



The Romany  
Flag



## RED WHEELS FOR NONVIOLENT ACTION: THE ROMANY STRUGGLE FOR DIGNITY AND TRUTH

BY VERONIKA SAFAROVA

For centuries, the effects of racism, stereotypes, myths, and scapegoating have shaped the state of Roma (a.k.a. Gypsies) around the world. Although the particular lifestyles and attitudes of approximately 9 million Roma in Europe and 1 million in the U.S. vary greatly between communities and individuals, one thing is for certain: as human beings, Romany people desire freedom and respect. Many texts portray the Roma as living the nomadic lifestyle because of their nature as “free spirits.” It is true that some Roma prefer the caravan to a house, but most have been forced out of their



Erika Adamova, a participant in the Roma Diplomacy Project which helps youth to bridge the gap between Roma civil society at the larger EU community. See <http://www.diplomacy.edu/Roma/> for more information

countries due to racist immigrant laws and disgraceful maltreatment since the time Romany ancestors left Northern India around 1100 C.E. The majority of Roma now prefer to live settled lifestyles, but they do not enjoy equal rights, even as citizens of their home countries. Distinguishing truths such as these from fabrications is a core aspect of principled nonviolence, and is vital in gaining equal rights for the Romany people.

### TRUTH, MYTH, OR GENERALIZATION?

Many Romany families, including my own, have left behind Romany laws and rituals in order to fit into mainstream society. But some communities, particularly the Vlach Roma in Romania, are concerned that full participation in Gadjo (non-Romany) communities will destroy their culture. In these communities, it is not uncommon for Roma to perceive Gadje (non-Roma) as unclean, violent, and sexually promiscuous. This is because the private and public practices of Gadje are not in accordance with strict Romany laws, which are similar to Jewish and Hindu traditions. Ironically, stereotypes about Roma have centered around these very qualities. Common demeaning phrases include, “dirty, evil Gypsy casting curses” and “exotic, sexy Gypsy maiden.”

On numerous occasions I have heard people describe themselves as “certainly not racist,” while simultaneously wishing that every Gypsy had been gassed in the concentration camps (in fact, over one million Roma died under the Nazi regime during the Holocaust). This “unconscious” racism lays the foundation for structural violence, which includes job discrimination and a lack of equal education opportunities, often developing into deep poverty. This accompanies the more blatant variety of racism, such as Czech policemen candidly exclaiming, “at least somebody else is doing the dirty work” while observing skinheads assaulting a Romany woman.

Reproductive violence such as forced sterilization can be a result of conscious or unconscious racism. Some health practitioners actually believe that they are “helping” Roma by inhibiting them from having children. Forced sterilizations of Roma have been practiced for centuries in Europe, and in

Czechoslovakia, this practice continued through the communist era. Government laws and programs used monetary incentives to encourage sterilizations for Romany women. These programs condoned misinformation and coercion in hospitals. The government in Slovakia claims that these types of programs were rescinded after the fall of the communist political system, but research reveals that serious reproductive rights violations continue despite the official change of this law.

### THE ROMA RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In order to confront serious human rights abuses, the Roma Rights Movement has been developing for 40 years through government policy changes, grassroots organizing of protests, and effective constructive programs. Leaders in each of these campaigns have emphasized the importance of a nonviolent approach to resistance against an oppressor, and defined nonviolent action as one of the key components to their campaign.

In Hamburg, Germany during the late 1980s, Romany political protest against deportation fueled a unique cooperation between Romany permanent residents and Romany refugees who were denied political asylum after the Iron Curtain closed. A national Romany consciousness emerged from these campaigns, and shattered the conventional impression that Roma never “fight back” or draw public attention to themselves. Romany families adhered to nonviolent, creative action while also getting support from groups such as radical anarchists, to Jewish Survivors of the Holocaust, to celebrities and international media. Their actions included seeking refuge at former concentration camps and in churches, organizing protest marches and hunger strikes in historic locations, and involving tourists in the resistance movement. This campaign succeeded in granting resident status to over 2,000 Roma, and served as a model for Roma Rights campaigns in other regions in Germany.

The Zero Evictions Red Wheels Movement is an active nonviolent resistance campaign in the United Kingdom, run by Roma, Irish Travelers, and other international groups. The Red Wheels Movement works to protect Roma and Irish Travelers from eviction from their own land and fights the discriminatory housing practices of the U.K. government. With the passing of the Criminal Justice Act in 1994, the government of the United Kingdom cancelled its guaranteed funding of caravan sites, and advised Roma and other travelers to buy their own land in order to avoid parking their caravans illegally. However, the travelers must also obtain “planning consent” permits in order to legally live in a caravan (or mobile home) on the land that they have purchased. And nine times out of ten, Roma and Irish Travelers are denied such permits by British councils as a result of discrimination. Thus, families must defy the law and move onto land they have purchased before a permit is issued. In an effort to get rid of these communities, the government has issued large-scale evictions—bulldozing hundreds of acres of homes and burning down trailers. City councils have also tried to claim as much as £18,000 from Romany and Irish Traveler yard-owners for these eviction operations. By demanding



Roma children at school

payment, the council is in effect bankrupting families and making it impossible for them to buy land elsewhere.

The Sheridan clan, who bought Dale Farm in Basildon, England, and transformed a junkyard into a Roma and Travelers’ community, are determined to avoid violence. Since 2004, they have set up meetings with nearby neighborhoods to sort out differences, and have filed new appeals for permits in order to build communities of caravans on their land. In partnership with the United Kingdom Association of Gypsy Women, International Alliance of Inhabitants, and a dozen other international organizations, these communities have carried out a nonviolent obstructive program that includes organizing protest marches, erecting miles of barbed wire around homes, writing letters to government, and creating petitions against the evictions. Roma have also voluntarily taken on suffering by refusing to leave their homes, standing as “human shields” to protect homes, and standing in sub-zero temperatures outside council meetings to hold candle-lit vigils. This campaign has also employed third-party nonviolent intervention via international monitoring teams such as Panjabi Human Rights/PakiTV, Jewish Human Rights, and National Travelers Action Group.

As a result of the Zero Evictions Red Wheels Movement, a full-scale review of accommodation in Somerset County, England is being carried out starting November 9th, 2006. The County Survey will include face-to-face interviews with Roma and Travelers to identify specific land requirements. “Reasonable” rents will be charged to tenants who will be able to claim full housing benefits. Roma and Traveler activists continue to campaign nonviolently in other regions of the United Kingdom where eviction plans are still waiting to be resolved.

Changing legislature to protect Romany rights is a significant step, but it is only one stage in the nonviolent campaign. Powerful human rights legislation can make racism against Roma unacceptable, but it does not necessarily change racist hearts. In “The Denial of Racism,” Dimitrina Petrova (1999) illustrates that as a society begins to denounce racism, more people also vehemently deny that they are racist; this is because racism is officially and culturally condemned. Gandhi realized that it is better to persuade than to coerce your neighbor to respect your beliefs, so that s/he might sympathize with your views. In the practice of principled

**CONTINUED ON PAGE 37**