

Life in the Aftermath of State Care

Jozsef Galyas

Mr Jozsef Galyas, a Romani man and NGO activist who grew up in state care in Hungary, discusses his personal experiences.

I AM very happy to have been asked by the ERRC to write this piece, and that in the future our organisation will be able to participate in the work of improving the child protection system where we ourselves grew up. Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about my personal experiences and share my thoughts with you.

I was 5-years-old when I went into state care in Hungary, together with my 6 sisters and brothers. Unfortunately, we were placed all around the country separated from one another. I was placed in the home in Berkesz, in Szabolcs-Szatmar-Bereg County, and that is where I started primary school. At that time there were about 20-25 other children placed in the town.

While I was in the home, my parents did not visit me at all; not even on one occasion. I did not know what it was like to grow up in a family. As children in the home, we learned a lot from each other, and during those many years very good friendships developed. When we finished primary school and had to choose a profession, it was very hard to part from each other. I went back to my hometown in Tiszadob, where I learned the trade of a welder.

When I was in state care, they did the laundry, the cleaning and the cooking for us. Unfortunately, they did not teach us how to survive Real Life (with a capital L). They just kept telling us, "When you get out, you will see."

After finishing vocational school, I went to Budapest where I realised that as a young adult formerly in state care, I was alone. Based on my experience, it is my belief that those who want to survive will be

able to. I settled in Tiszadob. I met my wife, who had lived in state care as well. We have had two children and, in time, we became foster parents as well.

Since 1998, I have been working for the Romani Minority Self-government at Tiszadob because I feel responsible for improving the lives of Romani people.

For years I was preoccupied with the terrifying situation that young adults who grew up in state care have to face when starting his or her independent life, away from the home. As a result, some of my friends from the state home and I established the Association for Adults Who Grew Up In State Care (Volt Állami Gondozottak Országos Egyesülete). I became the official representative of the organisation. Our main goal is to help young adults leaving state homes through counseling, providing information, research and advocacy.

I have participated in many conferences on child protection, where well-known experts in the field have given lectures, and what I have come to realise is that, unfortunately, most of these experts have neither participated in field research nor experienced first-hand state care.

It is important that there are NGOs that talk about the real problems and that they contribute to their solution. The child protection system, as it is today, does not work the way it is described in law. Our organisation believes that it is crucial that we follow-up with young adults that leave the homes and that we support them. One reason for this is that they receive a large amount of money from the state upon leaving and, unfortunately, most of them

become the victims of relatives that they have never seen before. Or, even if they manage to buy a house with the money that they receive, they may have bought it in a place where they cannot find work and then they are forced to sell their home at a loss. In the case of many young adults leaving state care, virtual or real homelessness is a large problem.

It is not enough to look for solutions that help adults formerly living in state care integrate into society; it is also important to efficiently prevent their children from getting into state care. Help is needed for those working in the system, but first and foremost, help is needed for the families that raise their children in adverse and disadvantaged conditions in order to prevent the children of former state care residents from being taken into state care. Many researches support the idea that those who are always being cared for will be unable to care for themselves.

Another essential part of our work is to improve the lives of those children currently

living in state care. Currently most children's homes are able to spend only about 350-400 Hungarian forints (approximately 1.5 EUR) per day on the provision of food per child. One must ask: Aren't the rights of children in Hungary hurt by this situation?

According to our experience, about 60% of the children living in state care and those leaving the homes are of Romani background. This fact cannot be ignored since the integration of Roma in society should be a priority, and is even more difficult than the integration of non-Roma living in disadvantaged circumstances. They face harsh discrimination in all walks of life – especially in education and employment.

In the future, it will be of crucial importance that representatives from NGOs working in the field of child protection can participate in the work of relevant ministerial committees.