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CULTURAL AND OTHER SPECIFICITIES

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The Romani People and the Others

I always wanted to be a missionary. I dreamed about going abroad, getting to know other countries and other cultures. For example, I was inspired by Bruchko, a book about a 19-year old American, Bruce Olsen, who decided to leave his home and move to the rainforest in Colombia, bringing Christianity to the Motilone tribe. Although I had children soon after I got married, I never quite gave up on the idea of becoming a missionary. I speak Russian, which surprises even me, given my lack of talent for language learning.

In 2000, I took my family and a few other Christians and we spent a month at a summer camp just outside St. Petersburg. We prepared activities for children about Jesus in Russian. In 2001, my family and I spent five months in Kolomyja, Ukraine, where we ministered in a local Pentecostal church. I was leading the Sunday Bible studies for other leaders – trying to teach them how to make the studies more about “Sunday” and less about “studies”. I worked with women, young people, and families. I really enjoyed it!

After I came back from Ukraine, my family and I got involved in church planting efforts in Humpolec. As a mother of five preschool kids, I didn't have much energy left for anything else than my family. Once a week,

I attended the local maternity centre and prepared Christian-themed activities for children and other mothers, who became my friends. Several of them started believing in God.

Even after my divorce from my first husband, I still wanted to travel as a Christian missionary, but the five little children made it all too difficult.

The Romani people, for me, are an opportunity to be a missionary without leaving the comfort of my home, without dragging my

kids along, making them change schools, and without the necessity to learn foreign languages. The Romani language is beautiful, I know a few words and songs, but I can't speak it. The Romani people are amazing, but their culture is not easy to grasp and understand. At least, they don't wage any wars! I've fallen in love with the Romani people, so I'm happy that my dream of becoming a missionary has, in a way, come true :-).

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things that surprise me even after all those years. And that's exactly what I love about the job. I'm never bored, I can never be confident that I understand everything...

Summer camps are a good example that illustrates how working with Roma children is different from working with children from the Czech families. Before the regular Czech summer camps, such as Pathfinder or Kvitek, the organizers know the list of participants as soon as January or February and they can already assign the children to teams. Before our "Romani" summer camps, we do not know until the last moment who shows up. Usually, the leaders have to wait

until all children are on the bus before they start dividing them into teams. The beginnings were wild and disorganized. We once had 34 children who signed-up, 16 of them already paid the symbolic fee of 100 CZK (around 4 EUR) and only 8 of them showed up in the end. But over the years, the situation has been improving. The difference between the children who sign up and those who actually show up is significantly lower, and we also have better camping equipment available. In the early days, I had to pick up the kids at their homes, and had to pack things for them. Before the first summer camp in 1992, I announced the meeting time 3 hours before our train was leaving. Nobody showed up, so

I went to the children's homes to find out what happened. At the first house, I rang the doorbell, and I heard the voice of the excited David and Rudla: "Pavla is here, we're going to the summer camp!" The boys were sitting at the table, with a loaf of bread in front of them. Both ends of the loaf were cut off, and each of the boys had their "share" of food carefully packed in their bags. Their mother was beautiful and she had 6 kids already. In order to pack some more things for the summer camp, we had to go out to the yard, and the boys showed me which drying clothes on the clothesline was theirs. I still don't know if I packed only the boy's clothes, or some

clothes of the neighbours too. The boys' mother was asleep the whole time and just before we left, I went to her and received a sleepy nod, acknowledging our departure. I had talked to her about the event several times before, she had filled out the registration forms, but she probably did not believe that I was being serious... In a similar way, I managed to collect about ten kids. When our train left Pilsen, some of the kids were glued to the windows and kept saying, "It's so beautiful here!" They never left Pilsen before.

In the recent years, we meet with the children 20 minutes before the scheduled de-



parture, with their parents coming to see them off and carrying heavy bags with all the things they need. The kids have made a several of little discoveries over the years - they found out that nights can be cold in the summer. They've also discovered that it can start raining during the week, even though it is sunny on the first day. They found out that a plastic cup is more suitable for camping than mugs made of breakable materials. They have made many other discoveries.

When working with people from other cultures, it is important to learn to distinguish between the behaviours that form a part of their untouchable cultural heritage, and the behaviours and habits that need to be changed or suppressed. It's always much easier to see the flaws in other people's lives and cultures than to look in the mirror and see our own. I'm looking forward to the time when we, Czechs, overcome our pride and let the Romani people point out our own flaws and shortcomings. They definitely have a lot to say to us, whenever we are ready to listen...



"I bought syphilis at Domazlicka Street for 250 CZK," one of our children's relatives told us. He was 18 years old and was infertile. It did not seem to bother him too much, as he already had a couple of children. When I asked him if his mother warned him about prostitutes, he said she didn't. As she herself worked in the field, she did not care about what her son did... It's been almost 20 years now. Today, syphilis costs considerably more on the market... I've been around socially excluded people for over half my life, yet I still never cease to wonder. It is not in my power to take all the kids to the swimming pools, to the summer camps, and to teach them about the pitfalls of life that still await them.

Bits and pieces of life

"Will you teach me to swim too?" We are very happy that we managed to beat one of the stereotypes that Roma people cannot swim. The younger children see their older siblings and friends swimming and they trust us that they will teach them how to swim too. Our greatest battles are that with our own minds. Our motto when teaching kids how to swim is: "Water is a friend, water can carry you!"

"This is where my mother comes for methadone," eight-year-old Peter remarked, pointing towards the hospital. "Why?" I asked, not knowing what the word meant. "She used to do nasty things, but now she cooks for us," the boy explains, and it dawns on me that he was talking about the medication used to help addicts stop taking drugs. I had noticed that Peter was no longer in the care of his grandmother, but his mother was taking care of him, but I did not know the details. I talked to Peter about it to find out if he had forgiven his mother, and encouraged him to pray for her. Peter is good at maths, and in the second grade, he surprised his teacher by mastering multiplication and division. Fingers crossed for the whole family, and we hope the mom will continue cooking lunches for her kids and be OK.

"Not in the bin, Tom!" Petr and Jane shouted towards Tom, who was about to poop into the trash can. The toilet was in the hallway and it was locked, and the poor four-year old did not know how to deal with the situation. When we come out from the dark into the light, we may often find out that we are dirty. It is easy to get ourselves dirty when we can't see. There are more ways how we react to that discovery. The two extreme reactions are: try to wash ourselves, or try to break the light. Deciding what to do and how to react to various situations is always tough. Regardless of age, ethnicity and social status...

"What didn't the recruiter know?" The old lady, Tišerová, and her husband left their settlement in Slovakia after World War II and moved to Pilsen, following an invitation by recruiter at Škoda company. I have had the privilege of knowing this extraordinary woman for more than 20 years. I personally know all eight of her children, thirty grandchildren (sixteen of whom I have worked with), twenty-eight great-grandchildren (twenty-two of whom I have worked with), and nine great-great-grandchildren. I believe that our cooperation with this family will not end any time soon.

"Do you know why gypsies cry when the Titanic sinks? Well, because of the iron chain..." Usually we don't like any racist jokes, but it was a Romani boy that told us this one during one of our summer camps. Everybody laughed. Only a civilized and refined nation is able to make fun of itself...

"I was at Fat Granny's!" Denis announced. "Fat Granny" is not a pub or an underground culture event, it is how the boy refers to his favourite grandmother. This expression was not meant to be offensive, it is simply what the boy considered the most "fitting" term. The same words sometimes have slightly different meanings in different families, or different cultures. For example, when my kids were little, we agreed that we were not allowed to use offensive words at home, and should use milder alternatives like "baboon", instead. Of course, the kids are creative and they found a way to make these alternatives sound more offensive than I intended...

"You don't have to lose weight, you're old!" Sara told me, trying to comfort me. We talked about why it can be good to lose weight, why we shouldn't smoke, why not to let babies "cry it out", why not to sleep with a boyfriend on a first date... But we also played fun games, went on trips, watched movies and talked about all sorts of things. We had a great time.

"Eat as much as you can!" One of the father instructed his kids as he was handing them over to us before a trip. I previously informed the parents that I will provide snacks for the children. On the day before, this father asked me for money claiming they did not have enough money to feed the children. The reasons why parents let their children participate in our activities are diverse. But whatever these reasons are, we are glad they trust us with their kids!

Bits and pieces of life

"I swear on Kevin's death I'll jump!" And jump he did. It was October and it was pretty cold. Adrian, his sister and his cousin love Kevin (their dearly loved nephew), and a bet is a bet! Out of the five kids who were with me on the trip, three came back home completely soaked with water and one of the 'dry' kids got a nosebleed as soon as we got out of the car. Surprisingly, everybody survived. I was happy that I had taught the kids how to swim before. Nikola (from the family of non-swimmers) swam across the entire pond with me this summer, which made me very proud.

"Pavla, are you shiing or pissing?"** The boys asked me while exploring the creek. The creek runs near our outdoor toilet and the boys wanted to know what I am doing. When I asked them to reformulate the question in a nicer way, they didn't understand what was wrong with their original wording. So, the boys learned two new words during our summer camp: "to pee" and "to poop".

"Out of twenty-five Roma children, only one of them had a sleeping bag. Three of them only had the clothes they came in, two of the girls came in flip-flops." Of course, we were expecting this. We made sure to have enough sleeping bags, sleeping mats, spoons, raincoats, boots, torches and spare clothes ready at the summer camp. It is always a little miracle when we not only survive the summer camp, but when we also enjoy it. The biggest reward for us was that the children did not want to go home and booked their place for the next year!

"18 years old, two kids, renting a 1-bedroom flat together with his girlfriend and her five relatives with no income." This is not a fictional horror story, but the reality of a pretty cool guy we happen to know. At times, he is cheerfully playing hide-and-seek with the kids, but most of the time, he is distant and dejected. I wish I had any advice for him! Some of the things we do during our residential events with families is listening to their stories, showing we care, not trying to offer any quick fixes, but trying to find ways to at least slightly improve the situation, and pray together.

"We want a flush toilet!" That was about the only complaint the kids had about our summer camp. The food was great! The games were great! The night game was awesome! And the people were the best thing here! We will come again!

"Look, a duck! Let's go find some rocks!" It's been a really long time since we heard that line and had to explain again how to treat animals. We were really happy when we heard the kids saying things like: "Come pee with me, there'll be fireflies", "The spider is a friend, you don't have to be afraid of it!", "I picked a flower for you!"

"Lance, Vinnetou, Indian, Paw..." These are not the nicknames of the children in our summer camp, but the actual nicknames of their adult relatives. Everyone knows them by these nicknames. These nicknames are often inherited, like surnames. They help navigate in the Roma community, and tell who is who. It would be nearly impossible without knowing the nicknames. This is one of the cultural differences we face every day. If you do not know these differences and do not respect their habits, you are not welcome. Our favourite Romani word is "Swachi". It expresses the kinship and the relationship between the husband's parents and the wife's parents. We don't have a word for this relationship in Czech - we don't need it - what a pity!

"My hair is neat and combed again!" I don't usually pay much attention to my appearance. But if I have to use a flea comb to protect my head against unwanted inhabitants, my hair is constantly neat and combed. There's always hazard in every job. If you work in a Zoo, you risk being spat on by a camel. If you work with children, you need a flea comb.

"Cooking healthy foods, canis therapy with Dorca the dog, art workshops..." In addition to the regular activities in our Children's club, we try to provide a variety of other interesting activities. Our aim is to keep children entertained and provide opportunities for them to grow and learn something new. Time with children is always precious to us, we never know when we see this or that child for the last time. Some families occasionally move to England, to Germany, to Slovakia, to another city, but even moving to another neighbourhood in Pilsen often means that we never see each other again...

Bits and pieces of life

"Mom, buy some salt, we have only 3 kilos left" My 16-year-old daughter shouted at me as I was leaving to the grocery store. I have five children. Large families have their own peculiarities, regardless of ethnicity. Although my family is Czech and we live in the Czech Republic, we sometimes seem a bit exotic to some. When the children were smaller and I went for a walk with them, people thought we were a kindergarten. The fact that my family was often considered non-standard helped me understand other non-standard families. Generally, I do not expect and assume anything, but genuinely try to get to know other people. I think about others as people first, rather than some strange apparitions.

"Smoking isn't cool anymore!" I was delighted to hear that from one of the Romani fathers. His life is not entirely neat. He has more children than teeth. His current girlfriend is younger than his eldest son. His ways of earning money have been diverse, but we appreciate his interest in finding an honest work nowadays. He used this line about smoking when he saw his 13-year-old son smoking a cigarette. His son had been struggling with an addiction to smoking for a couple of years already. The father was unable to come up with any better argument against smoking, but we will help him find some more!

"You better bugger off from here!" A young man, not Romani, but white Czech, was trying to send me away to safety with these words, while we were trying to help him push his car up an icy hill. He didn't mean to offend me at all, he was just worried about me because the car was sitting on ice and it could slide in any direction. Incidents like this help me to be more tolerant to our children's vocabulary. We try to teach kids better manners, of course, and we are happy when the kids reprimand each other or apologize for something rude they said :-).

"Pavla, if the boys drown, I will drown you too!" One of the fathers said before we parted. The good news is that no one (got) drowned :-).

"Do you need a car radio by any chance?" A suspicious-looking gentleman on the street asked me in a half-whisper. Actually, I don't blame him for mistaking me for someone else. I parked my car in Husova Street in Pilsen, which is known for its gambling houses, nightclubs, and pawnshops. Three older, bigger and tattooed Romani men were loading something into my car. To the locals, I looked like a promising customer. I declined the offer, not even trying to explain that I am just moving a freezer and a bed for a couple of Romani children. Their brave grandma and grandpa are taking care of where they were previously staying was really too small for them, so I'm glad they were able to move to a bigger one...

"Don't worry about it!" Michaela, 13, said to me when I asked her about something I just witnessed. Her mother instructed her to go shoplifting, but Michaela got caught. Her mother beat her up and cursed her, so that the social workers in the shelter where they were staying thought she had nothing to do with the shoplifting accident. In the summer, Michaela went with us to a Camporee and she fit in so well with my own children that from the outside, you couldn't even tell that this girl was not my own. A different environment, a visit to "another world", a confrontation with different values - that's what we want to offer to these children.

"You're so fat! Here on your tummy," our Roma girls sometimes say to us. Roma children stay honest with others much longer than other children, sometimes for their whole lives. And we love them for it!

"I don't have a suit!" "You can go to church even in sweatpants," I assured the father of our children when he made excuses why he couldn't go to church on Sundays. Most Romani people claim to believe in God, but most of them don't want to change their lives or go to church.

"Pavla, I need something!" I was about to blurt out my usual answer "I won't give you any money", but before I had a chance to do so, the girl continued. "I need you to forgive me, because I did something bad." "Oh. This is not about money?" I was just making sure I understood her correctly. "I don't want money, I need forgiveness!" the girl insisted. God is indeed great. Greater than I can ever imagine. I keep reassuring everyone that for God, there are no hopeless cases. As long as one lives, there is hope! I am always surprised when I witness how true that is :-)!