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Roma Access to Adequate Housing

Erschienen in: Wohnen | Dwelling

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1. Forward and methodology

This essay addresses a manifestation of antigypsyism and focuses on human rights violations, in particular on access to adequate housing. The study seeks to examine a lived experience of a Romani person with reflective criticism regarding a lack of fundamental human rights protections. My aim is to offer a record of antigypsyism, which involves normalized exclusions, discriminations and intolerant attitudes towards Romani people.¹ This article analyzes the narrative of an inside-outsider in a qualitative manner, which highlights the major issues that often emerge in Romani housing issues.

Antigypsyism is the specific form of racism towards Roma, Sinti, Travellers and others who are stigmatized as 'gypsies' in the public imagination. Antigypsyism comprises attitudes or the expression of negative stereotypes in the civic sphere. It informs discriminatory expressions and practices, including many implicit or hidden manifestations. Antigypsyism is not only about what is being said, but also about what is being done and what is not being done.²

Adequate housing was recognized in 1948 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in article 25, as part of the right to an adequate standard of living³, and later on in 1966 in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in article 11.1.⁴

This essay seeks to promote the voices of the Romani people, with the aim of awareness-raising, knowledge production, and policy recommendations.

I am a Roma LGBTI person with a Ph.D. in Interdisciplinary Sociology. My present and past social and economic background are incompatible, which causes me great trouble in my everyday life. These lived experiences are the fundamentals of my inside-outsider academic narrative.

2. Positionality – Manifestation of Antigypsyism

It is May 10, 2022, and as usual, my phone begins the alarm at 5:30 a.m., with a powerful signal to start the day. After approaching the kitchen, I open the tap to have a glass of water. Unconsciously my memory flashes back to between 1992-1995, to the period when I was a homeless child, to that time when I had to sneak into a sugar manufacturer's property to steal clean drinking water in a plastic bottle.

I am not talking about water to brush my teeth or face, that would already have been a high privilege. At the age of seven, it was a standard morning routine for me to illegally enter a private property to access drinking water. My mother passed away when I was six years old, therefore I lost everything I had from one day to another: a caring family, and the shelter above my head. Before the day of my mother's funeral, my father kidnapped me from my mother's family site, and placed me in another community, to his family (who were until that day absolutely unknown to me). A few weeks later, because of my father's unpleasant behaviour toward others, we had been expelled from his family, we had to leave the community and Romani settlement.

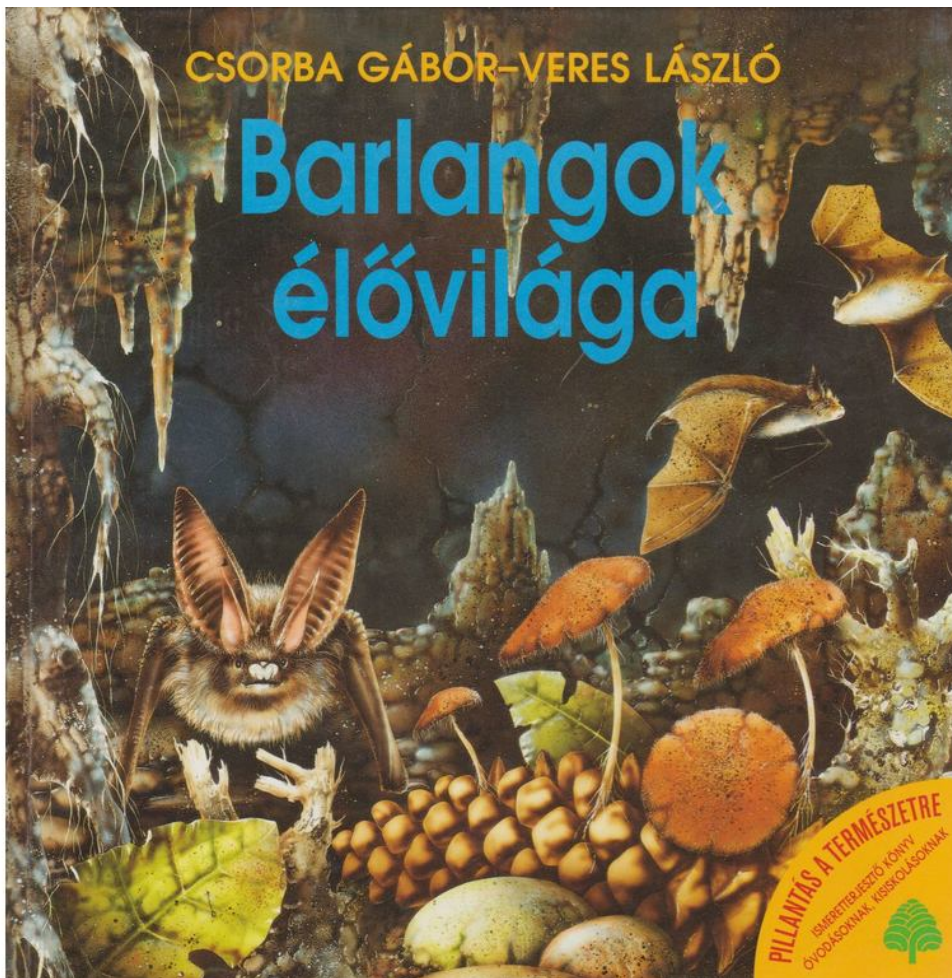
Our new home became an abandoned railway building behind a sugar factory, which we shared with other homeless families. The place was completely abandoned but had a registration number, therefore we got an illegal residence permit. We had no water, electricity or heating, but we knew that the place was unknown to social workers and the authorities. The only guests were rats in the evenings. Until we had some light with a candle in the evenings, they were silent, but as soon as it got dark, the rats started their usual rodeos in our place and often in my bed. That time I learned that having a place to sleep, and clean drinking water are those social goods and rights that are not for "Gypsies."

The abandoned railway building place and the still functioning sugar factory, which was a home for several homeless families.

Later, my father got arrested for robbery, and some other homeless members sometimes warned me to go to school: otherwise the social workers would place me in the orphan home. I had no strict guidance from adult homeless people during my time on the street. The school was a place where I sometimes appeared for nothing more than free school milk. No one really guided my day-to-day practices, therefore the school week for me started on Wednesday. But I knew that I should go, otherwise I would end up in state care, an even worse stigma than homelessness. On the other days, I had to beg on the street for my daily bread. While Saturdays and Sundays denote the weekend for

everyone, my weekend extended to Fridays and Mondays as well. Tuesday was the most treasured day of the week because the waste trucks loaded the trash into the garbage heap. That was how I found my food, clothes, and sometimes toys.

All of us own a favourite book, which symbolically or directly changed our way of thinking. During my childhood I had only one book. Therefore, it was my dearest. I got it for Christmas from my elementary class teacher in 3rd grade. It was February 1994, when I walked “home” on the railway lines to find the place which was a safe shelter for many families destroyed by municipality bulldozers. The people, who had that only one dwelling space could not stop the defacement.



The book which was left in the dust and I never had enough power to reorder. Image source: <https://www.regikonyvek.hu/kiadas/barlangok-elovilaga-1991-officina-nova>

All our begged goods, dreams and fundamental human rights were buried there under the dust. I was ten, and my mind snapped over the fact that I lost my only book, my clothes, the drinking water, and the bed where I should sleep that night. We no longer had any illegal roofs above of our heads. We were destroyed. From that day on, I slept in freight train cabins for months.

Homelessness has many layers, and the lesson I learned that day was: some homeless people can be more marginalized, dehumanized and excluded from national and international human rights conventions.

3. Housing as Fundamental Human Rights

From the standpoint of fundamental human rights conventions, the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights (UDHR) declares that discrimination and exclusion are forms of human violation. All humans are born free and should have equal rights and access to education, housing, health, and employment, to culture, or to equal marriage. If regularly denied one of these fundamental human rights, citizens face the impact of inequality and human rights violation.

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control. (UDHR, Article 25)⁵

In the case of the European Union — European Convention of Human Rights – Article 14 proposes protection against any kind of discrimination. In order to “expand the scope of the prohibition on discrimination”, 17 EU member countries out of 28 ratified the national anti-discrimination law in 2015.⁶ Based on the OSCE ODIHR reporting, we can state that hate crime is a result of criminal offense and biased motivations caused by negative opinions, stereotypical assumptions, intolerance, or hatred directed to a particular group. Hate crime includes threats, property damage, assault, murder, or any other criminal offense, which are caused by biases and target the following groups, identities, or characteristics:

- Racism and xenophobia against racialized people;
- Bias against Roma and Sinti;
- Anti-Semitism;
- Bias against Muslims;
- Bias against Christians;
- Bias against members of other religions or beliefs;
- Bias against other groups – Sex;
- Bias against other groups – Sexual orientation or gender identity;
- Bias against other groups – People with disabilities

The notion of “Bias against Roma and Sinti” was applied by the OSCE states in the early 1990s. In their common statement, they declared that Bias against Roma and Sinti is an Anti-Roma rhetoric, including the bias-based views, opinions, and statements on “Gypsy criminality”, which can be perpetuated in the media, public speeches, and by political actors as well.⁷

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) statement declares:

Hate crime is the most severe expression of discrimination, and a core fundamental rights abuse.

In their critical consideration, they draw society's attention to the fact that even though numerous initiatives target hate crime across Europe, there are countless unreported and unprosecuted cases leaving victims remains without redress. They advocate their member states to improve their access to social and judicial justice for victims.⁸

In 2018, the UN Human Rights Committee stated in its concluding observations that it finds it alarming that the Roma community continues to suffer from widespread discrimination and exclusion, unemployment and housing, and educational segregation. The UN Committee also flagged a concluding observation, which remarks that the persistence of discrimination against Roma and the segregation and extreme poverty that they face is concerning.⁹ The Fifth Opinion on Hungary of the CoE ACFC on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities has been published on 12 October 2020. The Committee noted that Hungarian Roma faces structural difficulties in all spheres of public and private life, including education, employment, housing, and access to health care.¹⁰

4. Conclusions

The number of local Roma experiencing direct discrimination, harassment, and forced evictions without providing alternative housing is increasing. The proportion of social housing is very low particularly in rural areas where rental agreements were terminated by the municipality, with limited compensation or on condition that the tenant purchases a property located outside the municipality. Besides discrimination and forced evictions, adequateness and affordability are the largest issues Roma people face regarding housing. According to several studies, a disproportionately high percentage of Roma live in rural areas, mostly in segregated residential zones in poor conditions, lacking basic infrastructure (no access to running water, dwellings without a toilet, shower, or bathroom). The national and international authorities have limited tools to ensure that international human rights obligations relating to adequate housing are upheld at local level.

Several related issues arise from this and need further consideration:

1. The persistence of structural discrimination against Roma across Europe;
2. The increased segregation in education faced by Roma children with the fact that Roma face extreme poverty and live in segregated neighborhoods that lack proper infrastructure and services;
3. Unlawful destruction of Romani neighborhood without providing adequate alternative housing to the inhabitants;
4. Roma are subjected to a high number of hate crimes, including violent hate crimes, and reports that adequate protection is not provided to Roma communities by law enforcement and they are subjected to ethnic profiling by law enforcement officers, hate speech against Roma, including by public officials;
5. Supervision of anti-segregation and integration plans to avoid false policy implementations. In addition, anti-discrimination legislation should be highlighted concerning ensuring equal access of Romani people to social housing.

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SUGGESTED CITATION: Mate, Dezso: Roma Access to Adequate Housing, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/roma-access-to-adequate-housing/>], 07.06.2022

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20220607-0830>

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DOI: 10.37189/kwi-blog/20220607-0830

URN: urn:nbn:de:hbz:465-20220607-084657-3

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