

shelter of care update

focus : Romania's cultural divide

Romania's Roma people (gypsies) account for around 2-10% of the country's population.

However, since many Roma conceal their ethnic origins from authorities or do not have identity cards, exact figures are not known.

The name 'Roma' is not related to Romania. Romani people are thought to have migrated from the Indian subcontinent into Asia Minor, and from there in waves across Europe, from as early as the 5th century. By the 16th century, they had reached most of the continent.

Persecution of Romani has been widespread throughout history. From the 15th century until 1878, much of what is now Romania was part of the Ottoman Empire, and the site of repeated wars between Russian, Ottoman and Hapsburg forces. Roma people in what would later become Hungary and Romania were kept as slaves. They were not granted their freedom until the mid-1850s, shortly before Ottoman rule ended.

Whether indigenous peoples (Romania as a country was not formed until 1861), or the Ottoman rulers are to blame, the fact is that Romani people endured centuries of slavery and hardship. Their release from slavery did not bring any relief, as many

simply became instantly jobless and homeless.

During WWII as many as 500,000 Romani were killed in Nazi concentration camps. The rise of communism saw repeated attempts to forcibly integrate Roma people into the national culture.

More recently there has been a revival of Roma culture which is noticeably different from the Romanian lifestyle. Romani are organized into clans with their own leaders, and customs influenced by Hindu purity laws. They have influenced Romanian culture, most notably in the area of folk music – the *lăutari* who play at traditional Romanian weddings are virtually all Roma. Most Roma are no longer fully nomadic, living in self-contained communities – in *lași* many live in houses that were left empty by the many Jewish families fleeing the country before WWII. Traditionally Roma work in craft industries but there are a large number that supplement their income, or make their entire living, by

begging and scavenging.

Tension between the two groups is a continuous undercurrent – perhaps these two cultures are just too different to exist comfortably together. Europeans value the idea of 'private property' highly, whereas the Romani language does not have a word for 'possess'.

While many Romanians acknowledge the injustices done against Roma in the past some speak out against the 'țigani' of today, blaming them for their own poverty and a bad reputation resulting from activities such as persistent begging using children and customs of child marriage which Romanians find shocking. For their part, Roma people are proud of their heritage and feel that Romanians are prejudiced against them, refusing them work and being too quick to unfairly blame the Roma community for every crime and problem.

For our clients, many of whom are of Roma heritage, the big picture is largely irrelevant. The tension between the two communities only heightens the challenges they face when they, raised as Romanians, are reunited with their Roma families.

praises and prayers:

- We give thanks for a generous donation which has given us financial security for the next few months. Read more on page two of this edition of Update.
- As spring approaches, we are turning our attention once more to the building project at Bârnova. Please pray for us as we look for a way forward for the counseling center. You can read more about the project on our website under 'future plans'.
- Sorin and Genuța welcomed a new addition to their family before Christmas—a beautiful niece!
- Please continue to pray for our clients. Several are dealing with difficult family problems, and one has recently graduated from school and needs a job and a new home.



For centuries, Roma people were kept as slaves.

profile : re-discovering your roots

Romanians who were abandoned as babies often lack information about their families, and grow up with no contact, even though records of their families' details may exist.

Many don't discover their families until their late teens and early twenties. This is sometimes because the Child Protection Authority is looking for someone to hand the young adult over to, and sometimes through some smart investigative work on the part of the young people themselves.

However, being reunited with a family that abandoned you before you could even walk or talk is an emotional minefield. One of our clients — let's call her 'Maria' — has just begun this journey.

Maria, in her early twenties, found her real family late last year after discovering that a

boy at school was her cousin. Excited, she contacted her oldest sister who came on the train from Pașcani (about an hour away) to meet her.

The two sisters got along wonderfully, and Maria learned that she has five sisters, including a twin, as well as nephews and nieces. Maria's sister gave her 50 lei (a substantial gift) and invited her to Pașcani for a visit where she then met her father and other relatives.

Of course, life is complicated. Since those first meetings, Maria has had to face up to the fact that this same family that was in such difficulty that they had to abandon a child all those years ago, is still struggling now.

Maria's father and most of her sisters drink quite heavily. They make their living scavenging in dumpsters. After Christmas, one of her

sisters phoned Maria to say that she was sick. Maria took the little money she had raised from carol singing at Christmas and gave it to her sister for medicine. She spent it on drink.

Maria was delighted when her father spoke of regaining custody of her from Child Protection, but then her sister revealed that he was planning to arrange a marriage for her (a common practice in Roma communities), which would have earned him 500 euros as a bride price from the groom's family.

Maria said, "My sister told me that my father had to give me up because I was sick and he didn't know what to do. She said he was sorry and was never the same afterwards, but I told her I'd never forgive him." And yet, despite saying this, Maria still saves the 4 lei she needs each week to buy

her return ticket to Pașcani to visit her family.

Although she will remain at her placement center for now, Maria is very accepting of her family's lifestyle, and looks up to her kind older sister as a role model, telling us proudly what a good mother she is, and how nicely she keeps her home. It remains to be seen how successfully she will manage to balance the joys and disappointments of her new situation.

Maria's is just one story—each experience is different. Some, like Maria, are excited to find their families, and can overlook problems for the sake of belonging. Others, embittered by rejection, refuse to even contemplate meeting the parents who abandoned them. The effects of abandonment continue long into adulthood.

news : gifts and gratitude

A generous gift from Project Agape in England has enabled us to secure our office tenancy until May.

Our landlord has also helped us by reducing our rent by 100 euros per month. All this is wonderful news, giving us the security to carry on building up our work.

Gifts don't always bring joy,

though. At an orphanage Christmas party, the children and young people were handed 'pot-luck' presents.

When the orphanage director saw that one of our clients had received a good quality Romanian dictionary, she took it away, saying, "What's a girl who goes to the technical school going to do with a dictionary?" Instead,

she gave her a piece of tinsel off the tree and made her sign a paper to say she had received the dictionary.

Sadly, stories of little injustices like this are still all too common.

We are working closely with Petro this month, who has finished school and is seeking a new home and a job. She lives in a 'Children on the

Edge' foundation apartment, which is a great relief, as the Child Protection Department has already cut off her maintenance funding, leaving it to the foundation to find her a home and a job and pay for her food and lodging until she can manage it herself. We are working closely with them to make her transition as successful as possible.

'For I know the plans I have for you', says the Lord.

'Plans to prosper you and not to harm you;
plans to give you a hope and a future.'
Jeremiah 29:11

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