they were living in the margin of the society. For some of them, this is still the case. The word Gypsy in Greek has a derogatory meaning. Everyone who dealt with Gypsies knows that they are thieves, drug traffickers, and smugglers. The latest events in the Czech Republic show that Gypsies are hated by all White Men.

The report speaks for itself; the most negative ever.

7.) On Romanes dictionaries

“The Gypsy Dictionaries”

Folklore, among other things, is a political science. Linguistics is also a political science. In Greece whatever is written on the minorities -supposedly with love and objectivity- stinks of racism. After the *Greek* dictionary of Markos Botsaris, who as an Arvanite spoke as much Greek as the Ottoman rulers did, we tried to prove, through stupid studies and researches, the “Greekness” of the Pomaks. Then, we did the same with the Romanian Vlachs, having forgotten what happened during the Nazi occupation and the independent principalities they attempted to establish in the country. Now, we have come up with various dictionaries for the Gypsies. Lately we call them Roma but some -even among the “intellectuals”- write their name incorrectly and spell it with an [ŭ] instead with an [o]. This is done probably in order to make it sound more Greek. In any case, all those “new” dictionaries of the Gypsy language in Greece are not new and definitely not serious from a scientific point of view. Greeks ignore all the work done in this field mainly by Gordon M. Messing and the Greek

Alexander G. Paspatis. Roma are divided into many tribes and their dialects vary much from place to place. To be able to say and understand more about this, one should look at the work done by T. V. Ventzel and others.

A neutral report, highlighting the ethnocentric objectives behind the “rediscovery” of the Roma, especially those living in Greek Thrace.

8.) On Roma music

25/12/1999: Epohi, [Liana Malandreniotis], p.21

They are scattered around the world, they have no country and in their minds and souls there is always one thing – the desire to move to a new place. They were initially taken for Egyptians. That is why they were called Gypsies, a name that is with them even today. They do not like to make commitments. They do not like to come dangerously close to the people around them. For years now they have kept their traditions and habits. Their civilization and culture are based solely on oral communication. Their music too, goes from generation to generation. Their songs can be found everywhere. Wherever they went, the rest of the people marginalized them. But their free and independent nature inspired many writers and intellectuals. Their passion is music and their inborn talent has helped them produce unique melodies, combining the past with the present. Two music collections with Roma songs -“Kurbeti” and “Gypsies’ Bar”- present a wide range of music from all over the world.

One of the most indicative, romantically stereotypical, presentations of the Roma.