

Synopsis:

LIVING AMONGST THE ROMS

Photographic essay by

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A 5000 square-metre lot borders the railway line at La Courneuve. Seventy families live there. It all started nearly five years ago when Titel, the village leader, built his house here. Then, he built the church “with my own hands”, as he says proudly with his wide grin and stance of a heavyweight boxer. The others then followed. The others, those much-maligned migrants, almost all come from Bihor, a region in eastern Romania.

Living in France for the past twelve years, Titel had a vision and was converted. *“I was ill. You can see in this photo that I had lost a lot of weight, and the doctors said that I would die; God saved me”*. He goes on: *“We have a proverb that says that we are all the fingers of the one hand, there are good ones and bad ones”*. He shows me the caravan where I was to live like them but for just three weeks. I meet with Debora, his daughter, who would be my translator; and his wife who was to serve my meals. Umberto, the president of Romeurope, convinced Titel to give me carte blanche. The following week, here I am in my caravan near the entrance to the camp. Titel has the same role as the mayor of a village. He resolves problems within the community and on the outside. No one disputes his authority.

Part of his family lives here, a brother, a cousin, a sister. They own the vans that collect scrap metal, the generators that provide electricity to the village and the fridges that keep the drinks cold. Titel is in charge of security. Every evening, he and his dogs are on patrol, guarding against intrusions and criminal or domestic fires. Someone from his family relieves him at three in the morning.

The scrap metal workers are the first to leave at four in the morning. There is a well-established system of solidarity. Food is collected from waste bins, and unsold bread from the bakers. Families leave the village together; the father sorts through the bins, the mother and children go begging. Each family pays one euro per day for electricity and security. That is Titel’s income, which he does not hide, but none of it comes from begging or prostitution. As it happens, most of the villagers are evangelists, fervent believers and regular church-goers. There is mass every Tuesday and Thursday evening, and all day Sunday, when evangelists from other camps come to pray.

Roms aren't good subjects for spontaneous photography: they pose whenever they see a camera. It took a while for them to forget me, and then it was as if I was invisible, I existed no more, I was like the wind blowing through and I could mix both posed and candid shots. At the same time I fall under the natural charm of these migrants who are here to seek a better life. Such richness, such humanity! The naivety of the children, the laughter and the sounds of their language. As time passed I thought about what we may have already lost. Dry toilets, no running water, rats that come out at night don't take any of their dignity from these men and women. They wash in basins or in the public baths. The women do washing every day. The streets of the villages are swept every morning at seven. The children have access to healthcare, which is not the case in Romania where everything is far too expensive. *"How are we supposed to live over there? Everything is the same price as here, petrol is 2€ a litre and the best salary we can hope for is 150€ a month. We miss the old communist life because at least then we had our place in society"* said Sebastian, computer technician in France for three months. *"I'm here to care for my daughter Estera because at home they want 5000€ to do the operation"*.

With the municipal elections on the horizon, the communist mayor of La Courneuve started an urgent eviction procedure against the Roms. The court ruled that they will have one month to leave the village when the order to evict is served. They will have to decide what to do by August 31, 2013. Titel has no idea as to where to go and is worried that families will be broken up. His own daughter will most likely have to change schools but perhaps, like Anina Ciucu, the first Rom to be admitted to the Sorbonne, she also will one day get as far as university.