

### How Will this “Gypsy Girl” End Up?

*Rev. Sek Wai Lo*

Never had I realize Gypsy girls are so beautiful until I saw a little girl in a Serbia Gypsy slum. She was with a group of neighborhood kids. In her innocent eyes, I saw her future...

But this little girl will probably drop out of school before finishing grade school, marry another young man of similar social-economic status, bear a bunch of kids, and never be able to escape the slums.

#### **Is there a way out for her? Can anyone help?**

It is hard to imagine the difficulties they and their ancestors have gone through since centuries ago. But history tells the facts. For a thousand years, these “Roma” people, better known as “Gypsies,” who wandered from India to Europe, have always been regarded as “untouchables” and outsiders. They have been oppressed; they have been treated as the lowest caste. In Romania, they were treated as farm slaves. Along with the Jews, they were massacred by the Nazis. Some called “Sinties” are still wandering around Europe in

covered wagons, despised by society. Their acceptance by others is further hindered by their low education level. As a result,

Roma’s unemployment rate is high. Those with musical talents work as musicians. But most of them work as peddlers or temporary laborers. These are the fortunate ones. Some, the unfortunate ones, fall into thievery... These people live in Europe, the Christian countries, yet ironically, no one shares the gospel with them.

Their experience is similar to the Israelites in Egypt, crying and pleading to God. This Roma group of 12 million people scattered all over Europe has been neglected by the Church.

But God has heard their cries. The Holy Spirit has begun working among them. This is a mission challenge before the Church.



We were there because we heard their “Macedonian call.”

In November 2013, a group of six people from Great Commission Center International spent two weeks to visit eight Roma communities in Slovenian and Hungarian cities and villages. Some local churches there have outreached to Roma and build Roma churches. The Roma Christian have very meager resources in both personnel and finances. Yet they have started planting churches. But they really need help.

Indeed, the harvest is ready, waiting for God to send in the harvesters. Having heard the difficulties of Roma, I asked myself, “What can the Chinese churches and believers do?”

## I. Church Planting

Church planting is always the gist of mission ministry. It requires traditional missionaries with theological training and the burden for church planting.

Churches in Slovenia and Hungary already have some ministries and church planting ongoing. Roma churches also have sent out church planters to various cities and villages. But what they are lacking is manpower: they need a large number of church planting missionaries. In Hungary, a Roma pastor oversees approximately twenty churches. And one problem is that though most of Roma pastors in Slovenia have been trained in churches, they receive no theological training. They need someone to equip them with the gospel doctrine.

What Roma churches need urgently, at this moment, is development of children and women ministry, or professional missionaries who could help provide educational and community development ministries.

The mission outreach to Europe by Chinese churches mainly targets towards Chinese immigrants. In many Eastern European cities and villages, there are Chinese and Roma stores or street peddlers



in Chinese shopping centers. These are excellent places to get in touch with the Roma people.

## II. Operating School

The reasons why Roma people quit school after grade school are complicated. The truth is that the majority of Roma did not have much education.

The intricacy lies in that they involve many different but interrelated social factors. For example, parents need children to help earn a living. This is particularly true for those work in farming and street peddling. Early marriage is another reason. The most important one is that while they deem education as useless, very often it is the teachers who do not wish to keep them in school. Even if they have obtained good qualification, that does not guarantee them a job because most employers do not trust them.

I met a Roma pastor who is fluent in English; his experience reflects what was said above. He has good learning ability, and was the star of gymnastic athlete of the school and the city. However, no matter how hard he studied, he never receive good grades. He barely passed even in physical education. Apparently, his teachers wanted to discourage him so that he may choose to dropout. Yet he persisted and was able to finish high school.

A Dutch missionary started a kindergarten, and together with the Roma pastor they planted a church. The missionary told me that Roma parents regard education as useless. In order to get them to send their kids, the school has to provide incentives such as breakfast and lunch, plus school bus service. Anyhow, kids love the kindergarten. The missionary and Roma pastor lead the kids and their parents to the Lord. Once involved with the church, the Roma people become much more willing to improve themselves.

## III. Business and Employment

Because of lack of education and necessary skills, many Roma people are unemployed. A Slovenian pastor explained that Roma people are actually very diligent, but employers just don't trust them. And Roma people themselves are reluctant to make any progress or improvement, as they, too,

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Jesus to him. Another sister told us that she would not beat any Roma thief any more. Praise the Lord!

## A New Understanding

Prejudices and discrimination often originated from misunderstanding. And it is always easy to label the whole people group with some isolated cases. Nowadays, when I travel overseas, some people still ask me if I eat cats – they have an impression that all Chinese people eat cats and dogs. If you find the above question ridiculous or offensive, think how Roma feel when they are misunderstood. Are we willing to put away the stereotype on Roma people and replace it by God’s perspective and Jesus’ love? Only when we consider Roma as equal, as God’s precious children, and as our brothers and sisters in Christ, then can we truly relate the love of God to the world.

## Prayers and Blessings

Having removed our labels and prejudices on Roma, we can realize the problems Roma encounter and can sincerely care for their needs. Our prayers and blessings for them could then be consistent with our purpose. If Chinese churches

can start putting Roma people on their “unreached” people list and pray for them today, the intercession will be more powerful. Church leaders ought to bring Roma people in the sight of their congregation. As they become aware and learn more about the Roma they will be willing to share the blessings from God with Roma, including money, time, experience and labors.

Just as a Serbian pastor who is serving Roma mentioned, “Love is the most important language that we should learn.” Today, God heard the cry of Roma and made Chinese pastors realize God’s will on Roma people. Listen, followers of Jesus, will Roma receive what they have lacked and desired for so long from us? As church leaders, how will you strategically lead your congregation to understand and take part in fulfilling God’s will? How may the congregation prepare themselves to act on such?

God so love the world that many more marvelous and wonderful things will come to Roma people. If you are willing, you can also play a part.

*(The author was one of the six member mission team from Great Commission Center visiting the Roma in 2013.)*

► *From P.2* look down on themselves, not striving to advance. As a result, Roma only depends on occasional job opportunities or seasonal work. Some manage to engage in small businesses, but it is difficult to raise capitals.

It is a good avenue to evangelize Roma people through community enterprises. Mission agencies can definitely achieve this. Christian businessmen can also help. Employ Roma workers, give them some job training. Training can equip them essential work skills, which can in turn increase their self-esteem. With self-confidence and work experience, it is easier for them to find jobs.

## IV. Short-term Mission

All Slovenian and Hungarian pastors welcome vocational missionaries and short-term mission groups. Here is a meaningful dialogue I had with a Slovenian pastor serving Roma people: “What short-term group members need to pay special attention to?” I asked. The pastor surprised me by saying, “Learn the language.” “How can one learn a new language before joining the short-term mission team?” I asked further. “The language of

love,” He said.

Indeed Roma people need compassion. They are excited and greatly moved when people from afar come to share with them the gospel and help them in some ways. Compassion is far

better than thousands of words. This also is what we experienced in those two weeks.

May there be people in Chinese churches willing to learn the “language of love.” And may the lives of Roma people changed due to the “language of love” from Chinese churches!

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