

# 4 SUMMER CAMPS AND OVERNIGHT EVENTS

*“When one falls, both get warm!”* Fourteen-year-old Thomas tried to memorize a verse from the Bible: “Two are better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour. For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow...” Nevertheless, we are happy that older boys return keep coming to our events and do their best to complete the tasks.

During the 12 years of our summer camps, 164 children have attended our camps, and the total number of participants was 404. A large number of children return every year. Two children have already attended 8 of our summer camps, seven children have attended 7 camps, nine children have already returned six times and eight children

five times. New children keep coming, most of them are siblings, relatives or friends of the children who already attended. 12 already grown-up children have joined the summer camps as part of our team, taking up the roles of cooks, counsellors or simply volunteers.

## Summer camps

Our first experience with summer camps, not yet organized by us, took place in 1993 and 1994. We collected our first valuable experience and learned more about what it entails to take Roma children to summer camps. We learned that certain rules must be followed, that we cannot bring children we do not know well, or with whose parents we don't have a good relationship. Also, we needed to provide outdoor equipment for children whose families can't afford it.

Another big inspiration for us were the scout-type camps organised by the non-profit organisations Pathfinder Club and Royal Rangers. For several years, we kept attending these camps with a small group of Roma children. We learned a lot of useful games and activities; we learned how a good day should be organized. Another valuable cooperation was with the non-profit organization Kvítek, where we were also able to send some of our Roma children. And then, in 2011, we also attended a "Police" summer camp. A group of police officers repeatedly organized a summer camp for socially disadvantaged children whose parents often had

clashes with the police. What an excellent idea! This allowed the children to have their first positive experience with the police.

But as the group of children interested in our activities grew over the years, we got to a point where it was no longer possible to take only small groups of children to camps organized by other organizations. And this is when we made the decision to start our own summer camps. For the first three years (2012-2014), we only organized one run of the camp. Since 2015 onwards, we have added another run every summer. This allowed us not only to accommodate more children, but also to divide the camps into the girl's week and the boys' week. This worked really well for us. We could modify both of the camps to better suit the gender

and the hobbies of the individuals attending the given week. Separating boys and girls also removed some tension between the children, and removed the danger that they will pay each other visits at night.

Our first summer camp took place in 2012 near Konstantinovy Lázně as part of the project Váhy (Scales). It was a 10-day camp with the theme "What am I going to become?" During these 10 days, we kept introducing different jobs, and towards the end, the children had several test interviews where they "applied for jobs". Throughout the camp, they collected various certificates in different subjects (science, English, strength training, cleaning, math, reciting some Bible verses ...) and depending on how they did in the exams, they could then apply for suitable jobs.



For example, for a cleaner, only the Bible and the cleaning exam were required. If they applied to become a doctor, they needed to pass almost all the exams.

**T**he next year, 2013, the theme of the camp was "Knights of Love". We enjoyed the beauty of the surrounding mountains, as well as the assistance of the hut warden. With his help, we visited the local underground bunker, designed to defend our country in the past, and the zoo in Dvůr Králové. And then, there is a story I will never forget. One of our team members could not find her pocket knife. And so, we announced that we

will not start breakfast until we find the lost knife. Young Michal immediately volunteered and started searching for it. After a while, he came back saying he needed someone to help him. He told the other boy that he looked for the knife everywhere, everywhere except for one of the drawers in the hall. And the boy indeed found it in the place where Michal "forgot" to look! Michal had various diagnosed disorders, he attended school for children with special educational needs, but he handled the 'lost knife' situation brilliantly.

**I**n 2014, another important figure entered the scene. Aleš Fáber – the second husband



of the organization's leader – was a brave man who did not panic and run away from a woman taking care of five children as well as the local Romani community. He was convinced that a proper summer camp must be Scout-style camp – with tents, teepees, field kitchens and all. Everything else is cowardly. But he did not only speak about it, but went on to build such a camp. All right. Let's openly admit that the first year of the Scout-style camp was rather challenging. We had trouble raising money, so our camp did not take place until late August – a period of summer with already pretty cold nights. We also didn't have as much equipment yet, and one week before the announced start, we did not have much more than a stretch of an empty field. For the first two days, we wandered through the forests nearby, looking for suitable wood



poles for the teepees, the kitchen and other purposes. Of course we had all the necessary permissions. The canopy over our kitchen was rather short, and the other accessories were barely suitable for our needs, but somehow, the summer camp turned out to be a success, and left everyone with many wonderful memories.

**I**n the following years, the mayor of Bochoř, Mr. Egert, provided us with better materials to upgrade our field kitchen, he helped us mow the grass (we have another kind volunteer, Mr. Vaňousek, helping us with that a lot, too), and in times of draught, he had drinking water delivered to us by volunteer firefighters from Bochoř. Last but not least, he allowed us to sleep over at the Hartenštejn castle several times, which usually marked the ceremonial

ending of the summer camp – and was the perfect place to carry out the “knighting ceremony”. Thank you very much for all the assistance!

Since 2015, we have been organizing two runs of the residential summer camp. The camps always have a unique theme. We have already had Indians, knights, agents, rescuers, sailors, cowboys, Israelites and their exodus from Egypt, we had construction of the railroad in the Wild West, and Noah's Ark. Our traditional daily program begins with a warm-up after we wake the children up.

After breakfast, we carry out the morning hygiene, we give children points for the cleanliness of their tents, and after that, we have a “morning story”, which is typically a short moral story. For the rest of the morning, there are themed workshops where children work in groups, learn new knowledge and skills. Depending on the camp theme, the workshops deal with various topics and skills: meteorologist, sailor, interpreter, scribe, carpenter, farmer, architect... After we have had snacks, the children help with various activities necessary to run the camp: they fetch water from a nearby well, they collect



trash left behind, they help prepare wood for the kitchen stove and campfire, and wash dishes after lunch.

Lunch is followed by a lunch break. During the break, we offer a few non-demanding activities, and for the more active children, we offer an opportunity to play football or go for a bike ride. We constantly try to channel their energy in the right direction, especially at the boys' camp, so that they don't get into fights and other kinds of mischief.

The children can use a colourful bulletin board to review the information discussed during the workshops, because they take exams in these topics later. The exams are designed in such a way that everyone can easily pass at least one of them. We never forget to compliment the children on how smart they are and how well they studied. This is a major moment for them, because not

many of them have experienced much success and appreciation at school. Some of the exams are hard to pass, because we want to give children a challenge, and find special talents that stand out. We need to know, for example, which kids have a good chance at a high school, which kids will do great at vocational schools – because crafts are once again in high demand on the job market.

In the afternoon, we organize team competitions and games, whether in the camp directly or in the surrounding forests. Evenings are dedicated to knowledge quizzes and singing songs around the campfire. Typically, the summer camps have a one-day “special event” or trip, for example a trip to the children's rope centre, the swimming pool near Sokolov, or one-day rafting down the Ohře River.

## Overnight stays for families with children

Children who have attended our camps often carry away a lot of memories and enthusiasm. Over time, their enthusiasm started to rub off on their parents, who voiced their interest to experience these activities as well.

Many of them “missed out” on them as children and saw an opportunity to catch up now! At first, we had our concerns, as we don't feel comfortable having some of the fathers around. But in the end, we took the leap of faith, and we applied for a European subsidy for family trips with children. The second attempt was successful, and we had a green light to start organizing overnight family weekends and family weeks as part of



the “I Already Know How” project for families with children in 2018. The project lasted until January 2021, and in that period, we organized 11 weekends and 7 week-long events. We had 82 adult participants and many children, staying in different places.

Family getaways and overnight stays have many advantages. Mothers and fathers can unwind, stop thinking about chores and cooking, and enjoy the moments spent together, instead. We discussed important topics, such as money management; what happens if I spoil my child too much; what happens if children don't attend school; how to choose a partner for life - this was not only relevant for teenagers, but also for some mothers with already five children of their own. During the adult discussions, we had other people taking care of the kids. We also went on hikes where we learned about different tree types, we held

running races or walked over logs. In the evening, we had a fun night game, for example in the basement. Everyone enjoyed it a lot. Evenings were also great opportunities to play knowledge games - we made up our own questions relating to the place where we were staying or the topics we were discussing.

Another great benefit of the overnight stays was the fact that we could talk and reflect about each other's lives. We could comment on some parenting methods, such as “Just give it to them so that they stop crying”. We had the opportunity to show parents that setting boundaries works for both sides. It was kind of funny when some kids listened to us more than their parents. We, on the other hand, were inspired by the Roma culture and the way the families stick together.



Sometimes, we watched inspirational film together, such as the Butterfly Circus, or films about Jesus for children. After watching a film, we tried to understand the message, and to understand our lives better. Luckily, everyone seemed to know how to solve other people's problems, so that was a start. ☺

Each of the events was unique. Each event was shaped by the participants, the weather, the relationships between the participants, the severity of various addictions. We only allowed adults to smoke in designated areas, so those individuals who were used to more freedoms could get very grumpy. Fortunately, this was rare. Overall, these family events turned out better than expected. For this reason, we have included

these events in our next major project, the "Family Teaching Family" project that was financed from the Norway Grants. Thanks to this project we were able to organize eight overnight events for a total of 121 people between 2021-2023. In addition to our favourite places in Šumava, we also visited the safari zoo in Dvůr Králové. We continue to try to include educational overnight events in our upcoming projects because we know how beneficial they are for all the participants. Through various games and activities, all participants collect new valuable memories, parents expand their parenting skills and families gain inspiration on how to spend quality time together.



## Overnight Events

Residential events include popular sleepovers at our organization's premises. These are always an intense experience for all involved, however, not everyone has the same memories. While the feedback from the children include: "It was great!", "Everyone was there!", "We ate the biggest pizza in the whole world!", "We had an amazing time!". The supervisors, on the other hand, keep saying "I didn't get any sleep.", "They were up until 3 a.m. and then started going to the toilet.", "Never again!". We often ask ourselves why we keep

doing this to ourselves. But the children love it so much! And there is one more advantage: When we need to go to a more distant place for a trip, we really need to leave early in the morning, and a sleepover event guarantees that the children will get up on time. Additionally, these events give us an opportunity to get to know the new children better—we can find out whether these kids can manage to sleep outside their homes, and if it will be possible to take them to our summer camps. The sleepover program traditionally includes a knowledge quiz, big pizza, a night game in the basement, and watching films.



# Bits and pieces of life

**"I have to collect some iron, so we have money for dinner..."** In Pilsen, some of the children have to face quite a different type of challenges than most kids. 14-year-old Christopher often peers into garbage cans late at night, using a flashlight. This issue has no easy solution. I wouldn't have been able to do what I do if I weren't able to pray to God, to cry and to ask Him for help and strength. As for some issues, we are unable to solve them in our own power...

**"What do you want to do after you finish elementary school?"** "Why, I will apply for unemployment benefits, of course..." Valeria was surprised when I asked this question, the answer seemed obvious. I hope that after the summer camp, she will reconsider her plans. These children desperately need to broaden their horizons, to step out of stereotypes, to find motivation, and to see different options and values than those that surround them at home... Summer camps are indeed one of the effective ways to introduce these new perspectives. We must hope that they will carry this inspiration away and not forget it after the camp is over...

**"Let's launch the boat into the water?"** Our children's self-confidence is absolutely unlimited. Our wooden boat had no bottom and it was in a poor shape. Yet our kids had faith that we can use it. ☺

**"We are looking forward to it soooo much!"** That's how the children feel about summer camps. The pandemic measures in 2021 have made it impossible for us to organize some of our traditional events, and made everyone very excited about our next summer camp, with 22 boys and 16 girls on two separate runs. We had a lot of fun, played games and pondered about spiritual topics. The theme was "Journey to the Promised Land" and we learned about Egypt, Israel, Moses and God's actions towards people.

A fifty-year-old Romani man told us: **"I felt like a completely different person during the trip. I'd go again in a heartbeat..."** And then there was one mother, who made her first bike trip with her 9-year old son. A mom and dad with five children, also experienced a bike trip for the first time with us. A dad of two sons - the older one is eleven years old - was on a trip with his children for the first time. Another family was in the pool for the first time with their four children. That is a lot of "first times"... Our list could go on for a long time. We are really grateful for everything we could do within the "I Already Know How" EU project. We are happy for every inspiration and every nice memory that we were able to create...



# Bits and pieces of life

**"Going to fetch the Death March medal too?"** someone in a soldier-like uniform asked us as we were walking up the hill. I thought he was making a joke, because we were out of breath, but he wasn't. Accidentally, we found ourselves in the middle of the World War II memorial event. We enjoyed every bit of it! Everyone greeted us with a kind "Hello" and smiled at us. That doesn't happen to us in Pilsen.

**"We want to go to camp too!"** our children's parents have been demanding for years. Thanks to the European project "I Know How", we were finally able to make it possible for them. Educational trips with experiential and educational activities for parents and entire families have proven very successful! We will continue to implement them in other projects as much as possible.

**"Pavla, I've got glasses now!"** Roman shouts as soon as he enters the room. He attended our camp in the summer, and he was unable to see the strawberries 30 cm away from him. He struggled to see the paper when he was drawing. After arriving home, I kindly but firmly told his parents repeatedly that they needed to address this issue immediately. Otherwise, he would perform poorly at school because he simply wouldn't see anything. It worked, and Roman started the next school year with new glasses on. I was very happy for him.

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**"I don't like you!"** That's how one of the fathers started our conversation after coming back from the police station. He went to file a report about someone harming his family. In the past, he would handle similar situations with a fist fight, and, in doing so, he would break the law. The police resolved the reported issue to the father's satisfaction, so he did not have to take justice into his own hands this time. We are so proud of him!

**"They're with their father now..."** In 2017, we had just under 30 applications for the girls' and boys' summer camps with the theme "What Am I Going to Become?". We never know until the last moment how many kids will actually show up. 24 boys came instead of 20, so we had to send 4 of them home, as we had no extra places in the tents. These 4 boys did not come to our other activities during the year, which was the condition for coming to the summer camp. I still felt deeply sorry I had to send them away. There were only nine girls for the second run. One girl cried because her friend didn't show up, and left before we boarded the bus. One participant was a boy - a twin brother of one of the girls. But otherwise, we had a great time. There were various reasons why many girls did not show up, even though they signed up. In one of the families, the father came home from prison after 4 years, and took the girls away (he and the mother did not live together). Nobody knew where they were or when they come back. The friends of these girls also refused to go. In another family, the mother started a new job, and the daughter had to babysit her younger siblings. Her cousin did not want to go without her, so both girls did not show up. It is indeed not easy to organize the summer camps. But we are grateful that we can provide this opportunity to children who would otherwise not be admitted to regular summer camps, as they would not meet many requirements. We are happy that the children keep coming back, that they enjoy the camps, and that the older children already announced their interest in becoming part of the team. We are looking forward to the next years!