

ERRC

Let's See Action

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BORN and raised in Kalamata, a small city to the south-west of Athens, Greece, I could never imagine that one day I would somewhat presumptuously undertake to jot down a short autobiographical note (nor for that matter that anyone would be interested in reading it).

As it often happens, my involvement in the field of Roma rights was the result of a series of (fortunate) accidents. Following my failure in the Greek University Admission Examinations, I migrated to the United Kingdom to study at the University of Essex. My efforts during the first two years were devoted solely on passing my exams, and it would be only in the third and final year of my LLB that I would first get a glimpse of the human rights world and decide that this is what I would like to explore further.

Decisive in that respect was the teaching and the passion of Mr Kevin Boyle who run an optional course, an introductory course on the European Convention of Human Rights; one that deeply influenced me. It is only with the utmost difficulty that I can form a rather vague recollection of that course but, in the end, it was the teacher and not the teachings that led me to make up my mind to pursue a career in the field of human rights. Mr Boyle's passion turned out to be highly contagious. It was also the first time that I would come into contact with some of the darkest aspects of my home country, namely the treatment of religious and national minorities. Interestingly enough, even back then when I was avidly reading about the veritable mosaic of minorities in Greece, hidden beneath a veneer of cultural uniformity and ethnic homogeneity, I came across only scant references to Roma in

Greece, references that I tended to disregard, deeming that this was not an important issue to look into any further.

That choice would mature in me during the next two years when, following the completion of my studies, I performed my



compulsory military service. I then returned to the University of Essex in order to study for the LLM in International Human Rights Law, a rather gruelling task. I would spend a year shuttling to and from the lectures of Sir Nigel Rodley to those of Geoff Gilbert and, of course, Kevin Boyle, amongst others, trying to make my way through the intricate web of the various United Nations and Council of Europe bodies and procedures. Further inspiration would come from Douwe Korff who ran a course on the theory and practise of the European Convention of Human Rights. It was in fact probably after the moot trial (held at a local pub!) which represented the culmination of the course that I really made up my mind about committing myself to the human rights cause.

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But even until then, I knew nothing about Roma, apart from the phrases containing pejorative references to Roma, present in pretty much all of European languages. It would be only after I took up an internship and then work at a Greek NGO, the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), that I would start coming into contact with them. I vividly remember my first visit to a Romani camp; a visit aimed at breaking me into my new post but a visit that ended up breaking me down. It is impossible to convey with words the feelings that are literally thrust upon someone visiting a destitute Romani settlement. The surroundings (most often the settlement will be located in insalubrious surroundings), the noise, the smell, the people, all those form an image that cannot be put in words. One reads, for example, that Roma of settlement X live under “wretched conditions”. But are these two words enough to convey that settlement X is located on a rubbish tip that is functional? The piles of rubbish surrounding the Romani sheds? The courageous but ultimately futile struggle of Romani women to keep their homes clean? In the end, it would be the “we-know-we-have-been-dealt-a-bad-hand-but-we-will-carry-on-regardless” spirit of many of the Roma I met, such as Dionysia Panayotopoulou and Nikos Aristopoulos (designer, architect and builder of the first and only two-storey wooden shack I have seen in my life!), that would make me understand that what these people wanted was just a clean start for their lives.

For the next seven years I would work together with Panayote Dimitras (spokesperson for GHM) and Nafsika Pananikolatos (spokesperson for Minority Rights Group – Greece). It was during these seven years that I started forging both personal and professional links with the ERRC and started getting deeper into the issues confronting the Romani minority in Greece, travelling far and wide and documenting the problems that Roma faced in Greece. Under the relentless drive of Panayote Dimitras, GHM continuously expanded its activities to include immigrants’ issues, national minorities and victims of sexual trafficking. I had my fair share of involvement in cases from all these fields yet what strikes me to this day is the veritable lack

of allies or at least kin-spirits concerning Romani issues. While there are many individuals or NGOs working, for example, on issues of victims of sexual trafficking and while both the Turkish minority of Western Thrace as well as the Macedonian minority of Greece have their own vocal advocates, there is almost no one to talk about Roma living in the settlements. I was lucky enough to come across the exceptions to that rule: Thanassis Triaridis, Vasso Christopoulou and Leonidas Drandakis are all persons that I met and who have fought long and hard for Romani communities living in the places where they live, despite the occasional harassment to which they have been subjected.

In the purely professionally part of my career, there were many things to celebrate. The European Court of Human Rights’ judgments in the cases of *Bekos and Koutropoulos v. Greece* (a case prepared jointly by ERRC and GHM), *Karagiannopoulos v. Greece* and recently *Tsakiris v. Greece*, to name a few of the cases concerning Roma, constitute landmark cases in the field of police brutality against Roma. I gradually started feeling that I should form a more complete picture of the problems faced by Roma in Europe in general, and in Greece in particular. Luckily enough, the ERRC was looking for a new legal officer. I immediately applied and was accepted at the end of a long and difficult process.

I am aware that the present text contains so many references to individuals that it might read more like a telephone list than an autobiographical note. In my defence, I have to note that in one way or another, all the individuals recounted above have influenced me in my decision to work in the field of Roma rights. Another recent such influence was Johann Trollmann. A Sinti man from Hannover, Germany, Trollmann was the dominant boxer in the light-heavyweight category during the early 1930s. An early proponent of the “hit-and-run” technique (immortalised in Muhammad Ali’s dictum “float like a butterfly, sting like a bee”), he won the 1933 Light-Heavyweight Champion title by smashing his “Aryan” opponent, only to be deprived of his title six days after his victory for “bad boxing” (sic). The Nazi establishment used every means at its disposal to destroy him,

mentally and physically. Its propaganda officials, however, knew that a boxing champion can be beaten only on the boxing ring. They therefore prepared a rigged match between him and another “Aryan” contender. This time they took no chances. They forced him (by threatening him and his family) to abandon his usual boxing style and basically stand still for his opponent to punch him at will. Trollmann knew that the die was cast. A broken man, he was not, however, a beaten man. Thus, on the day of the rigged match, he “entered the ring with his hair dyed blond and flour all over his body, looking like a caricature of an

‘Aryan Warrior’ in a final act of defiance.” After that, he did as he had been ordered. He stood still and received his opponent’s blows, eventually “losing” the match. His travails however were not over. He was subjected to sterilisation, was drafted into the German army but arrested while on leave by the Nazi authorities and was sent to a concentration camp where he was ultimately executed. In 2003, the German Boxing Federation would restore Trollmann to the 1933 Light-Heavyweight Champion title.² In the light of Trollmann’s courageous example, we have no excuse not to work harder for Roma.

² See Schroeder, Olaf. “Trollmann Is Champ – 70 Years After The Fight.” Available in English at: <http://www.fight-production.com/articles/article37.htm>.