

# You Welcomed Us into Your Kingdom



ROMA YOUTH, MISSION WORKERS, PASTORS AND  
ARTISTS IN THE REFORMED CHURCH IN HUNGARY

Reformed Church in Hungary



Tibor Balogh:  
The Gypsy Woman's Dance with The Angel



You Welcomed Us into Your Kingdom



Kálmán Káli-Horváth: The God-child



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ROMA YOUTH, MISSION WORKERS, PASTORS AND ARTISTS IN  
THE REFORMED CHURCH IN HUNGARY



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# Preface

“I was searching for the Lord. I used to read the Bible on the train to and from school... The idea that God could love me so much always put me on the verge of tears. It cannot be true, I thought...I kept saying: Lord, it is impossible that you really want me. And when I got off the train, he virtually grabbed me.”

The present publication features testimonies of our Gypsy<sup>1</sup> brothers and sisters about what the love of God means to them. Nearly all of them suffered from desperate physical and spiritual circumstances before managing to find their way to the Gospel. Their confessions shed light on the depth, the height and the versatility of the Gospel, which is able to provide the fatherless with a father, to raise the despised, to offer a new beginning after each failure, to show an interpretation of our existence, to give us a goal in life, and to grant those who live on the periphery of society with the dignity of God’s children.

The interviewees include theologians, students, among them a PhD student, skilled workers, teachers of religion, artists and a pastoral care worker. The interviews also reveal what role spirituality plays in social mobility. We can almost feel we are back in the age of Reformation when hearing about the community leader who dropped out of elementary school after completing only four grades but who is motivated to read by the desire to study the Bible. And the skilled worker and the young man who used to skip school and fail classes decide to continue their education: they enrol in college to be able to spread the Gospel. They have to take incredibly courageous steps in order to gain a foothold in new and unknown social territories.

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<sup>1</sup> In the present publication, we use the words “Gypsy” and “Roma” (“cigány” and “roma” in Hungarian) interchangeably, although we are aware of the differences between the two expressions. Furthermore, where necessary because of the wording of the interviewees, we kept the differentiation between Roma and Hungarians, despite the fact that naturally the Gypsies living in Hungary also belong to the Hungarian nation.



“Breaking out is mostly a battle with yourself. Firstly, you must destroy the negative self-image that you’ve created based on all the negativity coming from your family, your surroundings, and the media. You must believe that you are capable of more, that you can move mountains, and if you believe it, you’ll be able to do it,” says the Golden Headband award-winning PhD student in his interview.

The book primarily contains interviews published on the recently-launched Roma Ministry website. As a result, besides Roma people who are Reformed congregation members, there are also interviews with the musical group Amaro Del and the painter *Tibor Balogh*, who do not belong to the Reformed community but have been active in the work of the national Reformed Roma Ministry.

After considerable preliminary work, the *Concept of the Reformed Church in Hungary for Serving Amongst the Roma* was published in 2013. The document, which is also supplemented by an action plan, points out the following: “The basic attitude of the church’s ministry among Roma is determined by the value and dignity of human beings as God’s creatures. God created man to live in loving community (communio) with Him and each other, and the evolution for this community glorifies Him. All ethnical, economic, social-based distinction, hierarchical or patronizing relationships harm this relationship-system and is a sin before God... the RCH aims to help congregations become welcoming, multiethnic, God-glorifying communities, where Roma church members are also important and equal members of the community, and their culture is reflected in the culture of the congregations.”

The title of the book – *You Welcomed Us into Your Kingdom* – comes from the last line of the Gypsy anthem, as sung by our Roma brothers and sisters who believe in God. The final lines of the original Gypsy anthem – “You’ve

cursed us, you've hurt us, / Making us eternal vagrants", which express the state of being outcast – have been rewritten as a Christian confession: "You've blessed us, you've saved us, / Welcomed us into your Kingdom".

The interviews of this publication aim to present the faith, desires and struggles of our Roma brothers and sisters, thus contributing to the development of smaller and larger communities of mixed ethnicity where the Lord is praised, and ultimately to the creation of God's kingdom here on earth.

KRISZTA NASZÁDI / OCTOBER, 2015.

A black and white portrait of a man with a short beard and mustache, wearing a denim shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera. His hands are positioned in front of him, with fingers spread. A large, light-colored circular graphic is behind him, and a smaller, darker circular graphic is in the upper right corner containing his name.

RÓBERT  
BALOGH

# Nothing is Impossible!

Even though he hated going to church as a child, by the time he graduated from high school, theology was all he could think of. According to him, he's come from "the edge of the world". We had two conversations with Róbert Balogh, the young minister who went to primary school in Tiszabecs, a village in the poor North-East part of Hungary, and graduated in the nearby town of Mátészalka. In 2014 he finished the Debrecen Reformed Theological University. He has recently come back from Geneva, where he got his second masters. Our first interview took place after he finished at university and the second one after he came back from Geneva.

*How did you manage to get into theology? Did your family support your studies?*

My parents nagged me with my studies ever since I was born. I owe my mother a lot, she was the one who dealt with me all the time. She taught me how to read and to recite poems when I was in preschool. She took me to competitions. These are good memories. My parents finished eight years of school. They were working all the time, when I was a child; my mother in the stocking factory, the farmers' co-operative and the public works program. My father only came home every second week because he worked far from us in Budapest or Esztergom. Despite all this I believe my brother and I were raised properly because I think the most important thing for a child is to be taught how he can decide what to do and how to go on with his life. In my opinion, we were taught this lesson.

*How did you choose the ministry? Have you been going to church from the start?*

I was about eleven when my parents met Christianity and from that point on everything was different. They thought differently of life, the world, us, the family. There were arguments before. My mother needed to go to the hospital and she was converted by the influence of the minister in the hospital. My father followed her a year later. Since then we hardly heard any loud voices at home and they started raising us in faith. I went to church because my parents forced me to go, but the sermons seemed like they would never end. Then, after turning thirteen, a Gypsy missionary with a Baptist background visited our village and preached on the streets and in the gardens. At first I only went to laugh at him, but then I heard *“Those in Christ are a new creation, the old life is gone and a new life has begun!”* This was what set me off on the path of the Lord. I understood that no matter what I’ve done I can have another chance with God. I started going to church by my own free will. I had a small blue Bible that could fit in my pocket and I had it with me all the time. I took it to school and read it on breaks.

*Weren’t you mocked? Wasn’t it lame to read the Bible?*

No, there were some kids who thought it was strange, but a wave of awakening swept through the neighborhood at that time. People got interested in God, Christianity, and the Bible. It wasn’t lame for a thirteen-year-old to read the Bible because everyone was heading in that direction. This is how I started actively practicing my religion. At the time of my confirmation I was full of questions. I was interested in the same things as I am now. How can someone live his Christianity in his everyday life? How can a rebellious teenager be a



Christian? What does it mean that we're poor and how can we live with it? My vow at my confirmation was a testimony of my faith. I liked studying catechisms. The things I learned through them I then I lived out in my first year at the university.

*How did you choose theology?*

I finished middle school in a nearby town, Mátészalka, in a class concentrating on the humanities. Hungarian and history were easy, but I had difficulties with math and chemistry. My grades weren't good in high school. I survived with the things I could memorize in the classes. I was rebelling against anything and everything. My teachers were surprised when I told them I'd like to go to university. They saw my talent, but I skipped classes and when I went in I disturbed others. I decided to study theology when I was eighteen. I said if I'm not accepted I won't go to university. The only place I registered to was the theology program in Debrecen. When I visited the school the atmosphere gripped me. I decided to do my best on the graduation exams. I was accepted.

*What were your years at the university like?*

The largest boost was after my first Greek exam. I studied a lot and I had no mistakes. That was when I realized that I can go through university getting grades other than D-s. After that almost all of my grades were A-s. My second most important experience was my Hebrew language exam. My teachers told me in high school that I had no talent for languages – but I still managed to pass. During my years at Debrecen University I was member of the so called “Virtual Roma College”. I was full of enthusiasm, full of so called “naïve dreams” that I would do something great. Our dream was to create a residential

college for Roma. We managed to fulfill this dream and now all major denominations run such institutions to help Roma during their university studies. But I also think that these Christian Roma Colleges put too much burden on the students. At the age of eighteen or twenty they hear that they'll be responsible for the Roma people. This is an unreal expectation.

*As a Roma minister how do you talk to the Roma believers?*

Honestly? Sometimes I have no idea. I used to believe that the Roma will listen to me. Then I realized that me as a Gypsy standing out in front of all the people wouldn't help me to create any miracles. But I can achieve my goals with hard work and devotion. My personal courage and achievement won't bring the Roma to church. But I try to fill my sermons with examples we can find in our everyday life, while shopping, working, or just by staying at home. I need to talk in a way that the people in church can take the things they heard with them, and besides all this I praise the gospel and spread the good news.

*How do you prepare?*

It varies. I used to write everything down, all my sermons, and then memorize every word till I knew it by heart, but I am finding my own style. I'm honest in my preaching and my praying and I say whatever the Spirit tells me to say on the spot.

*What kind of person do you think you are?*

I have the same faults everybody has. The key of mission is for the minister to show the congregation himself. The minister walks in front of the people, but if he can find a way to walk among them, his mission will be more successful.

*What are the three words you would describe yourself with?*

First of all, I would say *dedicated*. If I start doing something, I will finish it at all costs. I would say I'm pretty *earnest*. I've never faced a problem or a life where I didn't feel like I can't help. I like to see the things in the whole. I want to make the best of others and of myself. I'm *forever changing* in my attitude, my way of thinking, my plans, in everything except the really important things, because those are stable. I can't sit still, you can't shoot me down and I believe nothing is impossible!

*What are your plans?*

I'd like to progress in my profession. This is why I'm going to Switzerland for a year. I need to develop. I'll be studying in Geneva at the ecumenical institute, attending a postgraduate course and I'll be the minister of the Hungarian congregation in Geneva.

# God Wants Me in Hungary

A year ago, Róbert Balogh talked about his journey from poverty to attaining a university degree. In the last year he received his second master's degree in Geneva, travelled quite a bit, and, due to these experiences, something essential changed in him. He says that in Switzerland he truly found and accepted himself. He found a new mission: he wants to use everything he has learned to help those in disadvantaged regions. He trusts that God will send him where he is needed the most.

*The last time we talked was over a year ago and at that time you were heading to Switzerland to study, and now you are home again. What happened to you over there?*

A lot of things. I faced a lot of hardships, especially in the beginning. Language barriers, for example, and I was just unfamiliar with the place. Geneva is in the French-speaking region of Switzerland, so sometimes I couldn't understand the name of the stations, and my English never seemed to be good enough either. Initially I had a lot of problems at the university, too. Often, I couldn't understand the instructions in class, and there were a lot of misunderstandings because of that. All in all, it was really hard at first, but once I got used to the situation, and learned how to fit in, I really enjoyed it.

*How did you end up in Switzerland? Were you welcomed?*

I was on a scholarship from the Reformed Synod. Geneva is a multicultural city. So many nations live together there... I could really find myself. People

are accepting to the very end; they don't care who you are, or where you come from, or what kind of clothes you wear. What matters to them is if you're willing to get to know them, if you're willing to sit down with them to chat, and whether you are a valuable person. Befriending people was the easiest part.

*What exactly did you do in Switzerland?*

I was on a scholarship from the Reformed Synod. I was a Masters student studying ecumenical theology in the joint program of the University of Geneva and the Bossey Ecumenical Institute. I was also the pastor of the Hungarian Protestant Congregation in Geneva.

*That's certainly a busy schedule. I guess you didn't have a lot of free time.*

Not really. The course included a lot of travelling so I visited Rome, the Vatican, Taizé in France, and congregations in one of the German districts, where I preached. On top of all this, I preached at the Hungarian congregation, and I studied for my classes.

*What was your schedule like?*

There's a huge difference between the two semesters. It was a mostly typical university schedule in the first semester. Every day started with prayer, we organized it with other students. Most of us were pastors from all over the world. After that we usually had classes until the afternoon and then we had to prepare for the next day. There was always something to do: writing presentations, studying, and lots of reading. The second semester was mostly field work. Occasionally we had classes, where we could ask about the requirements and our thesis, but most of the time I was working as an intern at the World Council of Churches (WCC).



*Were your teachers strict?*

My instructor was a brilliant lady from Great Britain who was fluent in both Arabic and Hebrew. She expected a lot, and she was very strict, but I really learned a lot from her. Once, as preparation for a paper and for a conference, she put half a meter stock of paper on my table, and told me to work my way through it – I had one week to finish. In general, my teachers were strict, but I’ve learned a lot from all of them.

*How different is this year’s Robert to last year’s?*

Very different. A lot of people told me – and this is how I feel, too – that a different person came back from Switzerland. I am more confident. I know what I want. But most importantly, I can enjoy life and I can find beauty in the smallest things. Recently I experienced awful situations, but God brought me back from them. I truly found myself in that multicultural environment and I learned what God’s plan is for me. During university I only cared about theoretical things, and now, within the Roma Mission, I’m planning to do service in one of the most disadvantaged towns, because I realized that I want to use everything I learned in a practical way.

*Why do you think this is the job for you? You’ve studied a lot, and you have an international degree. Not a lot of other Roma can say that.*

I believe I am needed there, and not just because I am Roma. It is obviously a factor, but not the most important one. The main reason is that I am a very open person, I learned how to accept others unconditionally, and that is very important in the Roma Mission because you can’t do service there without acceptance. This is why I feel like I am needed there. As a Roma myself, I can fully understand their figures of speech and their social

situation – I don't need to assess the situation because I already know exactly what it's like.

*So as a Roma pastor you can get along with Roma people better than a non-Roma pastor could?*

Yes, there are situations where that is certainly the case.

*How did you relearn to fit into Hungarian society again?*

When I came back from Geneva I practically fell into the Roma Mission's internship program. It took a while to find my place, but then I got jobs that were made for me. I translated a technical paper, and I did field-work, too – which made me surer than ever that I want to work in the field, that God wants to see me there. The joy I feel when Roma children come up to me... Nothing else feels like that.

*What other opportunities did you have this year?*

I was asked to teach a joint social worker course at the University of Prague and the University of Helsinki. There is a spiritual component to the teaching job as well, as a pastor. Besides this, an international diaconal research team invited me to join them and we are preparing for a conference in Helsinki next year.

*What about your family, your parents?*

I rarely see them, unfortunately – only twice, maybe three times a year.

*Is it worth it for you?*

I think so. Some experiences I get to live through are absolutely worth it.

*Would you like to go back to Switzerland?*

I'll surely visit; I miss the congregation and my friends there. I have deep bonds with a lot of people there, so I'll most certainly visit them in the future. But God wants me in Hungary.

TEXT: KRISZTINA BALOGH / PHOTO: VARGOSZ



JÓZSEF  
HORVÁTH

# From a Roma Settlement to the Research Lab

"Kids, never let anyone stand in the way of your dreams!" says József Horváth, research biologist, who made his way from his way from the Roma settlement in Karcag to the university research lab. According to this young man, among the many obstacles that people sharing his fate face, the most important one to surpass is yourself. This way you can use the opportunities God gives you to their full potential.

*A few months ago you received the Golden Headband, an award of the Roma Press. This is handed out to everyday heroes with Roma ancestry, who show an example with their lives to their surroundings. What is your example?*

Among the Gypsy children, only a few go to high school, fewer get to attend a university, and even fewer end up finishing it. In my family I'm the first, and the only one with a diploma. My example might be encouraging for Roma children because I wasn't afraid to dream big, and I succeeded in making my dreams come true. Everyone can see that there's light at the end of the tunnel. The only things in the way of that light are obstacles often raised by ourselves, because we bring up poverty, discrimination, and hopelessness as excuses instead of realizing our own talents that are hidden within each of us.

*Where do you come from?*

I grew up in Karcag. I finished elementary school there and then I attended the Gandhi High School (a school specially for Roma students) in Pécs for one



year, but then returned home for my second year and graduated there. This is how I ended up at the University of Debrecen, where I graduated as a molecular geneticist.

*How and why did you become a biologist?*

My father was a railway worker and he worked all over the country. He usually slept in the workers' hostel, so he had a lot of time to read. He loved books, he never left without one, and he always bought one, wherever he went. I unintentionally ended up with his love of reading – I was especially interested in ancient Greek and Roman history, and from here, being a lawyer is only a step away. At first I wanted to become a lawyer so I could help the Roma in the settlement. This was my goal, but then my high school biology teacher (*Zsuzsanna Kolostyáné Pljesovszki*) asked me to participate in biology competitions. Then, with her help, I put together course work on drug research and prevention, and I won the national grand award. At that point, I decided to become a biologist. While preparing for the competition, which took about one or two years, I needed to read tons. There were loads of information I needed to look up and understand. I ended up loving biology so much that I felt like my true self at last – I felt like I am finally doing what I love. As a biologist I finished the B.Sc. at Debrecen University, and moved on to the master's degree program in molecular geneticist. I'm doing doctoral school now. That's how I ended up in the lab, from the Roma settlement.

*Didn't your father want to continue his studies?*

It was a different world in his time, a different system. He didn't really have the opportunity. He had a lot of siblings, so the older ones always needed to help out the family. He needed to start working when he was still quite young. My mother also has a lot of siblings, more than ten. After she finished the first

three years of elementary school, meaning that she learned how to write and to read, she quit school. She needed to start working around the house and help raise her siblings – she had no choice.

*When someone mentions a Roma settlement a lot of things come to your mind, but bookshelves is not one of them.*

People often tend to connect certain expressions with a pejorative meaning. Of course I know that the conditions are criminal at more than one settlement, but this doesn't mean that the conditions are inhuman everywhere. Yes, most of the people here are poor, but they can lead a normal life. It doesn't mean they don't have clean and orderly homes, that they struggle to provide for their family. Being short on money doesn't mean they can't have books to read.

*Did you ever experience discrimination because of your origin? Did anyone say that this Józsi is a Gypsy and he will never accomplish anything?*

It did happen that I wasn't let into a disco and I have heard people calling me names behind my back. It didn't feel good, sometimes I got annoyed about it, but in the end I never really dealt with it, because I don't really care, and even if I would, there's nothing I could do about it. I'm not bad at judging situations, and I try to avoid ones like these. My schoolmates and my teachers, on the other hand, never harmed me. My teachers were actually quite fond of me and gave me encouragement. They saw that, even though I'm a child so I may misbehave, there is nothing more important for me than school.

*It is heartbreaking to think about all the children full of potential staying in segregated settlements, without the chance to put their talent to use. I wonder how can talent make way for itself?*

That's a complex question. Talent is useless if you don't recognize it and can't use it. In other words, you need to learn how to live with it. For this, you need someone who can help you. In my case, this someone was my biology teacher, but the school isn't the only thing that counts. Your surroundings, your family, your parents – these determine your life the most. Actually it all comes down to your family. My parents worked, my siblings had professions, and, together with my teachers, they always encouraged me to study. They said this is my only chance and I believed them. Indeed I didn't see many opportunities around me. Most of the people were doing public works, or daily labor, others got involved in crime and ended up in prison. I turned these negative examples into positive ones, got strength from them; I was afraid of them and struggled to avoid a similar fate for myself. I told myself again and again that I don't need to end up like that, I don't want it to be that way, I don't want to walk this path.

*Where did this determination come from?*

I always felt this motivation inside me. Others asked me sometimes about this power that keeps me going, the power that keeps me up even when the waves sweep me down and if I fall it makes me stand again and go on. I didn't know what it was then, but now it's obvious: it's the faith I receive from God, and had received even before I knew about him. In my point of view, my life has chapters, which I had to reach and successfully overcome. During my journey I needed to find the path which God chose for me. Of course, this wasn't always the smoothest path to take. However, God gives opportunities, talents, and gifts, and with these every single chapter is passable. It is my decision to live with what God gave me or not.

*Your family is a blessing as well. You can hear a lot of Roma families not supporting the education of their children, or sometimes getting in the way of their mental growth.*

That is why I stressed the importance of the family so much. For a Roma child, everything depends on the attitude of the family. If they are supportive, it can give a boost that can help to overcome even financial issues, but if the child lacks this support, the setback is so great that these children almost never break out from where they live. It would be important for professionals to find a way, a method, that can cure the mental state that these families are currently living in. We should be able to explain to them the importance of learning. Here's where people like me come in. Maybe they'll believe us, believe that it is possible to make it even in a harsh environment. They can't tell me that it's easy for me to say that I had it easy growing up.

*Wealth of the parents doesn't guarantee success. Many children, coming from wealthy families end up clueless, unable to move on.*

These questions usually come up connected to Roma, but actually you don't need to be a Gypsy to mess up your life. Yes, it's a fact that most of the Roma children start at a disadvantage, but your nationality or your financial background make no difference if you have no will or no purpose – you will not be able to take advantage of the opportunities you receive from God.

*The responsibility of the family and the individual is obvious. In this case, what can society do?*

Public life and the media are showing more and more negative examples to young Roma, showing that being a Roma is living a life that is miserable, hopeless, a life without opportunities, and full of crime. On the other hand, they rarely meet any positive examples. These are never found in the news or in political speeches.

From these experiences, the kids conclude that trying to continue studying, trying to work, is all useless because there is no chance, they'll just be rejected and discriminated against. There is no chance to break out, so why would you even try to do so? You shouldn't blindly believe everything the media or the politicians say. They all bend the truth to fit their own purpose. Their doings are unbelievably harmful, because they will not only effect the generation growing up now, but the next ones will also be harmed by this attitude passed on from generation to generation. These two sources often shatter the dreams of many Roma children. So many give up even before stepping on the first step of the path that takes us up. To these kids, I say, "Guys! Don't let them shatter your dreams! Dare to plan ahead, and never waver, whatever happens," because even though some Gypsies fit the given descriptions, you should never generalize. Just as in biology you can't say that based on one sample the results of the test will show up for sure with all the other samples. The same way I can't say that what is in one part of the country will surely be in other parts, in other villages or cities, because like all the other societies, the Hungarian Roma society isn't really what you could call homogeneous.

*As we talk I feel like there are a lot of responsibilities, but it is all decided in your head.*

Breaking out is mostly a battle with yourself. Firstly, you must destroy the negative self-image that you've created based on all the negativity coming from your family, your surroundings, and the media. You must believe that you are capable of more, that you can move mountains, and if you believe it, you'll be able to do it.

*When was your first encounter with God?*

In the kindergarten in Karcag, thanks to the wonderful Miss Julika. In our room, there was a painting of a little girl and Jesus on the wall. On this picture

the little girl was holding a teddy bear, which the Master was asking for. The little girl did not know that behind Jesus there was a bear much larger than hers, which she would receive in exchange. Every afternoon, we would sit under the picture and listened to a Bible story.

*When did you give your teddy bear to Jesus?*

Two years ago, after a service held by Reverend *József Tóth*. Because of my parents, I was baptized and I never doubted the existence of God, but I had no idea how to approach him. Then here, at this service, something switched and I felt like I needed this, because without it I would be the same as before. I did not want to be the same as before when I could be much more.

*Much more?*

After I understood myself, I could get rid of qualities I could never shake off. For example, I understood what unconditional love is, understood what it means to forgive or how to ask for forgiveness. These are not as easy as many think. Even with twenty-seven years behind me, I'm still on the path to learn these things. As the Bible says, the most important thing is love, and if this love starts to fill your life, you'll see everything in a different light. I understood that my problems are nothing compared to the problems of others. They aren't even real problems, just minor obstacles I need to get over.

*You've mentioned your dreams. What are these?*

As a child I dreamed of accomplishing something that will make me famous, and everyone will be proud. I think I've accomplished this with the *Golden Headband* award of the Roma Press.

*Fame? Isn't this too ambitious?*

I didn't want to become a celebrity. I wanted to be known in a way that when people think about me, they'll say that this man has done something with his life and he did not do it for himself, but for others. I've been interviewed a lot since I received the award, and I like the attention, but I'm trying to stay cautious in preventing it getting to me – I'm trying to stay humble and show myself, and others, that my accomplishments are not my doing, but the gifts of God.

*Did you dream of anything else?*

I still dream of travelling to America. I'm amazed by the positive view of the people over there. They see the world differently from the Hungarians, who only notice the bad things. We are a pessimistic nation. I see in my American friends that, despite the hardships, they try to bring out the best, the most, in every situation. They work with their heart and soul, even if success is not for sure. I've decided that, someday, I will go there to work and gather experience. I'd like to apply for a scholarship and continue my research there.

*Mouth cancer is your current research area. What have you accomplished so far?*

I've been a part of many research programs, for example, one where we made therapeutic antibodies. Now I deal with mouth cancer. We search for biomarkers in human saliva that can help us manifest the illness in an early stage. If we succeed, people will have a bigger chance to survive. It would also be important because we are the world's first in deaths from oral cancer. This is caused by smoking and the high rates at which we consume alcohol and salt. It is also one of my dreams to save lives thanks to my research.



SZABINA  
SZTOJKA



# Together, in Community

Is it worth it, if you already have your diploma, you speak different languages, and you are a valued member of a congregation, to reveal your background and possibly have all that change? Is it possible in Hungary today for Roma and non-Roma to worship God together in community while living out both of their cultures? This is what we talked about with seminary student Sztojka Szabina.

*You have language certificates both in English and Italian and you are attending your second university while working at the Reformed Roma Mission. From what kind of family background did this journey start?*

I am a Gypsy from my father's side. He comes from a traditional Roma horse-breeding family with thirteen children. I also have Romungro (Hungarian Roma) musicians and "Beás" Gypsies among my relatives. My grandmother, whom I loved deeply, was a typical "Csurari" lady from the town of Kalocsa, always wearing her skirt. My mother, who is not Roma herself, cared a lot about our schooling and she made sure that my sister and I received a proper education.

*What is memorable to you from the Gypsy heritage?*

The most important thing is a tight-knit family. We got together often and weren't jealous of each other. If anything happened in the family, everyone was there. It wasn't unheard of for a hundred relatives to show up for a baptism or to have sixty men at our house to sprinkle us girls on Easter (an Easter tradition in Hungary). It was important for our father that we didn't get our hair cut and we also knew that whenever a man visited our home we had to go back to our rooms.

*Was your family religious?*

I was baptized in a Catholic church before I was two months old so, “the curse wouldn’t harm me,” they say. We had pictures of saints on our walls and we even brought holy water home so no one would break in. I went to a Christian preschool just after we moved to a small house with two rooms in the town of Kiskunhalas from a single room with a kitchen where we lived before on the edge of the town. I was quite independent; I loved pre-school, so once I decided I would go on my own. When the teacher saw me I said, “Oops I left my mom at home!” I started to cry and said I’d go back and get her. I introduced the table blessing before meals at home and I even checked – eyes partly closed – to see if everyone was saying it. My mother wanted me to attend the music faculty in the primary school. During the admissions process they said I did very good but asked me if I could sing something different than songs about God. Do I know any folk songs? I answered no and told them that I only knew the song, “Jesus loves every little child” and I didn’t really understand what their problems with my favorite songs were.

*Where there any other Roma children in the primary school?*

I was the first Roma girl to go to this school. There I had an experience in my first year. It happened when I went into one of the classrooms where a girl was sitting at the piano. When I entered she turned around looked at me and said, “It’s smelly in here.” I left crying. I was a first grader and I didn’t understand what happened. After that, I did not want my father to pick me up after school even though I had a close relation with him. I did not introduce myself with my full name and I stopped using my family name because it made my ethnicity obvious. I did not go out in the sun so my skin wouldn’t get any darker. When we started to have integrated school things just got worse. The

majority and the Gypsies where equally afraid and this led to aggression. I am now ashamed about this, but at that time I tried to avoid other Gypsy children. When my cousin started to attend the school I acted as if I didn't know him. During my teenage years I started to wear strange clothes. I wore steel toe boots and shirts with 666 written all over it. I was laughed at by my relatives. I just wanted to do things Gypsies didn't.

*During this time were your studies affected? Weren't you influenced by bad company that comes with dressing that way?*

Studying was easy for me. I got a mentor in upper class, and even a small amount of money, thanks to a scholarship program which helps disadvantaged children. I got along very well with my Hungarian teacher, she was the one who taught me the love for books and helped me join the student press and the reading club. Pastor *Pál Bödecs* and his wife *Hajnalka* invited me to join the Reformed high school. I was accepted. I wasn't really interested in religious studies, but Pastor *János Berze* visited us once at home so he could invite me to the English Bible camp. He kept talking and talking and my mother got nervous about the lunch she was making and what if it gets burnt. So to get it over with, she agreed that I would go. The British leaders shared their testimony and told us that Jesus gave his life for us. "Why didn't I know about this before?" I thought. I cried. It was a true conversion moment. I loved the English language, and I finally was in an environment where my skin color was not an issue. I was fifteen and I joined the youth group of the church and even started to organize camps.

*How did the Reformed people relate to you?*

I never felt like, neither in school, nor in the congregation, that I was any different. Maybe it was thanks to the very fact that I was in high school, I be-

came integrated there but I don't think this was the real reason. They simply treated me equally; they looked at me the same way they did to others. A close, heart-felt youth community was formed where anyone could talk freely about their situation and sometimes I really needed that.

*You seem quite comfortable in international environments. You are the soul and the translator of international conferences. How did you gain this experience and fluency in languages?*

I always liked languages. I enjoy being in international environment because it doesn't matter what culture you are coming from. This is why I majored in International Studies in Szeged. A girl once told me in one of the summer camps that she did voluntary work for a year in England. So I decided I'll go as soon as I can. Before I started the university I went to London for a year. Here I worked in a day center where we helped homeless, injured, elderly, refugee, and trafficked women. They came for advice sessions and we helped them with their papers and to find jobs. We had, for example, jewelry making workshops because many of the women were abused or raped in the past and we tried to empower them to find again the femininity in them which they have lost. We tried to help them find and keep the values in their culture and in themselves. This was the place where I could face and process the question of identity which I've always struggled with.

*Where did they think you were from?*

They thought I was Libyan. I was so happy during this year even though it was a challenging work. I only got to understand the real reason behind my happiness when *Martin Johnstone*, a Scottish pastor, visited Hungary and, based on Matthew 25:40, said, "*Jesus is not taken to the poor, by us, but is found amongst them.*" Through these women I met Jesus every day.

*What is your opinion on your life so far – as a half Gypsy, half Hungarian intellectual?*

I don't think I experienced or carried less than someone who is fully Gypsy. I consider myself to be fully Hungarian and fully Gypsy. While being abroad, I was always proud to be Hungarian – I know and love the Hungarian history and culture, and call it my own.

*How did you feel when you only heard about Hungarian culture and history, and nothing about Gypsy culture, in school?*

I didn't notice this then. Only now that I attend lectures and meet people who know the story of Gypsy people do I realize how much there is to know.

*Didn't you seek links with Roma intellectuals and Roma Christians?*

I never thought about it. Once I heard about the *Amaro Del Roma* music group, but I couldn't go to their concerts. I checked them on the internet and saw that they are Christian Gypsies. "Oh," I said to myself, "are there Christian Gypsies?" It was funny because it didn't even cross my mind that I am one as well. Their music, the rhythm they play, was the way I grew up. Once, my church in Kiskunhalas asked me to share my testimony with the community. This was the first time in front of my congregation when I stated the thing that of course they already knew: that I am Roma. God showed me the value of it and that I can be proud of being Roma and I also know that He would like to use me. It was hard to talk about this. I felt like I was naked.

*How did you join the Roma mission?*

The Reformed Church took over the school I attended as a child and invited Rev. *Eszter Dani* to talk about her experience with the Roma Mission in

Transcarpathia and help the congregation think about the responsibility we took on with a school where many Roma children are studying. We were asked how we would approach a Roma community and I shared my ideas. Eszter complimented me and asked me if I'm Roma myself. Afterwards we went to the Gypsy neighborhood to a house where a Bible study was held. I enjoyed it and was surprised that there was something like this in Kiskunhalas. Later Eszter Dani invited me to workshops about forming the Roma Mission concept of the Reformed Church and I've been working as her colleague since then. At the Starpoint Reformed Youth Festival in 2013 we had a group of young Gypsies. There I got to meet Gypsy youngsters who were Christian and were attending university. I felt like finally I could be among people who have similar values but can still understand the hardships I had, like when you need to send home your scholarship or when your studies can't be supported and you need to work more than your classmates. But I also saw the positive side and realized how we could form bonds more easily and how we were more spontaneous.

*What is your family's opinion on your life now, especially as your mother really encouraged you to study?*

My father thinks that now that I've studied for three years in Szeged and I only have my thesis and final exam left, I should go home and stay with the family. He doesn't understand why I would start theology and stay in school for another six years but still end up with a job that doesn't make me rich.

*Why did you decide to start the seminary?*

In Szeged I was part of the university church's leadership and I led the Alpha course, which has a special place in my heart. I realized how much I wanted to take part in the life of the congregation and I found my gifts I received

from God and I cannot leave them unused. “What does God want from me?” I asked. Then, at a difficult period of my life, I decided to apply to seminary. I received the following verse from Romans 10:14, “*How then can they call on the one they have not believed in?*” I thought of the Gypsies.

*So you interpreted your calling for Gypsies.*

I talked about this in my initial entrance process because they asked me what I would do if I ended up in a Hungarian congregation. I answered that everything would remain as it is, because I currently go to a Hungarian congregation and have Hungarian friends and I would love it there as well. But the place where I could really see and find myself is an international congregation where you can find Gypsies, Hungarians, or Africans and have all cultures represented. My dream is to study in South Africa for a while because they have experience in worshipping God with a mixture of different cultures. We should see how we can do that here at home as well.

*Now that you have experience in the Reformed church, do you think this is possible?*

I’ve thought about this a lot. I believe that there is a great opportunity for the Gypsies to serve the wider non-Roma population. If committed Roma and non-Roma Christians could form a welcoming community where everyone could experience the freedom of being themselves and could express all the things God created them for, then we could experience a different worship together given to us by the Spirit of God.

TEXT: KRISZTA NASZADI / PHOTO: ANDRÁS DIMÉNY



RUSZLÁN  
JANKOVSZKI



# We Want to Praise the Lord in Our Own Way

The Amaro Del ("Our God" in Romani) music group started preaching the living Word among the Roma fifteen years ago. They say that a lot of Roma lives have changed since then. They come from the Gypsy settlement in Munkács (Ukraine), or as they call it, "the camp". About seven thousand Roma live in the settlement. It has a several hundred member Pentecostal church where the band sings songs to praise God. The boundaries between Gypsies and non-Gypsies disappeared when they played at the Starpoint Reformed Youth Festival in Hungary. We talked to Ruszlán Jankovszki, the band's singer-guitarist.

*How did your music carrier start?*

We started going to the congregation in the camp, then visited other Gypsy communities to spread the Word and testify what we believe in. As the years passed, this ministry started to slowly evolve and reached the point where we were visiting congregations and holding concerts as a band. Then we recorded our songs and now we praise the Lord in this musical form.

*How do you write your lyrics?*

We have a lot of our own songs, but we also do covers of songs from other Roma congregations. We get together to come up with a new song or someone already has a tune and we write lyrics to match it. Or we simply use Bible verses, write music for them and add words if necessary.

*How do you decide what language to use?*

It depends on the audience. We sing in Hungarian or if we go to a place where the majority speaks Romani, then we sing more songs written in that language. If we go to Russian or Ukrainian communities, we'll sing more in those languages. But if needed, we can even sing in English.

*For whom do you write your songs?*

The Romani expression “Amaro Del” means “Our God”. We sing about God, about his deeds, about his Word, and about our own lives. With our songs, we tell the audience what God has done to us and how we became better people. We try to praise the Lord with our songs, and while we're at it try to mix in our own style.

*Why was it important for you to come to Hungary, to the Starpoint Festival for a second time?*

There are young people from Transcarpathia who have come from Reformed congregations. They are a good reason for us to come. We have new songs of our own, and ones we have re-written. We've brought some more dynamic, more Gypsy-like songs because, after all, this is a youth gathering.

*So what does the line-up of the band look like?*

Our current line-up consists of *Tibor Virág* on vocals, *Sándor Tejfel* on keyboard, *Tibor Kotlár* on drums, and I sing and play guitar.

*Have you been playing music all of your lives?*

We weren't born with instruments in our hands, but we all love music. We aren't educated musicians so we can't read music. We play by ear. Our drummer is the exception; he's lived his whole life playing music.

*Are there any musicians in your family?*

My grandfather was a musician. He played the dulcimer and the clarinet.

*So you could say music is in your blood.*

I don't know, but it must be connected to genetics somehow. Amongst Roma people, almost everyone has a knack for music. This might be a talent from God...

*In Transcarpathia, do you use Gypsy or Roma?*

It doesn't matter. Of course if someone calls me a Gypsy, saying the word harshly and full of hatred, I won't like it. At home, in Transcarpathia, we have no problems with this. We've always used the word "Gypsy" to identify ourselves.

*You also hold devotions at Starpoint. What's the difference between giving a performance and leading a devotion?*

The purpose of our concerts isn't just the music, or to entertain the crowd. Our goal is for the people to find God. At our concerts you can always hear God's Word and we give testimonies between songs. Sometimes we read from the Bible and share our own stories. This is our motivation: for God to be praised and for his kingdom to grow through us.

*What's your message to the youth at Starpoint?*

First of all, I would like to ask them to pray for Ukraine. Secondly, I'd like to tell them that the Lord is near. It is hard for young people to notice Him in the busy world today because so many things demand their attention. I'd like to tell them not to let their focus slip from what matters, from Jesus.

A black and white portrait of a man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard, looking slightly to the left. The background is blurred. A circular graphic with a white border and a grey fill is positioned in the lower-left corner, containing the name 'TIBOR BALOGH' in a serif font.

TIBOR  
BALOGH

# From the Attic of a Foster Home to the Art Galleries

God took care of me by giving me the joy of creating, so painting was an adventure to me, rather than being work or a duty – explained Tibor Balogh, a graphic artist, who was the first Roma graphic arts student to attend the Hungarian University of Arts. He thinks that everyone has the opportunity to recognize the task and responsibility given to him by God.

*We are at your home, which is your gallery as well, surrounded by tons of paintings and graphics, some of them have come back not long ago from an exhibition. What was the significance of this exhibition held at the Hungarian Academy of Arts, in terms of your career?*

This exhibition was a milestone, not just for me, but for the art group I am a part of, consisting of mostly Roma. The fact that we got into the place, that symbolizes the peak of Hungarian arts, means that Roma art has the right to exist. It means that our work has an audience in Hungary. This can encourage every Gypsy.

*Wasn't this always obvious? Are the Roma starting to find their place in the world of arts?*

In my opinion, yes. At the same time, I'd like to emphasize that quality comes first. We shouldn't get opportunities because we are Roma, and we shouldn't think that we should be treated better. So, we shouldn't abuse our ancestry or our situation. We should do our jobs with all our heart, wherever

our talents lead us, and then we can accept the reward of our hard work and the talents will carve a path to the top.

*Your group members call themselves free-pressionists. What does this word game, a play on impressionism, mean?*

The one who came up with this name was *Kálmán Káli-Horváth*. We grew up together; we've been creating together since we were children. I wasn't a big fan of his idea at first, because I thought we didn't need this euphonious name just for the effect. We had plenty of roots to give us a firm substructure. But then I gave in: why shouldn't we grab this opportunity, why shouldn't we use this name? Then afterwards we and our audience can live up to it. I like Kálmán's courage, I myself am a bit more conservative. I think that we shouldn't play with words, but rather do our jobs quietly. On the other hand, I admit, that low self-esteem is one of the greatest weakness of Roma. They are afraid to think big, to dream big. They don't believe they can become a good plasterer, a good teacher, a good painter, a good anything. They are crippled by their own self-pity, and because of this they always fall short. This is what my graphic, *Power Relationships*<sup>1</sup>, is about. Kálmán is also Roma, but he has the ability to set the bar a bit higher.

*So what exactly, does your name mean?*

I feel like we are closer to renaissance, than to impressionism. After all, while growing up, our main influence came from this art historical era. We read, and copied albums, and probably even today we hold on to these roots. Free-pressionists refers to the desire for the opportunity of free creating – a creation that is without pressure and is not bound by trends. The fact is that all

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<sup>1</sup>On page 132.

of us came from state care, and that must have had an influence on our lives and desires. In my opinion, this is the root of our desire for freedom: we had enough of the pressure, of the expectations, enough of others controlling our life. Be free, take a deep breath, and work under this influence. But I do not want to pity ourselves, because to us art means much more than our problems. And we obviously have other things in common – not only our childhood – that influences our work. True, we have wounds or things that hurt, but we must bring ourselves to a state where there are no chains to tie us down.

*You mentioned state care. Where do the Free-pressionists come from?*

We've been creating with Kálmán Káli-Horváth and Sándor Kiss since we were children. Mariann Borkó, Kálmán's wife, joined later. The foster home in Berkesz was a huge mile stone in our lives. We had a great arts teacher there when we were still in elementary school, the late *Mr. Attila Sárosi*. Only when I was at the Hungarian University of Arts did I realize that he taught us things others only hear about in college. We had a lot of good educators and teachers at that time – this is when my talent was discovered. Then we got scattered for a little while, and for the next four years I got my education in two different schools, my first year at Tiszadob and the rest in Pétervására. The second place turned out to be a place full of exciting experiences. It was a smaller home and this meant that I received more attention. I was member of the art club and even had a chance to go to an art camp where I met all sorts of art forms and different artists. It became a defining experience to me.

*When did you meet your friends again?*

In the last (eighth) year of primary school, I was asked what I'd like to be. I said I wanted to become a graphic artist. So I ended up in Tiszadob in a voca-

tional school. I became a painter... i.e a painter of rooms. Here I met with my friends again. With them and some others we started a self-educational group in the attic of the foster home. We had our own library, we viewed and analyzed pictures, and we even did some experiments. I can remember when we copied the Madonna of Esterházy by Raffaello. Later, when I got the chance to see the original at the National Museum of Arts, I was surprised by how similar the size and the technique I used was, compared to the original.

*Why did you choose this painting?*

Almost all of my copies were of religious portrayals. I felt like these pictures show the essence of what it means to be human. They explain why we are born to this world.

*This sounds like an instinctive choice. When did you consciously start with religious pictures?*

I realized during the years at university that I was controlled by my instincts, but in the world of an artist, consciousness is also needed beyond the instincts. The harmony of these two is crucial in the journey of becoming an artist. I started to work on creating a balance between these two things. Of course the scale will tip from time to time, but this is not necessarily a problem, if I can control it, if I know what a certain state of mind means and what effects it can have. I continued copying paintings for the first two years of university, but during the third year I was told to start working on my own. It was suggested that I start to read more, to draw illustrations. I was told to view the details instead of the whole picture. This was necessary because, like the Renaissance, I was interested in the whole. I needed to overcome this as well. I needed to shake off the ropes that tied me down, leave the comfort behind,



and find worth in more modern perspectives. I needed to realize that mine is not the only reality and that I must to mold my ideas together with the things I've learned.

*Is this how you also started to live with God, not instinctively but consciously?*

I still needed some time for that. After finishing at university, I did nothing for two years – I didn't have any motivation to create. I felt like I needed to let the things in my head sort themselves out. My first work that summed things up, with which I wanted to express something, was *The Gypsy Woman's Dance with the Angel*.<sup>2</sup> It was inspired by Jacob's fight with the angel, a work of Lajos Szalay. In this work, besides God, me being a Gypsy also appears. With it I expressed not only myself, but the Gypsy people as well. An elderly Gypsy lady invites the angel to dance. I tried to create equality in the portrayal, and even though the Gypsy lady is full of pride, even though she could grab the upper hand, she doesn't take it, because she recognizes the angel as the messenger of God. She asks for God's help for her people. As the Gypsy anthem says: "God have mercy on us / Help us not to suffer more". The purpose of the picture is to make people think, and to create the possibility of discussing our thoughts on the story with others.

*It seems as if there's some shyness besides the pride on the Gypsy lady's face. The face of the angel looks like he has bowed down his head and maybe even his knees.*

He bows his head as he listens to her. After all, he's a messenger of a God bowing down. He is God turning towards a human and human turning towards God, a communication, a talk, a prayer – this is also brought up in the picture and this is a universal question, no longer something only concerning Gypsies.

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<sup>2</sup> Inside front cover

*You even used the same color for the face of the lady and the angel. This could suggest that the angel himself becomes a Gypsy on the picture.*

I've never thought about that, but it's possible. I've heard people say that the lady is Mary. This is also an interesting idea. My goal with this picture was for everyone to come up with their own idea, to think more and ask questions. I just want to help, to show the way, but let everyone decide how they would like to walk on the path. Everyone can decide what the picture means to them, what it has to say.

*You've told us about your childhood, but not how it all started. Do you know your parents?*

I don't want any pity, but when I tell my story it usually evokes this reaction. I spent the first three months of my life in Tiszakórod, near the Ukrainian border. Everything I know from this period of my life, or to be more exact, of my mother, I know from the documents at the office of child care. All of these documents are full of terrible things: for example, she put on a compress so that she wouldn't have any milk and she did not get the free baby-food either. She was labeled as unable to raise children and I was taken to a foster home. I've thought a lot about the social worker who wrote these reports. I wonder how he viewed this problem in 1975. I've come to believe that, even though his assumptions were correct, he wasn't fully unprejudiced. I feel like he lacked the longing to help because I can't read a single word about how this poor lady could be helped to get her child back and how she could be supported in achieving this. They had no hope for her, they had no intention of changing her point of view or her choice. I would have expected more kindness, more help, from a social worker, not this coldness. This makes me sad a bit.

*Have you met your mother again, yet?*

I knew nothing about her throughout my childhood. And what you don't know can't hurt you – according to the saying. But of course it's a bit more complicated than that because a child needs his parents. So maybe what I could say that her absence didn't consciously hurt. I was a young adult when I met her, because I wanted to know who my mother was. I went to Tizsakóród with the head-master of the foster home in Tizadob.

*What happened?*

Many may think that something like this would be a story for the headlines – a perfect scene for a reality show – full of emotions, but actually nothing happened, just as I expected. I had no illusions so I wasn't let down. I had been looking forward to meeting her, but I had no false pictures of my mother.

*How would you describe her?*

Just picture a simple, alcoholic, Gypsy woman at the edge of the village, living in a small house built in communist times for the poor, now in ruins, with her lover. After exchanging kisses, she sent us to one of the inner rooms, while she went to the kitchen for a while. Maybe she was afraid to come in, maybe she thought I was going to criticize her actions. Of course I had nothing like that in mind. I couldn't really do anything with her, she was obviously drunk. We just sat there, sometimes talking a few words. I asked her about my father, but she only said he's a half-wit who is either in Budapest or in jail. We asked if she understands what it means that I'm attending a university, or if she was proud. She didn't understand and wasn't proud at all. But I'd like to emphasize that the reason of my visit wasn't to give or to get love. It was to see and understand where I come from, who I am. We finished in about forty-five minutes and I haven't seen her since.

*Has it ever crossed your mind that it might be better this way?*

Everything needed to happen this way, because everything has a purpose. This is how God uses me. I made my way to the university, and God gifted me with instinctiveness and also consciousness and gave me responsibility and a duty. He took care of me by giving me the love of creating. This way, when others went stealing, or to break into a house, I didn't join them because the arts were way more entertaining to me.

*Did the others have no duty, no responsibility?*

Me continuing my studies, finishing university, becoming an artist isn't due to me, and it isn't something unique either. It's all thanks to me recognizing and fulfilling the duty I received. A good laborer or a good mother are the same as a good artist. They are all useful members of our society. No one is born to become a criminal, but it helps to have the right kind of teachers and adults at the right time to guide us on our way.

*So are the bad choices actually not the responsibility of the children, but rather their teachers'?*

The cooperation of the children is also essential in this situation. Without it the struggles, the goodwill and good deeds of the teachers are almost futile. Though I think they are not in vain. All the kindness of the teachers must have an effect at some point. *When* these good memories come to the surface is a different question. It might be that it will only happen after three robberies and fifteen years of jail. This is why it is important for the teachers to deal with the children with a Christian attitude. If a turning point comes in the child's life, they will remember what they received from the teachers and will more probably understand the gospel and find God.

*At a youth conference you said that you had had struggles with your Gypsy ancestry. What did you mean?*

I never had a problem with the color of my skin, I was never ashamed of my ancestry. The struggles I mentioned were connected to me being an artist. While searching for my path I needed to face that getting to know my roots is essential in becoming an artist. Of course I don't need to add me being a Gypsy to every picture, but I need to show it sometimes. Because of this I needed to learn a lot of the Roma culture, because even though I was born a Gypsy I wasn't raised in a Gypsy family. Not only did I have to get to know this culture, all the beauties and dark sides of it, but I needed to understand it, to make it my own. Otherwise I would only be a false Gypsy. I lived with other Roma artists, went to Roma art camps, worked at the Gypsy House of the Capital, camped with Roma children, got to know them, got to talk to them. I feel like I more or less succeeded in compensating my disadvantages in this area. So I wanted to help the Roma, and I tried to find ways to do this as an artist. My first chance to help came with the picture I've mentioned: *The Gypsy Woman's Dance with the Angel*.

*What are you currently working on?*

I am a member of the Lutheran Church in Pesterzsébet and, thanks to the sermons, the gospel is filling me more and more and giving me inspiration for my art. I've started to think more about creation, this is where I find themes.

*What is creation?*

I do not know what creation is and I do not think we really need to know, but as an artist I still want to show it and bring the audience closer to it. I am concerned about the dots and lines, so during the creative process I take things apart to the individual elements. On the one hand it is theology, on the other

it is also education, because we tend to see only the details or only the whole picture, while both are equally important in order to come up with the correct judgement. Or if we think about connecting two dots with a line, we create evidence of our momentary emotions, this is also part of creation. Anyone can do this, which shows us that we are also capable of creation, because the dots and the line are details, and the picture in the end is the whole. In my current period I am more influenced by the abstract, because in my opinion I am closer to creation when I let the audience decide what the picture means and through this become a creator himself.

TEXT: SÁNDOR KISS / PHOTO: RICHÁRD KALOCSAI

A black and white portrait of a man with curly hair, wearing a white button-down shirt and a striped tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

KÁLMÁN  
KÁLI-  
HORVÁTH

# Flower amongst the Thorns

“I grabbed every sparkle of the abilities I got from God, as a drowning man grabs any small twig. Every stroke with the brush became my personal business,” says the performer and painter, known for his fine Hungarian language, who grew up in state care. We were at his small apartment in the eighth district of Budapest: easel, wide work desk, brushes and tubes of paint; there are pictures on the walls and on the floor. Kálmán Káli-Horváth showed us around the life he shares with his wife, Marianna Borkó, who is also an artist.

## The God-child

“A young, brown child, with curly hair is sitting at the edge of a void. There’s a flower in his hand: but it’s withering, but is verdant at the same time. On his head lays a vivid crown made of thorns. His eyes show no sadness, no accusation, only calmness. He accepts the World as it is. This picture is the mold of my childhood,” says Kálmán Káli-Horváth at the beginning of our conversation.

You can only understand him if you have seen the painting *God-child*<sup>1</sup>. The picture talks about hope.

“We are the children of God through Jesus. This gives us shelter, courage, comfort and responsibility. We could sort out many of our sickening thoughts if we could believe this,” says the artist, who comes from a foster home in North-east Hungary. It might not be a coincidence that he talks about the Heavenly Father: he realized at young age that he must let go of his family.

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<sup>1</sup> On page 2.



“When I was nine I spent the whole summer at home. It was a shocking experience. I got to know the life I was taken from. The misery. My parents were alcoholics and I lived day after day in complete despair. I never knew what I was going to eat the next day and had no hope for anything to get better the next day. I wouldn’t wish for anyone to feel as vulnerable as I felt there at the Gypsy camp. I was worried that I won’t be taken back to the children’s home.”

### That bad brush...

He was brought back, and everything changed.

“I realized that there is a place much worse than the institute, and that I don’t want to go back there. After that I always tried to be better. In the institute I met *Artúr Kálid* (now a well-known actor) who was a kid with curly hair just like mine. I felt like we had something in common. We were interested in poetry. I have always pronounced the words properly and was sensitive to how others pronounced words and often corrected them.”

Later, Kálmán won the national competition for nice speech, the Kazinczy-medal. He became known in 1996 at a talent show, where he recited poems by great Hungarian poets like *László Nagy*, *József Ratkó*, and *Attila József*. At that time, he already believed that his dreams could come true. Since that time, he has seen that the philosophy he borrowed from the famous Roma musician *Béla Szakcsi Lakatos* is accurate. According to him, you always need to be ready for opportunities. After performing in some smaller plays he was invited to national television as a reporter-announcer.

This talented child once dreamed of an acting carrier, but gave up on it because he saw no chance for himself.

“However, you could find a pencil and some paper anywhere and there was that awful watercolor you could get at that time, and a bad brush. I learned

how to paint with these. I still feel the advantages of this disadvantage, because I became a good watercolorist and learned how to draw with a pencil. This is a skill every painter must have. It's a blessing that I could find all this in that poor environment and could think of painting as a profession."

### The lamps

The life in the foster home didn't have the same effect on everyone. While some of the children from that time have by now become artists, others are on the streets or in jail.

"This life motivated me instead of making me feel hopeless. I wasn't satisfied with what was seemingly meant for me in this life. I always believed that I wasn't born to die. This is why my hardships made me stronger instead of knocking me down," says the artist.

"My kindergarten teacher, my other teachers, and my charismatic arts-history teacher also had a role in this," he admits. "I always found someone that shined like a lamp in great darkness. I always payed attention to what these people said. They were my base in this strange world. But I still see the impact of the institute," he reveals. "Besides the professional teachers, there were people from the village taking care of the children. They were harsh. Due to this brutal time, I still have wounds which God is healing for me."

### Get back what was lost

While we are talking to one another we have a look at another picture: *Mourning over the Loss of Paradise*<sup>2</sup> where we can clearly see the faces of three children.

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<sup>2</sup> Inside back cover

“The picture in the middle, titled *Admonition*, is the prohibition in paradise: do not eat from that tree... I translate the story of Eden as Jesus being the one God uses to talk to us. In my imagination, he appears here as a child and later when he comes to us he is also a child. It is no coincidence that he is on the tallest spot in the picture. If we look at him, we can become the children of God through him. It’s a huge power to live with this fact, but it also gives you responsibility. If you know how great your father is you don’t want to shame him.”

The basic commodity of the *Timeless Triptych*, which looks like it were at least a hundred years old, is mainly foam rubber wrapping material.

“If we can use natural materials for creating as we like, then we can use trash as well. We can get back some of our lost humanity the same way as we can get back some of our godlikeness with our salvation,” explains the artist.

### Freedom blessed with miracles

Kálmán Káli-Horváth is a founding member of the free-expressionists art-group.

“Our community is about more than growing up in state care and it’s more than drawing and painting together. We talk, we have discussions about art, we influence each other. What we do has characteristics and a new art philosophy is forming. We state that we are free and work under the influence of some sort of good pressure. This is why we use a dash in our name. One night this name popped up and left me no rest and I understood that it was a message from God. God created a group with a shiny name, out of people who are supposed to be at the edge of society. At first our modesty didn’t let us think this way, but I believe God sees us this way. It’s daring, but the name we received helps recognize the right path to follow.”

### The voice

When he paints he is always excited, whether he will be able to recognize and accept the guidance from God, because that's how miracles happen: something emerges that is valuable for humanity. Next to the sketches lies his Bible. He shows one of his favorite parts: Isaiah 53, which talks about the Savior.

“God spoke to me in my childhood, although I did not know back then that it was him. I couldn't believe someone was talking to me out of nowhere. During that summer when I went home, I was wandering in the wild and at a place where no one else was I could hear someone calling my name. When they took me back to the children's home I could hear it again. God was with me in these hard times, and wanted me to know that I'm his child. Him helping me through my hardships is a guarantee for my future.”

### The good news of brotherly love

“The only way to preach the gospel among the Roma is with unconditional love,” he emphasizes.

“You cannot reach the Gypsies if they feel like the missionaries think that they are better and come to them with an attitude saying ‘I'll fix you, I'll clean the dust off your clothes because you're not good enough.’ No, you must face the Gypsies saying you are good the way you are, you are already good enough and are precious to me. The best way to be a community is to set a table and have a meal together. As long as someone is not willing to do that, he or she won't be recognized as a missionary in our eyes. Until then, the church will be no more than a place where the Roma can get donations in exchange for acting like a Christian. In order to bring Roma closer to God the missionary must see them as brothers. This is the only way he can communicate to them the good

news. He can't say 'Here is the wrath of God, come to him or you will parish.' This method doesn't work in evangelizing the Gypsies."

The same is true for social integration. In the past, Kálmán worked as senior advisor of the Ministry of Human Resources of the Hungarian government.

"If the State Secretary for Social Inclusion would not have been *Zoltán Balogh* at that time, I don't think I would have offered to help to start a new kind of approach towards Roma instead of the former paternal attitude so that we, the Gypsies, can feel that we can and must also participate. I saw that finally a non-Gypsy man, with political influence, takes this matter seriously. If he can risk his political career, then I cannot hide, I thought. I feel honored, because Zoltán Balogh – who is also a Reformed pastor – listened to my opinion and several things changed under his ministry."

Kálmán thinks that the church should also turn to the Gypsies.

"The church and its members should pay more attention to the people living in the same country with whom they share a common fate. But it seems like we Gypsies aren't interesting enough for them to show us God's love, even though this could strengthen Hungarian unity. We should not believe that leaving hundreds of thousands of people in misery won't bring our culture, in a social and moral sense, to ruins. You can't be a good Christian while there are crowds outside your house in misery. God will haul us up for this."

His words are the final touches on the picture I can finally see. The picture, hardest to paint: of the Father, who was missing, even though He has always been there, who addresses, and gives future, power, and responsibility.

"A life with God is truly exciting," says the child of God with a smile.

And I know he is waiting for the miracle.



ZSOLT  
JÓNÁS

# Deposited Love

He's the most helpful person I've ever met. Once when he heard from a participant of a conference that he is from a village where the Roma want to praise the Lord with music but have no instruments, he returned home without his guitar. Zsolt Jónás this 34-year-old religious education teacher, coming from a Gypsy family with many children, didn't receive his diploma from the skies. Even today, he works hard in more than one job as both an RE teacher and as an educator in different places around Budapest. In his written testimony, he says that he's the spiritual heir of his Wallenberg prized godfather in his soul.

## I have a dream

My family moved to the ninth district (a poor part) of Budapest in the early nineties. Once, a nice white-bearded man appeared at our house, but my parents said, "He's a Gadge [non-Roma], we won't let you go out with him!" Against all their prohibitions, I grew close to this man and followed him wherever he went. Later, he was asked by my parents to become my godfather. This Gadge man was *Géza Orián*, who continued to fulfill his duties as my godfather – even after being robbed by my parents. When I got older he always quoted *Martin Luther King's* "I have a dream" speech. This is why I was brave enough to dream big and be the first one in my family to sign up for high school.

### **If you study so much, you'll go dumb**

From Budapest we moved to Tarnazsadány, a small village in the north, with my parents and, after I finished elementary school, I got accepted to the agricultural vocational school in a nearby town, Gyöngyös. All I heard from around me, was, “If you study so much, you’ll go dumb!” A pair of pants, a pair of socks, and a shirt was all I had. When, after the weekend, other parents sent their children back to school loaded with stuff, my backpack was empty – but I could be happy about the five hundred forints my godfather left in deposit with the secretary every week. While others could easily learn everything in the hours meant for studying, and then played outside in the afternoon, I often stayed up till midnight rehearsing English words and mathematical formulas.

### **I started to read the Bible and play the guitar**

Not much later when my godfather was invited to a congregation to speak about his missionary work among the Gypsy community, he brought me along. As his helper, I recited a poem before the service. My godfather introduced me to a retired pastor who lived in Gyöngyös. One day she came to my school, shook my hand, and said that I was expected at the youth Bible study at five. I showed up. The other high school students and the college juniors instantly accepted me. I got to know Christian youth songs and started playing guitar. With my first chords, I could play my favorite songs. I invited one of my friends and we both ended up joining the group. When I started to reading the Bible, I started to wonder how I could make sure Jesus finds a place in my heart. After my first steps came many decisions that I made with his help. I graduated from high school and became a teacher of primary school children and a religious education teacher.



**"In order to be loved, you must be the first one to love!"**

I got to know my mother at the age of eight – up until then I was raised by my grandparents. It always felt like mom loved me the least among her eleven children. I always longed for her love, her hugs, but all I received was hurt and scolding. The same went for my foster father. The absence of love raised a wall between us. I recognized prayer to be my weapon from God. I begged for the wall between me and my parents to fall down, for them to accept and love me as a child of their own. While praying, I heard a voice, deep down in my heart that told me, "In order to be loved, you must be the first one to love!" God gave me the strength, and the love, for me to hug my mother. I talked about Jesus to my foster father. One time, when we were talking, he shouted, "There is a God!" He claims that he heard a voice saying, "Don't believe the kid, there is no God." Since then he has accepted Jesus as his savior. The faith and love of God have found their way to his heart and to the life of my mother.

**I received the mission of my godfather as his heritage**

I believe, and I know, that the mission lead by my godfather for twenty years is my heritage. At the moment, I'm doing missionary work in several places among Roma children and adults. In Csepel, I teach religion in more than one school. I also work as an educator at a dormitory of a grad school. It wasn't always easy – I had my shares of obstacles, and bumps, in my work life. Today, I'm no longer walking on this path alone; I received a partner from God, who loves, helps, guides, encourages, and bears me. Throughout our life together I have experienced countless times that the love of God is far beyond our imagination. I believe that I can be God's tool to help the understanding between Roma and the majority. As my godfather became a Gypsy, despite

being Hungarian, I believe that I can become a Hungarian, despite being a Gypsy, in order to fulfill the thoughts of Paul:

*“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some.” (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)*

TEXT: JÓNÁS ZSOLT – KRISZTA NASZÁDI / PHOTO: KRISZTIÁN KALOCSAI



RICHÁRD  
MÁRTON

# One Does not Need to Wear Size 41 Shoes when Their Foot is Size 39

He was reborn and became a preacher. He used to be a fighter, a criminal of the notorious eighth and ninth districts of Budapest. He was an active part of the city's nightlife. We talked to Richárd Márton, a pastor in the multiethnic "You and Me" community of Budapest Józsefváros Reformed Congregation, about his identity and his mission.

*I saw on the website of the church that you were labeled as a "Gypsy minister". Are you happy with this label?*

I have no problem with this phrase, but at first I am a Christian. My ancestry is only secondary. My Gypsy roots come from my mother's side. From my father's side, I count as a Croatian. I'm comfortable in these identities just as well as in the Hungarian one.

*What else is there to know about your family?*

My mother and her parents are all Calvinists and they come from a village in the North-East of Hungary. It is said that my great-grandfather was once a "vajda", a Gypsy-chief. They were considered wealthy – with a cow, land of their own, and a house with a toilet in the nineteen-fifties. My father comes from the South; he graduated from a vocational high-school and spoke more than one language. At the time, he was the head cook at the National Hotel in Budapest.

This is where he met my mother, who traveled from her village to Budapest every week to work.

*You once said that your interpretation of your identity is motivated by important theological and missiological considerations. Could you explain this?*

In my experience, when someone – who considers himself a Christian – takes priority in his ancestry, instead of Christianity, then his Christianity will sooner or later be suppressed by his culture. If this happens, then he will not decide according to the Word of God when he faces cross-roads in his life. In the Gypsy mission, and in my life as a pastor, I emphasize my Gypsy identity, but this can never come in front of my Christian consciousness.

*How did you end up amongst the underworld gangs?*

It all started when my parents divorced and I moved from the middle-class third district with my mother and siblings to the ninth district. Here I met young Gypsies and I found my true identity among them. It began to dawn on me before that I'm a Gypsy, but we did not talk about this at home and it meant nothing to me. My mother never forced the question, because she was afraid that I would end up among criminals. I ended up there anyway seeking answers to my identity questions, which no one answered at home. Here I found that being a Gypsy means being a criminal. Now my children are raised with a crystal clear self-image that shows that the two are not at all the same.

*And what happened to the Gypsy boy, who found his “identity”?*

When I turned twelve I did a lot of things: night life, parties, girls, crimes. In the neighborhood, your position was based on your ability to fight so I start-

ed doing combat sports. I was talented, I trained with National team athletes. I was preparing myself for the prospect of ending up in a jail. I was preparing to stand my ground even if that happened. I'm thankful to God that he gave me a new life.

*When and how did you become a Christian?*

I was about fifteen years old when, on our way home from a disco with my friends, we ran into some girls we knew. Since we had last met them they had become Christians. They shared the gospel with us and I learned that, even though I'm a sinner who is lost, God still loves me. He loves me so much that he gave his own son to be sacrificed for my sins. A new chapter began in my life. I heard the same voice I had heard as a child and it said, "This is what you've been searching for all your life!"

*What was this voice from your childhood?*

I had my first experience with God when I was almost six. I had an aunt who was unwell a lot and was in bed every time I visited her. Once she wasn't there anymore. This was my first encounter with death. I was shocked – as a child I thought it obvious that everyone will stay alive and will exist forever. On our way home I asked my mother about death and life, but she couldn't really answer my questions. After we got home I asked for permission to leave for the playground. As I was trying to cross the road I looked left, but then I heard a voice shouting at me three times with great power, saying, "You will never die!" I looked around, searching for the source of this voice. I was taken aback by the fact that I was alone. This experience burned into my memory.

*What happened after the testimony of the girls?*

I was confused, I wondered, “Have I gone mad?” I was sure of one thing, I couldn’t have hallucinated it. I did no drugs and drank no alcohol. It slowly became obvious to me who the voice was. I was facing an inner struggle. By that time, I had a name in the underworld: I was rich, I had a car, I dressed in clothing from the best stores – and now suddenly I needed to face what my friends, my acquaintances, would think about my “believer like” life. I needed to face the fact: if I become a Christian, I’ll lose everything I’ve accomplished so far, my rank, my recognition. At first I couldn’t accept all this.

*What did you believe before that?*

We always had a Bible at home and my mother read it every night. I used to stay with my Gypsy grandmother for a few weeks during the holidays and she prayed with me every night and read from the Bible. These nights left a deep mark in me, I can still remember them. My parents weren’t reborn Christians, but it was obvious to us that there is a God above. I never had atheist thoughts, quite the opposite, I was always interested. When my mother and her relatives went to church at Christmas I tagged along. Even when I started heading down the wrong path, I was still interested in what the pastors had to say; I hoped that I would get answers to my questions and I could get to understand God better.

*How did your search for answers change after hearing the “voice”?*

Among criminals, the search for God is a sign of weakness. We believe in God, but we will only commit ourselves to him when we get old. But when I heard the gospel, everything that was in my subconscious became conscious. I was practically executed by it, it made everything clear. I understood what I had been searching for all my life. The Master is calling you, follow! I under-

stood what the wealthy young man in Jesus's parable felt. I had my personal belongings like him. Mine was the income easily earned with my criminal lifestyle and the recognition of my friends.

*And when did you decide which path to head down?*

It took me three hard years. The gospel awoke my conscience; it started to hurt when I sinned – but I still tried to escape, still went on breaking into cars and pickpocketing, though it was getting harder to fight against my conscience. I was suffering. So I started to travel. I was searching for something. Now I know that I was searching for freedom from my conscience. The change in my life occurred two weeks after my eighteenth birthday. The last days felt like the suffering of a traveller, on the brink of death, in the desert. And after reaching a certain point, I could no longer resist. I reached the point where I decided to leave everything behind, step through this tight gate, and then I fell into the arms of Jesus. This irreversible move occurred on March 21, 1993. That day I took part in a Gospel service for the second time in my life. During the service, the preacher suddenly looked me in the eye and said a sentence, and at that instant I lived through the moment of my assurance. I was unbelievably happy, I was whooping, like a child. Instead of walking home from the congregational house, I leaped all the way. I didn't feel tired, all I felt was the joy that I had been freed from my sins.

*After you converted, you started going regularly to a congregation. Where did you belong?*

I was part of an independent Roma congregation for one and a half years, where the worship was in Romani, but after a while the community got torn apart. About that time I met the girls who helped me find the right path,



and was invited to their non-Gypsy congregation. I went there regularly for twelve years, but as the years passed, I disagreed with the way they tried to assimilate the Gypsies. I invited Gypsies to the congregation, but the community did not like how the relationship of the newcomers with me helped them find their identity, so we formed a new congregation in my living room. We prayed, we sang hymns, and we studied the Bible trying to understand what it has to tell us. I encouraged them that one does not need to wear size 41 shoes, when their foot size is 39. After we had outgrown the room, we rented a place in 2006. From the first moment I tried to prompt everyone to use the gifts we all had received in Christ. “What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up” (1 Corinthians 14:26). Everybody with a living faith must have an experience with God, or with their faith, which can be shared at the meeting. I didn’t connect ministering to one’s position, but rather to personal rebirth. Competition can easily rise (especially with Gypsies) where there is a position to reach. But when everyone serves freely, the competition ceases to exist. The community can control what a person says or does.

*Meanwhile you went to the Pentecostal Theological College. But your views are nearer to Calvinist theology. How did this happen?*

Thanks to my theological studies, I could sort out a lot of things and I found a wonderful new world, a source of countless miracles. I have continued studying since. Yes, my biblical views are mostly based on Reformed theology, maybe because once I myself experienced what “irresistible grace” is. After studying the Bible for a long time, I came to believe the five points of Calvin-

ism. Meanwhile, I agree more with adult baptism, though I am aware of the essence of child baptism based on covenant theology. It can have its benefits, if used correctly. Within biblical framework, I also acknowledge the Pentecostal view that emphasizes the importance of charisma.

*How did you end up in the You and Me community?*

I was invited by their pastor, *István Lakó*. He read my views on Gypsy mission in a sociological paper. He liked it and visited me. We realized that we have a lot in common.

*What are the most important aspects of Roma Mission?*

First you have to see that Roma are not a uniform mass. Individuals and groups are integrated to a different extent. And there are also people among them who are against integration, not to mention assimilation.

*What is your opinion on congregations, especially for Gypsies? What do you think is better in a biblical view: separate or joined worship?*

Naturally, among the truly reborn Christians, members of the *invisible* church, there cannot be and are no cultural barriers. On the other hand, the *visible* church consists of reborn and nominal Christians. The two circles meet, but they are still not the same. This can lead to conflicts based on cultural differences. It can cause great controversies in the church if non-reborn members react to a situation according to their cultural view, while others view the situation from a biblical perspective. And this is not even mentioning the misunderstanding of the Bible when someone interprets a cultural question as a biblical commandment. In my opinion, this is why mixed congregations have difficulties in working properly. So even while I say a congregation with mixed

ethnicities is biblical, I can't really think of any good examples. As I see it, the tension can be released if integration is not forced on the visible level, because the walls have long since fallen down between Gypsies and non Gypsies. Of course there are also differences in the invisible church, as you can read in Revelation 7:9, that although everyone is present in white clothes and with palm branches, John still sees, that, "standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb," the crowd is, "from every nation, tribe, people and language." The differences can come with difficulties, and for the sake of consensus, everyone needs to take back a little on their own culture in order to achieve the new life.

*What advice would you give a deliberately mixed – Roma, majority, and other cultures – congregation?*

In my opinion, in this field two mission strategies exist. First: everyone does their own work, amongst "their own people," and while doing so acts as a bridge towards the others in the congregation; they become more tolerant. The other option – and this is the highest level of the mission life – is that the one who serves becomes everything, for everyone. This means that he can switch back and forth between styles and cultures, and can speak more than one language, both verbally and nonverbally.

*What would your task be in a mission like this?*

I think of myself as a bridge between two groups. I understand both of them, and might even be able to transfer virtues to the Roma from the non-Gypsies, and possibly represent the Gypsies amongst the non-Gypsies in a way that they can be understood.

*What are your plans for the future?*

I am planning a series of seminars titled: *From inside the Gypsy mission*. I would like to give practical advice to people interested, or people already working, in the mission – regardless of denomination and without taboos. I would talk about things that happen every day with missionaries during their work. The church has been doing mission work towards the Gypsies, but the gap is still huge. For example, in pastor training this subject is rarely present and there is hardly any specialization for this field. My other plan is to start a Bible school based on Reformed creeds, expanded with training in Gypsy mission, and a course on charisma, gifts of the Spirit. The goal would be to have more reborn Gypsy people, with a stable identity and spiritual gifts, doing mission and evangelical work.

TEXT: VIRÁG ESZTER MAJSZAI / PHOTO: ANDRÁS DIMÉNY



ESZTER  
KONCZ

# I Must Go back to My People

A well dressed, lovely Roma lady gets out of a nice Jeep in front of the community house in Kecskemét. At the edge of the Roma neighborhood stands this renovated house, which awaits children and their mothers. Eszter Koncz, who is studying to become a religious education teacher, is one of the workers of the Pancsinelló Playgroup (Punchinello is a character in one of Max Lucado's stories). The project is run by the Reformed Congregation in Kecskemét, but, as she says, her boss is Jesus Christ. In our talk, we understood how she switched "owners," how she became Eszter, and how she got this fancy car.

*What happens in the Pancsinelló Playgroup every week?*

We accept children up to the age of four with their mothers at the playgroup. We play together, talk, cook in the morning, and then we have lunch. While doing this, the children and their mothers learn the rules of the community. The mothers learn how to take care of their families and how to develop their children. We nourish their souls as well: I read the Bible to them every day and we discuss it together and sing. We work here together with *Tímea Lacziné Somogyi*, who is studying to be a sociologist, and is kind of a social worker here.

*Is she Roma as well?*

Yes. This is an advantage, because both of us know the world the children and the mothers come from. Both of us have faced the difficulties they face.

For example, when a fifteen-year-old Roma girl wanted to abort her second child I could share with her a personal experience. I was seventeen when I got pregnant and I didn't keep the child. I wish someone would have told me then: don't do it Eszter! I was happy to see that after telling her my story and reading Hannah's Prayer, she changed her decision.

I believe that we must change the way people here in the segregated area think – we must give their lives a purpose. We, who have found the answer, must lead them to the source, for God blesses the faithful lives. It is important to start this with the children, to teach them that they should not think that they cannot become men and women like anyone else in the society. Sadly, I've heard things like this before.

*How can you change the way people think?*

We try to create a community for them, with them, where they can feel safe, where they are accepted, and where they can share their secrets. We try to create a second home for them. We trust God to help us in this through his Holy Spirit.

*You are currently studying religious education at Károli Gáspár Reformed University. Where did your life start?*

My parents were wealthy Vlah Roma (a particular group of Roma known for their traditional Roma identity). I was their sixth or seventh child. They left me at the hospital, they thought I would die, because I was born with an open heart chamber. My biological parents no longer live together. A few years ago I found my father, but I didn't stay in touch with him. It was good to see the resemblance though, to find reassurance of my Gypsy ancestry, and it was important for me to get to know my roots – even though now I think I couldn't really deal with the things that happened to me.

*So did you grow up in a foster home or with foster parents?*

I lived at the foster home in Zsámbék and was adopted by Hungarian parents. My original name was Erzsébet, my adoptive parents gave me this new name, this is how I became Eszter. I can only guess the reason. My mother couldn't accept me being a Gypsy, she probably tried to give me a new identity with this new name.

*I thought adopting was voluntary.*

That's true, but my story is a bit more complicated. Mom was in the hospital when they had a chance to adopt a child, so dad chose me on his own, and he didn't tell his wife right away that he had adopted a Roma girl. Mom only got to know later and she said, "There's nothing we can do, she can stay." They really wanted someone to take care of them at their old age. They didn't even tell me that I'm Gypsy – I was mocked at school, children teased me saying I'm a Gypsy, but my parents told me my skin was a bit darker because my father had Creole-skin. I got to know the truth from one of my friends when I was about fourteen. When I asked my parents at home, my father burst into tears and told me he did not want to talk about this anymore. I was alone with my shock and I couldn't stop crying. I looked at them asking myself "Who are they?" and "Who am I?" I grew up in an environment that taught me that a Roma isn't worth as much as a Hungarian. My mother was always angry with me when she found out that I played with Roma kids. My father often told me that he would make a proper person out of me. "Does that mean I'm not a proper person?" I often asked myself. I felt dumb and ugly. My mother made me wear pants and cut my thick black hair short. She tried to make my Roma features disappear.



*And all these things that are quite difficult on their own hit while you were in your teens. Did this cause any arguments between you and your parents?*

The characteristics of the Roma people started to surface in my inner world. I lived entirely off my emotions. My adoptive parents couldn't handle me. I was falling into a deep pit of my identity crisis. I went on with my life, but longed for love, for happiness. I tried escaping from home and I married when I was eighteen, the year before I got pregnant from the same man. This was shameful in the eyes of my parents and I aborted the child. Even after all this I still think of them as mom and dad. I know they just tried to be happy. They couldn't have any children and their marriage wasn't good either.

*What nationality was your husband?*

I was raised in a Hungarian environment so of course I married a Hungarian man, but the problems with my identity ruined our relationship because I couldn't be a good wife. I was childish, wanted to receive without giving, dispossessed my husband, and gave him no respect. This is what I saw at home, that my mom didn't respect my dad. I wasn't a good mother either, I didn't care at all about our children, I didn't raise them properly. I divorced my first husband, the father of my children, who still cares for us. When we divorced, all I asked for was this car I arrived with. After our divorce I ended up in a terrible relationship with another Hungarian man. It was hell. It endangered my children's and my own life. I left him after one year. I lost everything. I was literally on the verge of death. And then I found Christ.

*Wasn't religion a part of the values you were taught at home?*

Dad was Catholic and he taught me how to pray; I went to religious classes and liked reading picture Bibles. I talked to God, but didn't understand that

Christ died for my sins. My first husband read the Bible, sometimes loud. I liked listening to it. Today I can see that God started forming my life when I was a child, but I only found him in 2011. My foster father was dying and I was there when *István Mező*, a Reformed minister, visited him. He read the story of the prodigal son. As I was listening, I knew that I was the prodigal son. Afterwards I talked to István Mező and asked for his help. I was sent to a retreat center in Biatorbágy for a week where I looked in God's mirror, wrote my sins on paper, and asked God to guide me because I was tired and I wanted to walk with him. At the end of the week I got the following passage: "For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building," (1 Corinthians 3:9). Here, God called me his fellow worker, saying what if I give my time, strength and talent to the hands of Jesus Christ. This way I could become his co-worker. Meanwhile, I got depressed and ended up in a hospital where I read the Bible for three months, day and night. This gave me enough strength to end my horrible relationship. With the power from God, my doctor, the psychiatrist *Dr. Balázs Silló*, could heal me without medication. After I finished my therapy we became friends and fellow workers in Christ. Sometimes we have served together in the hospital, or in the Gypsy mission. I can testify that there is a way out of every situation.

*And today, besides the Playgroup, you hold Bible classes in three preschools in Kecskemét. How did you get here?*

I was happy for finally I was loved. I had a heavenly Father and the pastor and congregation surrounded me like a family. Through them I could experience what unconditional love is. By the Spirit of God they have been leading me. They are a blessing in my life. I hope that one day I can become a blessing to the people God leads me to.

I finished Bible-school and also graduated at high-school in a night class. I served in the congregation in Tápiószele and the Reverend *Álmos Sipos* encouraged me to sign up for the Károli Gáspár Reformed University to study Religious Education. Here I met *Virág Kabai*, the deaconess of the congregation in Kecskemét. She helped me get into the Gypsy mission of the congregation. My wish was to serve among Roma and to preach the gospel to them. This is what I had been praying for.

“And the LORD said to Moses, “I will do the very thing you have asked, because I am pleased with you and I know you by name,” (Exodus 33:17) and I understood that I need to go back to my people. We moved from Tápiószele to a larger town, Nagykőrös. My children remained in the congregation in Tápiószele (and they started to take their father with them) and studied at the Reformed high-school in Nagykőrös. Mrs *Ildikó Mező* encouraged me to start my studies in teaching primary school kids and I finished my first year. It’s truly a miracle to me, for I never cared about my studies as a child. My parents signed me up for a vocational high school. My grades weren’t bad but they weren’t stable and I had conflicts because of my identity. The Reformed University is the first school where I don’t feel like my identity is a problem, where I’m accepted and even encouraged.

*You teach non-Roma children, too. How were you welcomed by the kids and the parents?*

I teach religion in a preschool in Kecskemét. I was worried what the children will say, but as soon as they see me they rush towards me and won’t stop hugging me. I have not met the non-Roma parents, yet. But I know the parents of the Gypsy kids and more and more of them are signing their children up for Bible class.

*Do you need to teach the Roma and non-Roma children differently?*

The non-Roma children can sit through a more thematic class, while the Roma kids need a more interactive one. They understand the stories told with intensive emotions. They are clingier and more grateful. It's important to them to belong to someone. My people always need a leader they can follow, they can belong to, a leader they can rely on. It is important for these children to find all this in Jesus Christ.

*And what do you think of your identity? Do you count yourself as Erzsébet or as Eszter?*

I am a child of God, this is my identity. I found it through Christ, but I think of myself as Eszter. It means star. Since I've been walking with God I've been wearing skirts and let my hair grow long like traditional Gypsy women do. I try to be a responsible mother for my children. My heart is full of thanks to God and love for my people. Whenever I visit a home where there is poverty, I feel sorrow and this keeps me humble. Now God uses the very things I was despised for. I have found peace because God's will is clear. I'd like to show how we can become new people, for every man can be a new creation through Jesus Christ. As it is written, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

*How do your children view the change in your identity and how do they see their own?*

I think my children got a new mom. We pray together every day, I am with them in the afternoon, I pay attention to their studies. My seventeen-year-old son has a mature way of thinking, just like his father, while my fifteen-year-old daughter, Evelin, is hard-working and organized. I think my children are wiser than their age. They can't imagine not going to a religious school.

*And what about their Roma blood?*

My children deny that they are Roma. I think they fear the discrimination and they still want to be loved by other people. It's like I am watching my old self, only they were not raised in a lie. Of course they can see how the congregation accepts their mom and in this environment they might become willing to embrace their identity. At first it was difficult for me to talk about the thing I had kept secret for so long, but the Christian community helped a lot. I need to remember that even though they are my children, they have their own personality. But it would hurt me to hear them despise the Roma. It would be good if they could love the Gypsies the way I do, because if they accept the Gypsies, they accept me. But the most important thing is when they ask themselves who they are, they should find the answer in Christ, because he has shown us God's never ending love. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

TEXT: MÁRIA SZÁDVÁRINÉ KISS / PHOTO: LÍVIA OROSZ



TÍMEA  
LACZINÉ  
SOMOGYI

# At Home in Two Cultures

After being warned by her mother to stay away from Gypsies and by her father to stay away from religion, Tímea Lacziné Somogyi is now organizing a moms and toddlers club within the Reformed congregation of Kecskemét to help Roma families. She considers herself lucky for learning three different ways of life: Roma from her mother, Hungarian from her father, and Reformed from her husband. "I can see how the Roma and the majority live out their culture and I can see why they don't understand one another," says Tímea, who is fresh out of university with a sociology degree. She recently went back to school after her sixth, and last, child began schooling of her own.

*What, exactly, does your Roma background mean to you?*

Up until third grade, from 1977 to 1986, we lived on a street called *Tatár-sor* where a lot of other Roma families lived and I liked it. My father, who's not Roma, worked as a glazier, and my mother had a cleaning job. My mother, who has Roma parentage, really wanted to move to another neighborhood. She had bad experiences with Roma life; she had many disadvantages as a child and considered them to be the fault of her ancestry.

*Was this a part of the reason why she chose a non-Roma partner?*

I'm sure of it. She always told me not to marry a Roma and she said the same to my little sister. I remember one time, after we moved to our new home in the city center, I went back to visit our old neighborhood and I got a harsh scolding for that from my mother.

*Were your grades good at school?*

It was a lovely community, I liked going to school. I was curious and I had no difficulty with learning, so I was a good student. I applied to a grammar school because I couldn't decide what I wanted to be and I wanted to learn everything I could. Soon, I met my husband and I got pregnant and wanted to keep the child. I graduated from high school twenty years later, as a mother of six. We have five sons and a daughter.

*In the Roma community there's nothing uncommon about giving birth at 16, but it's rare for a grammar school student. Do you think it was somehow due to your Roma background?*

It was either a coincidence, or I wasn't aware of it myself. I was more affected by the fact that one of my aunts could no longer conceive after she had an abortion. I always said that I'd never hurt somebody else's child, much less my own.

*How did religion come into your life?*

My family is Catholic by name, but we never practiced it and I would've never cared about it if my father wasn't so against religion. This way, though, I started going to Bible class in primary school and, once, I went home with Jehovah's witnesses. I didn't distinguish between religions; I've always been interested in them.

*How did you become member of the Reformed church? How does it affect your life?*

I got close to the Reformed Church because my husband's family is Reformed and religion is important to them. Our faith affects our values and the communities we are part of. Our children go to Reformed schools as well.



*How does a family of eight get by?*

My husband comes from a traditional farmer family, he works in agriculture himself, so we grow what we eat. The boys are working too, they all have something they enjoy about it. They have a profession and they are also farmers.

*Have you always wanted to go back to school?*

When my daughter, *Panni* started kindergarten, suddenly the whole house became quiet. I started to look for a job, but because I only finished primary school the only job I could've gotten was dishwashing or cleaning, and I do enough of that at home. That was when I had the idea to finish grammar school. My husband was surprised that after ten or so years, twice a week I wouldn't be at home. I enrolled in the same school I started in. At the end, one of my teachers asked if I considered going on to university.

*Were you surprised by the idea? How did you choose your subject?*

I checked the courses and sociology had a lot of topics I was interested in: philosophy, sociology of religion and of minorities, and math, which I was good at. I had no idea what it was going to be like in the university town, Pécs. I got lost on the first day – I had never travelled alone before, never slept away from home.

*Why did you choose sociology? Were you concerned with your identity, with Roma's lives?*

I did not consider my background important at that time. It became an issue – I can still remember the class – when something I heard in class contradicted my experience. From that point on I got interested. I wondered how come Roma are a society within a society, how can they be so different from

the majority: there are a lot of children, more men than women, and while the majority's numbers decline, their population is continuously increasing and becoming younger. Only a really small part of sociology BA study concerns the Roma minority. I didn't want it to be a motivation, but I caught myself considering everything from the Roma point of view and I read every theory with their community in mind.

*The University of Pécs is well known for its Roma studies. Were you the "Roma student"?*

Not at all. I kept quiet about having six children as well, because I didn't want to be judged by that. My classmates, though, often mentioned it when they introduced me to someone; they loved the reaction it got. Most of the people are surprised to learn that I'm a Roma mother of six who's studying at university.

*Did you have any contact with other Roma at that point?*

Not really. My current job helps me to learn about them and make acquaintances. I'm studying the Roma neighborhood my mother grew up in. My mother was really against us growing up in a Roma community, but her way of raising us still taught me a lot about Roma culture, especially in communication; I understand the Roma expressions very well. I learned another culture from my father, and I can see how the Roma and the majority develop their culture and I can see why they don't understand one another. I feel very fortunate for learning three different ways of life: Roma from my mother, Hungarian from my father, and Reformed from my husband.

*What do you think are the barriers between Roma and non-Roma in understanding one another?*

They have different cultural traditions and different ways of communicating. For example, when a friend of mine came with me to the Roma neighborhood, the children jumped on her, they touched her hair and she told me she was a bit unnerved, even though the children were only being friendly. It often scares people when a Roma person speaks loud and intensely, even though they aren't aggressive, this is just their normal way of speaking. The communication styles can be very different.

*How did the Pancsinelló<sup>1</sup> Mums and Toddlers Club start? And how did you become a part of this project which is similar to the “sure start” houses?*

When Panni started school, I volunteered at the diaconal service center of the church to iron the clothes of a disabled couple. During this time I had a lot of discussion about the situation of Roma with the leader of the diaconal service, *Virág Kabai*. She read a call for proposals in the Reformed newspaper and she asked if we should apply for the funds of the Swiss Church Aid.

*Why a mums and toddlers club for Roma families?*

The church already has a mother-child club for the members of the congregation, and it was a good experience to build on. This way the project already had a professional background.

*Why is it so important to help children even before kindergarten?*

Children in underprivileged families start kindergarten with a lot of disadvantages. The behavior patterns they've already learnt by the age of 3 or 4 can have a negative effect on their future development and integration into

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<sup>1</sup> Punchinello is a character in one of Max Lucado's stories.

kindergarten. In the club they can learn and develop so that they can start kindergarten in a better position.

*What do you consider the most fundamental part of this job? What result would you like to achieve?*

We always remind the Roma children and parents of their value. It's very important that they learn self-respect and to view themselves in a positive light. I think it's working well here. We are also concerned with including Roma tales, customs, and art in the program, and we make it very clear that these traditions are valuable and not something that should be hidden. Most of the time you hear people talk about the Roma in association with crimes, drugs, and unemployment. If all the children hear is that Roma are dumb and they'll never finish school, then they'll believe it and they'll stop putting effort into something they think is impossible for them. This is why we have to make sure they understand their value and their potential. With some mothers we succeed. I work in another project as well and there was a presentation about the history of the Roma settlement in Kecskemét. The Roma came and listened. The deputy mayor was also there, and when the presenter started to talk about how great the town is for accepting the newcomers, people started to feel uncomfortable, and then a Roma person spoke up from the audience: "That is not how it happened." "Oh, really? What happened then?" "A prince visited the region, he fell in love with a Roma girl, and gifted her the whole land." After this, the presenter barely had the chance to talk. Older people started to talk about their memories, and the children bombarded them with questions. It was a great experience, and this is how we came up with the idea to invite a storyteller who can discuss these Roma traditions with the children.

*So this is the origin story of Roma neighborhoods. A lot of people reproach the Roma for considering these stories and narratives as scientific facts. What do you think about that?*

Every nation has its myths and legends. There was, of course, scientific research about how the Roma got their homes in the neighborhood. Both are important. It's the same as when we learn about the Miracle Stag (a Hungarian origin story) in Literature class, and then about the conquest of the Carpathian basin. What is interesting to me is how these myths portray Roma: in most of them, being a Roma is not a happy thing.

*As a sociologist, do you do research amongst Roma families as well?*

I was an observer during a social survey looking at income, education, eating habits, racism... In my opinion, the interviewer over explained everything. I went back to these homes later and in one house I learnt that the daughter of a former Roma "judge" (leader of the community) is still alive. It turned out that five generations live together. It was really interesting to get to know a family that's so elite: they had education and lived amongst relatively good circumstances. When I mentioned the names of my Roma relatives they had no idea what I'm talking about, but then I remembered the Roma name of my grandparents, and suddenly, I was accepted – the family let me in. This motivated me for further research and I wrote my thesis on the ethnic characteristics of Roma women.

*What were the results? What conclusion did you come to about the situation of Roma women?*

I did focus group interviews where we sat down and I talked to women who have been living in the neighborhood for a long time. We discussed their

traditions, memories, their place in the family, their relationship with the majority. Most of the time, the opinion of the “Hungarians” was important to them and it filled them with pride if the majority had good opinions of them. They put Hungarians above, and Vlah Roma (a more traditional Romani group) and other Roma who are not Romungro (Hungarian Roma) below themselves on the social ladder. The topics of how they dress and choose a husband always came up. All of them considered it important to marry a Roma man.

*Don't they feel like they could get higher on the ladder if they marry a non-Roma?*

That is what I thought too, considering it is an advantage if the child isn't visibly Roma, but no. They either didn't care or they specifically choose a Roma husband. But they try to dress the same way as the majority and I think that's because these women don't want to be treated in the way Roma often are. The division of ethnic groups helps orientate people to the different social classes and it also helps us to know what the proper behavior towards the member of a certain ethnic group is when we interact with them. These women tried to avoid being treated as Roma. They also talked about their childhood, how they didn't want to stand out, and how hard that was for them; how important the external characteristics are. They are a kind of stigma. In the research I wanted to understand how the Roma themselves think of certain topics that the majority is judging from outside.

*What do we need to know about Roma women? How could the Church reach out to them?*

The fact that we trust them is important in itself. We need to respect them and not tell them off, but instead acknowledge that they know more about their

own life than we do. It feels like it's hard for them to make choices on their own, and not be affected by others' opinions.

*What are the possibilities for a teenage girl who brings 2-3 children to the play center? How will she make a living and take care of her children?*

I always discuss the possibilities with mothers who wish to continue their studies. Mainly, though, I concentrate on the children and on what the mothers can do to create a better life for them. I'm talking about specific people, on an individual level. We have a little girl here, she's really clever, and she loves books. We did our best to convince the mother to enroll her in a good school, and told them that we'll try to help. There was another family where the mother and her four children became homeless, and the youngest even caught pneumonia. Now they live with relatives, and both parents work in the public works program, but this way their daughter has to stay at home to take care of her little brother. She says that finishing vocational school would have no point anyway. According to her parents she wouldn't have any better chance on the labor market even if she went to school. If the parents' schools had no meaning in the end for them then we can't expect the children to be motivated either. It made me really sad that this girl thinks about education this way, but I'm hoping that when kindergarten starts for her little brother she'll go back to school. The exact strategy they use to survive today is what makes tomorrow so much harder for them.

*How can the Pancsinelló Kid's Club intervene in this endless circle?*

We can only help them step out of their poor circumstances – they have no electricity, no toys, and no books at home – while they are at the Kid's Club. One of my most recent experiences is about a baby girl who learned to crawl.

Back at home she's always held by somebody. Her family says that she has it good, everyone loves her. But this way she has never learned, how to crawl. It turned out that the floor is in such bad shape, the baby can't be put down on it. I noticed how fascinated she was by the shoes of my colleague, Eszter, and I put the shoes farther and farther out of her reach until one day she crawled right over to them. There was another girl who always ran over to the bookshelf and tore out the pages of the books and she looked like she expected praise for it. It is very likely that, back at home, books are only used for another purpose. They must tear pages out to feed the fire. It took weeks for her to understand that there are pictures and interesting information in the books. These are results I'm happy about. The parents of their mothers didn't play with them either, and that's what they passed down to these children. If we play together though, the mothers will start to do it on their own as well. They often get lost in their games, their drawings, their songs. Moreover, we cook and clean up together every day. A sociologist of education once told me that if a child comes and sees a good example, even if it's just once, it already helps.

*If you could have three wishes for the play center or Roma families, what would they be?*

I'd wish for the children to experience success, because they really need it. I'd wish for the Roma to not live at others' mercy but to be able to do their best for a better life. And my third wish would be for the *Pancsinelló Kid's Club* to be able to continue their work, to bring joy and help to many people in the future.

TEXT: NASZÁDI KRISZTA / PHOTO: KÁROLY PÁLÓCZI





MIKLÓS  
RÁCZ

# The Kid from the Gypsy Camp, Who Wanted to Be a Sunday School Teacher

The now 22-year-old Miklós Rácz, or rather known as Mityu, envied his religion teachers the most among all the others, but he thought he would never have enough money to study theology. He grew up in Transcarpathia in the Gypsy settlement in Szernye. He hopes he can graduate as a pastoral helper from Beregszász College.

*How can the kid from the Gypsy “camp” end up in college?*

I always dreamed of becoming a teacher of religion or a doctor. I envied the religious teachers in my village. I grew up in a Gypsy camp in Transcarpathia. This is where the first church for Gypsies was built and at the same time a school opened. Before that, the kids in the camp didn't really finish the first four years of school. We started every day with devotion. I was amazed, and I envied the teachers of the Bible classes.

*Were your parents religious?*

I received religious education, but we didn't go to church. I live with my grandmother, my mother, and my aunt. The first Bible study group met in our house and they even helped at building the church. Something must've happened that made them leave though when I was about two or three.

*Did you finish primary school in the missionary school?*

The truth is I did not really attend school at the time I should have. I went to the Gypsy school and I repeated some of my classes. Then, when I turned twelve, I went to the Hungarian class and started out in the seventh year. There were things others knew that I hadn't even heard of. I often came up with excuses in order to skip school. Still I managed to finish the 9<sup>th</sup> class.

*What was your relation with the Reformed church like?*

After envying my teachers as a child, in 2009 I tried to sign up for a course for religious education teachers, but I needed my minister's reference, so I started going to church. The minister, *László Béres*, and a teacher from the Bible classes, *Olga Buda*, invited me to join the youth group in the village. At a retreat I could really feel the love of God. From that point on I said that I had given the Lord my life. I had my confirmation around that time. I wanted to study Religious Education but I thought the tuition fee would cost me a fortune. When I found out that I only needed to pay for the registration, I immediately went to our minister to ask for his reference. He wrote it right away and I wrote my CV. It arrived a day after the deadline, but I was accepted. At my entrance exam, I asked if I could sign up to study for Religious Education and as a pastoral assistant the same time, but the girl before me was told to sign up for pastoral assistant and I was sent there automatically. Now I believe this was God's will. I started in the fall of 2012 and I'm currently in my fifth semester. It's extremely difficult for me. I'll be happy if I can pass all my exams.

*How does your family make a living?*

My grandmother receives a pension. During the summer we work in the fields with my mother and my aunt. I get some donations as well. Once, when

I was going to school, I had no money to buy food. They wrote it up as a debt in the store, but I had no idea how I'd pay it back. Then a lady came to me at school. She handed me an envelope saying it's from a Dutch organization that was looking for Gypsy students. This is God's care. In December 2014, I started leading Gypsy youth groups in the neighboring villages.

*Do you go to the other settlements by bike?*

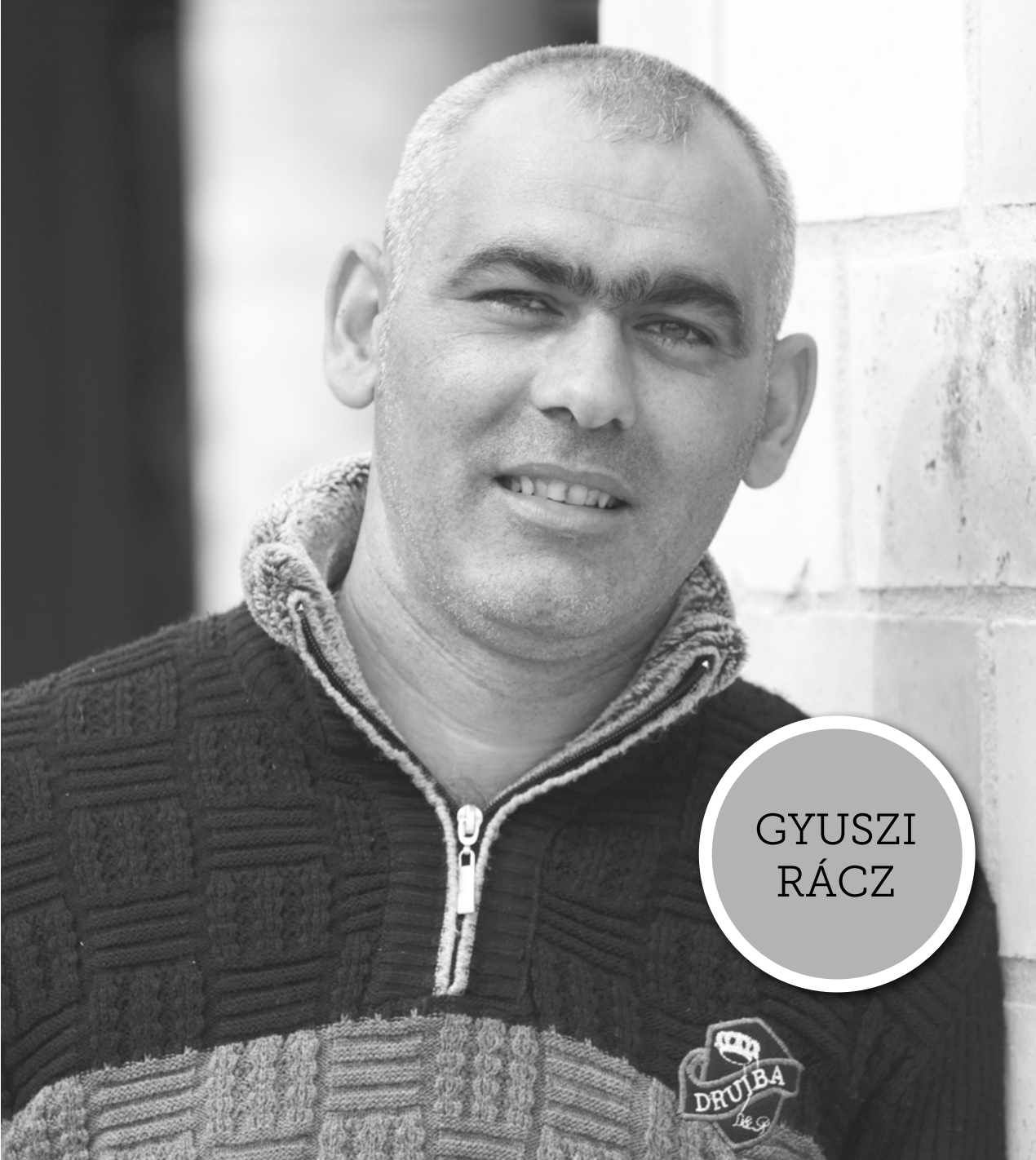
I don't have a bike. I can borrow the minister's bike on Sundays, when I need to substitute for him.

*Who goes to the youth group? What do you do?*

You can join when you're thirteen, and you can come as long as you're not married. We have about ten to twenty people. The gatherings are held in the Gypsy kindergarten of the mission. We sing, we read the Bible, and then I explain the passage or we talk about their interpretations. We play or the young people can paint, draw or use clay.

*What's going to happen to the dream of the little kid – what will you do if you finish school?*

I don't know what opportunities I'll have. I still need to pass a few exams. I got a new computer after my old one broke, from one of the brothers I got to know at a *cursillo* training. I need to write my thesis and then I'll also need to do some practice.



GYUSZI  
RÁCZ



# You Can't Curse in Our Yard

He grew up in a Gypsy camp and only finished four years of school, but knows the Bible better than most of us and uses it in service of a Transcarpathian Gypsy congregation. Gyuszi Rácz often gives a testimony about how his life has changed after watching a movie about Jesus.

## I wasn't disciplined

I live in Ukraine in the Transcarpathian village of Szernye. There are more than two thousand Hungarians and seven-hundred of us Gypsies there. I don't speak Gypsy, but my father, living in Ungvár, speaks Hungarian, Gypsy, and Ukrainian. I can't remember living with my father. I was eight or nine when I first met him. I have a twin. My mother was Christian to the point of acknowledging the existence of God. She loved us, but didn't teach us the way of faith. No one taught me what I can or can't do. In my teens I started smoking, drinking, and being promiscuous. I was game for anything.

## I forbid my wife to go to church

I got married at the age of twenty. I courted her for three months. We both worked at a business led by a minister. We got married the way she wanted at the Reformed church, but then I forbid her from going to church. I told her to choose between God and me. I don't know why. I thought she had someone there. "Are you meeting men there?" I asked. She gave birth to two sons and I was proud. I stuck cigarettes in my son's mouth and gave him beer, and bragged about this to others.



### **One of my Gypsy friends brought me a film about Jesus**

When the younger one was two, one of my Gypsy friends brought me a DVD about Jesus. I saw how the Lord healed, how he spoke to people and called them. It shook me when the leper went to him and he told him “be cleaned.” The leper was tossed away by everyone, the disciples covered their faces, but Jesus hugged him. He healed him. I could see the man rejoice as he showed himself, his hands, they were clean. This gripped me.

### **Who then am I?**

I saw in the movie how Jesus suffered when He was crucified – this made me think. I wasn’t bothering anyone at home. My wife was sleeping with my children. I watched them and thought, “Oh what have I done! Jesus, you suffered for my sake! I don’t deserve this; I don’t deserve your sacrifice for me and my children. Who then am I?” I felt like the Lord was next to me and I needed to follow him. I started crying and woke my wife to tell her I don’t know what got into me. I couldn’t sleep for three days. I couldn’t hear anything except the voice of God telling me that I would preach his Word. We prayed with my wife. I started to read the Bible and begged the Lord, “Lord, help me understand!” I prayed for someone I could talk to. It hurt me that I took my wife from God. A minister came for a funeral and I talked to him. “Where do you live?” he asked, “Let’s go to your house.” We talked and prayed and exchanged numbers. He called me and I could call him when I had troubles.

### **I’ve stuttered since I was a child and was mocked a lot**

From that point the Lord raised me like a child. I started giving the testimony of my faith in my village, then in other villages among the Gypsies. In three months I was able to give a testimony by reading the Gospel in church, even

though I've stuttered since I was a child and was mocked for it. I prayed, "Lord rest your hand upon me and give me your Spirit, so that I can talk about you," and the Lord opened my mouth and I stuttered no more – I had the courage to stand in front of about five hundred people, because the Lord told me "...do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:19-20). A few months passed and I was invited by *Ottó Jenei*, the missionary minister, to the *cursillo* training in Debrecen. "When you come back home, you'll be a prophet", he said.

### We set up a loudspeaker and a microphone

In one month we went to Sztrabicsó (a settlement in the neighborhood) with Ottó and two brothers. There had not been a congregation. Who will continue the work we started after we leave? I told Ottó I would do it. We set up a microphone, a synthesizer, and a loudspeaker. We started our testimonies outdoors and Ottó preached. I asked the Roma if I could come again on Sunday. "Fine," they answered. There were five of us. I went again on Wednesday; there were ten of us then. I started seeing children, I read the Bible, we sang songs, and I told them about God. I went there again the next Sunday. A few months passed and people started coming. At home I asked the Lord to give me wisdom, to tell me what to say. I saw how the Gypsies understood my words. The congregation has been going on for six years now. On Sunday we have a worship service, on Wednesday Bible-study: talking, reading the Bible, praying. I visit the families as well. Two years ago a minister came to the village from another church and brought donations and promises. We Gypsies go where they promise us more. I told my congregation, "silver or gold I do not have, what I have I give you, the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you need it I'll stay, if not I'll leave." Some left us, but some stayed.



### The Gypsies of Sztrabicsó

The Dutch gave us a container-house that functions as a preschool. A kindergarten teacher and a Gypsy helper teach the children how to behave, to talk properly, and to learn numbers and both Ukrainian and Hungarian letters. On Wednesday and Sunday the congregation meets there. There are no Hungarians in Sztrabicsó, only Gypsies and Ukrainians. There are no jobs – the Gypsies build with tin, cut wood, or find day-labor. The women stay at home. The Roma live in loam [mud brick] houses. They make the loam themselves and everyone helps to build the houses. If someone dies, everyone goes there to mourn and take sausages, bread, and drinks. They stay up till sunrise. If someone needs help, like an operation, they collect the money and everyone gives some. The Gypsies stick together.

### Even the old fortune teller lady was converted

Many Gypsies collect money with interest. No one does it in our congregation. They have converted from their old lives, even the old fortune teller. There was another lady who tricked people with clothes, but she stopped doing it and now makes a living out of raising pigs and selling them. Another lady used to be aggressive; no one could stand her, not even her son. But now? She tries to stay calm in every situation and she has a good relation with her daughter-in-law. In some families when a child cried at night they started doing magic. I preached about this and told them to stop doing magic and pray for the child instead. Two ladies were arguing and came to me saying that she did this and that. I listened to both of them. I can't decide who told the truth, but we prayed and they made peace.

### Lord, let it be a girl with blond hair and blue eyes

My job made my wife happy, but she wanted to come with me and join the mission. We need a car because when it's cold and snows I need to go to Sztrabicsó with my bicycle. We have four children. When my wife was expecting the third one, they told us to abort it because it won't be healthy. I told my wife that we should accept the child how he is. He was born healthy. We said that even though we don't have a daughter, we don't need any more children – and then three and a half years later my wife was expecting a child again. I said it's fine, but Lord let it be a girl with blond hair and blue eyes. All the boys have brown hair. She was born just the way we asked for it. She'll be two soon.

### You can't curse in our yard

We live in one room of a three roomed house. My mother has died and I live with my brother. I'm supposed to move out because the house is his. Gypsy children can come to our yard and play, but there can't be any fighting or cursing. I won't take my children away from the Gypsy camp, for the Lord told me "I don't want you to take them away from the world but to shield them from all evil." I pray to the Father to give me what my father didn't, because he knows what I need and that I can become a good father for my children. I remember how I grew up and I don't want my children to experience the same things. If we raise our children saying, "it's fine, go wherever you want to, you don't have to come home till it's dark, just don't bother me," then they'll learn how to fight, how to curse, they'll start smoking and drinking and the parents won't notice. We pray every morning for the things we would like. The situation is bad in Ukraine. My hope is in the Lord.

TEXT: KRISZTA NASZÁDI – GYULA RÁCZ / PHOTO: VARGOSZ

A black and white portrait of a man with a mustache and goatee, smiling slightly. He is wearing a white t-shirt with a dark logo that includes a silhouette of a person jumping. The background is a blurred outdoor setting. A circular graphic overlay on the left contains the text 'KRISZTIÁN LAKATOS'.

KRISZTIÁN  
LAKATOS

# My Father is God

Krisztián Lakatos is 27-years-old. He studied to become a cook and is now doing public work. He works a lot and has no free time, but he says he likes it this way. He is getting ready for his high school graduation and would like to go to university. If everything works out, he'd like to create an organization helping children with difficult backgrounds. Krisztián, a young Roma who tried to commit suicide twice but God saved him, talks about his life. He says God has plans with him.

“My whole life was full of suffering up to the age of ten. I felt like the way I'm living is not good, I wished for another life,” says the 27-year-old Roma man. We are talking in a park not far from the railway station in Debrecen (the second largest city in Hungary). He lives in Bodaszőlő (a village near Debrecen) with his family, in relative comfort. He has five siblings. When Krisztián was three, his mother left his father and raised the children alone.

“The place where we used to live was similar to a ghetto. It was a settlement with three streets with only Gypsies living in them. There was no water, no electricity, and there were rats everywhere. The place was surrounded with trash.”

Krisztián lived in the Nagysándor settlement in Debrecen, where he cared for his siblings and went to school. He met God when he was eleven.

“When I was eleven, I started going to church alone. Someone from the family died and I was searching for answers to life's questions. Church was a half an hour walk, but I felt like I wasn't welcome – that people thought it strange for a Gypsy boy to go to church, so I stopped going after a while. But then *Irénke Gregussné Buzás*, a pastor from the congregation, visited me at the

Roma settlement and convinced me to go. She told me it'd be all right. So I started visiting the Gypsy congregation of the church district.”

While Krisztián became a member of the community, things got worse at home: his grandmother got sick, he needed to look after his siblings, and on top of all that, he was mocked at school for being a Gypsy.

“I received a lot of hate at school. I couldn't dress like the others. It didn't matter if I washed my clothes, we heated the house with a furnace and you could smell the smoke. At school I hid in the toilet and stayed there for hours. I suffered so much that I pretended to be sick just to skip school. I was afraid the children would hurt me again. It was not that I didn't want to learn, but I didn't feel like I was cool and the other boys always mocked me.”

At that point the boy had enough. He wanted to give up everything, he felt like he had nothing to do in the world – he tried to hang himself.

“I tried to commit suicide. I went to church regularly, but I was exhausted from the hardships I faced day after day. I questioned the existence of God. If he is there above, why does he let this happen to me? I couldn't face my problems any longer, I felt like I was alone. When I tried to hang myself the branch broke.”

Krisztián tried to fill the emptiness he felt after his failed attempt, so he went back to church because he was loved there. The years he spent in middle school weren't easy though, and Krisztián needed to cope with a lot.

“In the first year of middle school I decided that I had had enough, I would be just like the ones hurting me. I stopped going to church again and I suddenly became a bad person: I returned whatever I got from others. After a while I didn't like the way I lived, so I went back to the congregation.”

Before turning eighteen, the young man got into trouble again and he couldn't cope with his problems. He reached the point of attempting suicide again.

“When I was seventeen, my problems added up again and I couldn’t take it anymore. I felt lonely. I needed to take care of my siblings – my mother couldn’t really be with them because she had other things to do. I drugged myself and drank. I wanted to die. I had a theologian friend who happened to call me at that time and he talked to me until he found me. God sent his servant to save my life.”

Krisztián says God has plans with him, so he won’t let him perish.

“Things changed in vocational school. I got straight A-s and got a profession in cooking. Many of the people at the settlement asked me why I study. They said I’m a Gypsy, I would not succeed. I told them I want to leave this place and the only way to do so is to study and God will help me in this. I would like to go to university and I would like to deal with children coming from difficult backgrounds. I want to show them that they’re not alone and that if they have problems they have someone to talk to, someone who listens. I never had a father, but I feel like I have a father I can tell everything, and this father of mine is God.”

With his siblings, they help each other to study. They say there’s no other way to progress in life.

“In my family, no one studied and no one finished high school. Now I’ve got a profession and I’m studying to get my A-levels. My brother is a barber, my sister is learning to become a waitress, and my other brother is becoming a policeman. I want to get a diploma after graduating high-school. We motivate each other at home and I always tell them to study, because without knowledge we’re nothing.


Krisztián is a real survivor. He suffered a lot. He says he is a man locked in a cage, trying to break free. While he is trying to help others, he forgets his own problems. He says that God takes care of his soul at all times. He used to

hate Gypsies, he blamed them for his suffering in school, but this has changed and he now works at one of the Reformed Gypsy missions.

“The congregation was the place where I always felt like I’m taken care of and being loved. By now they have become a part of my life. The church helped me reach lots of places in Hungary and I even got to go to Germany, Romania and Slovakia. I owe the Reformed church a lot. Nowadays I work a lot and I volunteer at the Reformed Gypsy mission. I think it’s important to give something in exchange for the things we receive, to help others in need. God gave me everything, but I feel like I’ll receive even more. I’d like to help the Roma by getting a degree and by creating an organization with Gypsy workers, to help the Gypsies longing to learn but who are in no position to do so. I think it will be difficult for the Roma to reach a position where they are respected. It will be difficult, but it will happen.”

TEXT AND PHOTO: KRISZTINA BALOGH



A black and white portrait of a woman with dark hair pulled back, smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark jacket with a visible button on the shoulder. The background is a plain, light color.

ELIZABETH  
VIRÁGNÉ  
VIDÁK



# He is Here in Me

At first she couldn't believe that God loved her as much as the Reformed people said, but the gospel convinced her and she is now God's. Since then she is a key member of the Roma congregation in Drégelypálánk. In her opinion, Roma are not hopeless, but without hope. Elizabeth Virágné Vidák, or, as everyone knows her, Lizi, welcomed us into her home. The young lady confessed not only her faith, but told us about the hardships of the Roma and the solutions to sometimes seemingly hopeless situations.

## Chosen

It was clear from the first moment that Lizi lives her life with God.

“My husband and I both converted. He invited me to the congregation because he's had these roots from before we met,” she says. “All I can say is that being converted is by the choice of God. Thinking of my childhood, I've always been interested in God. Our people are born and bred Catholics and I don't know what would happen to us if we tried to live without God. He is our everything. All religious people think this way, this isn't connected to nationality.”

## We strengthen each other

“My life became whole in faith,” Lizi says.

“Many of our brothers live in this street. I surround myself with people I can talk to about God. My husband reads from the Bible every Thursday in our Bible study home group. At our gatherings we discuss our week, our temptations, our failures. You can't concentrate on God if you waste your attention on other things, like what you'll eat. We assure each other every time that we

can turn to God with everything. We are lucky that we live depending on God. We say to God: you see, things are like this now, but we still have faith in you and won't go begging or stealing. There were people who used to cheat and lie before converting. We strengthen each other in our everyday fights. We are a "stiff-necked people" (Exodus 33:3) and we are disadvantaged compared to the majority. People generalize and say the Gypsy all lie, steal, and break into houses. This is true for some of the Roma, while there are a lot of Hungarians living dishonest lives, too. Of course we have dishonest people among us, but all of us suffer from generalizations."

#### **The believers are accounted for**

"In the neighborhood, every Christian is accounted for," she explains.

"In a small village like ours, if you are a Christian, every step you take will be watched. They'll look out for when you curse, when you get full of rage, or do anything they can judge. This makes being a Christian a life full of responsibility. If we do something wrong, we bring shame on the whole congregation."

#### **You're the one to talk?**

"We are at the edge of society not only as Roma, but as Christians, too," she continues.

"Darkness doesn't take the light in, so when you talk about your faith they hush you, you aren't taken seriously. This is why it's important to preach to those who let you do it. There are nice Hungarians but they were raised to be prejudiced against us. It might not be in the children, but the parents teach it to them. We can't even state what we believe to the religious people. They won't accept a Gypsy testimony: *you* want to teach me about God?"

### Irresistibly

Lizi was baptized as a Catholic, but she is part of a Reformed congregation now. “I was converted by the gospel”, she says.

“*Miss Saci and Papa Lala*<sup>2</sup>, the ones who started the mission, came here to preach. This is also a gift. I was about the age of my sister now and there was no need to search. Of course there were times when I questioned their words. I used to confess my sins regularly and recited the Hail Mary many times when I felt like my sins were greater. My life was in ruins when I found out this didn’t count at all. God was graceful, but he didn’t give me peace because I never searched for his Son. When the blinds covering my eyes fell down, I started going to the congregation. I started reading the Bible and asked for the meaning. I searched for God. I read the Bible on the train on my way to and from school. The idea that God could love me so much almost brought me to tears. I couldn’t believe it, but I was being influenced by the gospel. When I read the letters of John, God’s love found a way to my heart. I told myself that God wouldn’t need me. I got off the train and he grabbed me immediately. I tried to stop myself from being converted, but God took me with him irresistibly.”

### He’s inside me

“My view on God changed,” Lizi explains.

“I knew that the one I was praying to was so close that he was inside me. It doesn’t matter how much I hug my husband in times of fear, he can’t be as close as Christ – and even if he is as close as Jesus, he can’t comfort me the way Jesus does. Not even when he hugs me. When I pray to Jesus I ask for his help. I can feel him inside. I can feel his comforting presence. I am in a living community

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<sup>2</sup> Sára and Lajos Patkós, a sister and brother who repatriated from the US and started to work among the Roma of the region.

with him. I become whole when I go to God and there's nothing I could ask for. I know that nothing can top what I've received. He gave me eternal life and forgiveness. What else can I ask for?"

### **I am anxious about them**

God never stops providing for Lizi. If she wouldn't do anything else but praise him, she still wouldn't run out of words.

"I love God. When I was converted, he was all I could talk about. I told my partner that I love him, too, but the only way we can stay together is if we get married. After we got married, I couldn't describe the happiness I felt. My sins did not separate me from God anymore. Now my only fear is the fate of other people. A lot of people never get to know this God, never experience that great love. What is inside them? It's my responsibility to talk about the Lord. Let me help them feel the way I feel."

### **Anger and atonement**

In Lizi's opinion, the Roma are without hope, just like their situation.

"They see no escape from their poverty or their sins. The only one who can give them hope is God. They turn to him when they face difficulties, it's natural. If their child, their husband, or their wife is sick, or when they can't take the hardships – the children crying, the hunger – then they'll go steal. When they can't even do that, they turn to God, but then with all they have. They have their own picture of God, but they're mistaken. They think that God is after them, or wants to catch them. They see an avenging and frightening God instead of the loving and caring God he really is. If it wouldn't be for Jesus, the anger really would be there. The amount of sins in our thoughts... God had to put a lot on Jesus Christ."

### They flee

“The problem is with the roots, for the children will carry on what they learn from their parents”, she explains.

“We should motivate the parents to keep their surroundings under control. Try to keep the house clean and tidy despite the circumstances. Have a nice garden with vegetables and breed animals. Something that shows them that there can be beauty in their work and the results are worth the effort. They have no money for education, there’s no food to take to school, so the children drop out. They see fighting and hate at home, so they flee. They run away as soon they can. They try to find love in a relationship. This is a mistake. They make a baby and the whole thing starts again. It’s a never ending cycle. Of course a child is a good thing. I also wish for one, but I’m still young, we live with my mother, what good would it be? God gave me an opportunity. I finished middle school and am now getting ready a for child care and youth supervisor course. I’ll take care of children in the primary school. Seventy percent of the schoolchildren are Roma.”

### The real need

“When the Roma see a wealthy person who works a lot, has money, a stable family life, enough to eat, to drink, who takes his children to a nice school, they think they would be happy in his place. But money isn’t the source of happiness. This has always been our weakness: I’ll be happy when I have enough money. Money is momentary – it doesn’t last long and it disappears without any trace of being there before and the same boredom follows. Many come to me. God knows who his people are, but the Roma people are in great need of him and his hope. They think they will be satisfied by people, but all they really need is Jesus Christ. He is the only way they can find satisfaction in the things they have.”



ATTILA  
LAKATOS

# A Christian Follows Christ at All Times

Attila Lakatos lost both of his parents at a very young age. His father committed suicide and his mother died from alcoholism. He spent more than 20 years in children's homes and started his adult life in a homeless shelter. Now he is studying welfare work at the Reformed College of Nagykőrös and whenever he can he teaches the gospel among the youth. In his point of view, what matters is not your denomination, but rather the presence of Jesus Christ in your heart.

*Who told you about God?*

I met God on two fronts. In the children's home where I grew up, a Reformed minister, *László Bölcsöldi*, held Bible lessons for us. And there was also a Catholic community who regularly visited us.

*How did you end up in a foster home? What was it like to grow up there?*

My father committed suicide and my mother died because of her alcoholism. I was put into a children's home where I lived for twenty years. I had good and bad experiences there. When I was about thirteen a man used to visit me regularly. Sometimes he took me to his home, but mostly he asked for the money I got from the state. I didn't feel like the people working at the institution really cared about us.

*How come?*

There were lots of children. They couldn't create the atmosphere of a real home. I was mishandled more than once. For example, one day, after mopping in the bathroom, I was heading back with the mop in my hand. I accidentally splashed some water on another boy's feet. He got furious and tossed me towards one of the radiators. My head opened up. I went to the person on night duty and showed him my wounds. After unsuccessfully trying to stop the bleeding I was taken to the hospital by one of the senior kids, because the only adult in the institute needed to stay with the other sixty children.

*You are studying to be a "deacon," a welfare worker at the Károli Gáspár Reformed University in Nagykőrös. What are your plans after your diploma?*

I have no plans, but a Christian always follows Christ. Whatever decisions I make – who my partner should be, where I should study, what my goal is – I try to act according to Jesus Christ's will. I would like to do what God has planned for me to do.

*How do you know what God wants you to do?*

Whenever I finish a chapter of my life God shows me the next one. Whenever I finish a path he puts the first stone of the next one under my feet. But sometimes I don't follow his ways.

*When does this disobedience show?*

When there is a holiday in school I always feel lonely. I have friends and love people and I feel like my friends love me, too. I always help when my classmates ask me to prepare for an exam, or just give them some guidance. I do all this happily. I always try to change lives in a positive way. I talk about God's



greatness and tell my friends what Jesus would do in their place. I never judge, but rather try to show the way of Christ. But the holidays are always hard for me, because I'm left with my solitude. For me there's no one to go home to, I don't feel like I belong to anyone. At times like this I call upon God, and ask him to talk to me. It's happened before that God did not show himself, but thanks to God I have never tried to help myself with drugs or alcohol.

*Everyone reaches his limits sooner or later...*

Exactly. That's why we are in need of Jesus Christ. We need to believe in him and this is more than enough. I've thought of suicide more than once, but Jesus Christ was always by my side.

*How did you reach the point of turning against yourself?*

I was in a critical state. As the Bible says: the soul is willing but the body is weak. Humans are powerless, clumsy, fallible creatures. This is exactly why no one can find salvation on their own. We aren't capable of saving ourselves. Look at all the New Year's resolutions that are forgotten after a few months. When someone reaches the point of considering suicide, he is in a different state of mind. When you reach this point you are no longer capable of any rational thoughts. It's like you are no longer the one at the wheel. I brought this up when talking to God. God knows how I reached this point, he is aware of not only my actions, but of what I felt at that time, how much control I had. He is more understanding and sympathetic than what we could imagine. He has helped me accept myself. Without him I would still seek who I really am.

*Did you always know you are Roma?*

I knew, but while searching for an identity I always felt like I fell between two chairs. You couldn't call me a Gypsy because I know neither the language (which I regret) nor the culture, and I did not grow up in a Gypsy community. On the other hand, I'm not accepted by the majority. They can see my dark skin, dark hair, dark eyes... I call this the Mowgli-effect.

*How did you get in touch with the Reformed Gypsy Mission?*

I got in touch through the *Phiren Amenca* organization. This is an international organization working for the dialogical understanding between Roma and Gadge (non-Roma) people through service. I am Reformed, but I like using the term Christian when identifying myself. Most of the people are connected to the church rather than being connected to Christ. And your denomination – being Reformed, Orthodox or Catholic – won't help you in achieving salvation. People tend to be proud of their denominations. I think what you have in your heart is more important. Having Christ in your heart is more important.

*How did you get the chance to go to Germany?*

Thanks to a scholarship from European Voluntary Service. One of my Hungarian missionary friends mentioned that I should get in touch with a certain minister and he took me to an organization helping drug addicts. There was a German man in connection with this organization who was looking for Roma volunteers. I was recommended. We held Christian camps for children where we sang, talked about God and Jesus, and did sports. I also translated. I enjoyed being there. After coming home, I had a hard time fitting in again after a year.

*You were doing voluntary work at Starpoint Reformed Youth Festival for the Gypsy mission. What is your experience with Roma people?*

I got in contact with lots of wonderful Gypsy people who were also at the festival. I always tried to guide the Roma to Christ. They are also in need of redemption by Jesus in order to find salvation, in order to fix their relationship with God, with their neighbors. In my opinion there are two ways to achieve this: education and Christianity.

*Why did you continue your studies?*

I wanted to show the people who called me intellectually disabled that their judgment was incorrect and also to try to be an example to the children in foster homes. I would like them to follow me. I'll prepare the way for them, they only have to follow the path. I received the same education, I can do it, come with me. When I came back from Germany, my American-Hungarian friends helped me to enroll to the Reformed College at Nagykovács.

*What do you think of the fact that lots of Roma children are titled intellectually disabled and grow up without proper education?*

Why is it this way? I studied the educational problems of the Roma as I was preparing for an exam and read a lot of literature on this topic. I read that their intellectual setbacks can come from their surroundings because they receive a different socialization. Many children are labeled mentally ill because they need to fill out tests that are created for middle class kids.

*How do you feel about your parents, for letting you grow up as an orphan?*

God gives free will to every person. My father chose to commit suicide by his free will, and my mother chose to become an alcoholic. The things God

tells us are all for our safety. For example, when God says you shouldn't drink because you'll die, he says it because he loves us. Our sins have consequences. The consequence of my mother's sin was that I was raised in a foster home. But the foster home was God's way of looking after me – he took care of me through the state.

*What is your message to those with a similar fate?*

My message is that wherever they are, God will give them a purpose. And when God puts you on the starting point of a path, he will do everything to help you finish it.

TEXT: KRISZTINA BALOGH / PHOTO: BENJAMIN JAN BÓDIS



ZSOLT  
ZSIGA

# I'm to Help the Servants of God

"It's difficult for a Roma to accept the gospel, but when he shuts it in his heart, it can give a huge boost for the everyday life," says Zsolt Zsiga, an elder of the Reformed Congregation in Tiszakarád (a village in the North-East of Hungary) and a devoted worker of the Gypsy mission in and around the nearby town of Sárospatak. According to this father of two, the Roma should be thankful to God even if most of them don't have financial stability, for they have received a different blessing.

*When was the first time you met God?*

My parents were not religious, so they didn't go to church. When have the Gypsies gone to church anyway? Never, maybe. As a child I had no idea what that building with a tower looked like from the inside, what happens in there, who went there. I knew that God existed, but who he is, what has he done for us, what I owed him, were questions I never heard the answers for. I was introduced to Christianity when I was about ten and my grandmother moved to our place due to the early death of my grandfather. She showed me how to pray, how to give thanks, and how important it all was.

*How did the question of faith come up?*

I saw my grandmother pray: she put her hands together and closed her eyes. I watched her for a while, and then once I asked her what she was doing. She made me sit next to her and told me that when she does this she is talking

to God, who created us and who nourishes our body and soul. She taught me the Lord's prayer and a blessing for food, and from that point on we prayed together. We were very close; I received more love from her than from both of my parents put together.

*Was she the one who took you to church?*

My grandmother was the one who planted the seed of faith in my heart, but I needed time for the seed to grow. A few years after I finished my training in agricultural mechanics I got married. I had been happy with my wife but I felt like something was missing. My heart was empty. So I gathered all my strength and went to the house I feared as a child, because I found it mysterious. The congregation and the minister, *László Egresi*, gave me a warm welcome and invited me to their events. I enjoyed being part of a community, to belong somewhere and to be counted on. The sermons started to fill the gap in my heart: I could feel that the more I opened my heart, the more God blessed me with the joys of the gospel. It was a new experience to see how the people in the congregation trusted not only in God, but in each other as well. They taught me with their own example to live a life that pleases God.

*What was your life like before this and what changes did you have to make?*

I didn't murder, didn't steal, but I lived my life without God. My past self didn't think of his neighbor, and cared only for his own well-being. I did not see and was not interested in the hearts of others, who they were, what their hardships or their delights were. For example, I never felt bad after hurting someone's feelings and I never let people bother me with their point of view when I had a different opinion. When something didn't work out, I blamed others and never took any responsibility.

*How did you join the Gypsy mission in the region?*

Fourteen years ago *Choi Young*, a Korean missionary minister, and *Mr. Daniel Szabó*, the elder who is known by almost everyone in the Reformed church as *Uncle Dani*, visited us and told us their idea to start a Gypsy mission in our village. *Rev. László Egresi* agreed and helped their work. Meanwhile my wife and I started going to *Sárospatak* to the monthly Gypsy mission meetings held by Brother *Choi* and *Uncle Dani*. They invited the Gypsy brothers from the neighborhood who had the potential of becoming the pillars of the Gypsy mission in their village. It was good to meet other Gypsies. It only dawned on me then: I'm not the only one who's seeking the Lord. I heard wonderful testimonies which gave me a great push to grow my own faith. I felt like I needed to belong to these people. I watched how they were not shy at all when they confessed what they believed in and this amazed me. I told myself that I shouldn't be shy, shouldn't be ashamed about the Lord, because it is written that who can't confess Jesus in front of others, will be forgotten by him in front of the Father. I thought that I was a good Christian, but I was shown there that I'm nowhere compared to these people.

*How did the meetings in Sárospatak help to establish a Roma congregation in Tiszakarád?*

At first we started out by organizing gatherings in homes, led by Brother *Choi* and *Uncle Dani*. As I was listening to them, I realized that I must pass on the Word I received from them, because this is not meant just for me. So we started inviting more and more people to our home and more groups similar to ours started in other families. We listened to the living Word of God and afterwards we had coffee, tea, and some cookies while talking and praying for each other. The houses started to be too small, so the town council gave us a 150 square me-



ter room. We hold our worships there since then. We have about 80-110 members. Things worked out similarly in other villages and in some places the Gypsy mission bought the building with the support of Korean congregations.

*What reaches the Gypsies of Tiszakarád? What part of the gospel helps them the most in their everyday life?*

It's difficult for a Roma to accept the gospel. They believe in God, but turn to him only in the times of need and after being heard, forget him again. The ones who understand his message and take it to heart can receive a huge power in their everyday life. I asked one of the ladies why she likes to come to our congregation. She said that when she comes here, God takes her burdens off her shoulder and she forgets poverty, hurt, and goes home as a new person. "My Lord! If this lady can be so happy in her miseries, how can I, whom you have given everything, complain?" I thought. So the most important teaching here in Tiszakarád is that, even if we live in poverty, money doesn't come first. We are not wealthy from a financial point of view, but we must realize how God blessed us in other ways, and we can give thanks for so much. Someone who has accepted the Lord can rejoice in the beauty of the small flower blooming in the fields while he does public work at the edge of the village. This is what God gave me; he wanted me to live my life this way, praise him this way. I received plenty. No fortune, no house, no car. None of these. What I received is a different kind of blessing. I received a family, a child, a community, and a duty. If I can fulfill it, I will always be satisfied.

*Why do you worship in the mission house and not in the Reformed church?*

As you can see in my example, a Roma can be afraid of the church because he does not know the customs and has no idea how he will be welcomed, so it is easier to meet in a mission house. Brother Choi emphasizes every time that

this is just the first step on the path of faith. The final goal is for everyone to find their place in the Reformed congregation of the village. As I have already said, I was the only Gypsy in the church twenty years ago, and now you can find many families there every Sunday, who started out from our small congregation in the mission house. They have confessed their faith and there have been several adult confirmations.

*What are your duties?*

I'm a simple man with basic qualifications. I've asked the Lord many times why he needs me. I ask him to let me be to his use. We have a disabled girl in our congregation who can't even remember her mother's name and has difficulties speaking, but thanks to some miracle she sings beautifully. I always tell the others in the congregation: See, the Lord can use her in his kingdom, so you shouldn't doubt that he will use us, blessed with physical and mental health. We have many wonderful examples in our congregation of how God uses our lives to teach and form each other.

*Let's get back to the question: How does the Lord use you?*

The main part of the work is done by Brother Choi and Uncle Dani and the local ministers. I am no more than their assistant. It's an honor that, even though I'm a simple man, God has listened to my prayers and uses me through his servants every day. I became the first Gypsy elder in the Reformed congregation in Tiszakarád and I have been fulfilling this position to this day. I helped Brother Choi start the Gypsy mission in three villages and I am still helping in Tiszakarád to organize the events. My wife was asked to lead the community center of the settlement and I am occupied as a janitor in a part time job. I am honored by this, for I am entrusted a very valuable property. This is all thanks

to the Lord, because the leaders of the village know that I have left my past, selfish self behind and my new, Christian self can be trusted. So I've received a lot of duties from God, even though I went through cancer twice, but I'm thankful even for this, because he sees worth in me and gives me opportunities to continue my life.

*You live in Christian faith with your wife and two children, but what about your siblings? Have their lives changed?*

All three of my brothers are searching for the Lord and I believe that, "For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened" (Luke 11:10). One of them had his confirmation with his spouse; they both are members of the church. I pray for them a lot. My mother is also a member of the church, so we can pray together, and my father became a believer, as they say, "his own way". He is a good man.

*And what about your grandmother?*

She left us more than twenty years ago, but if she could see our family today and how God has formed us through her, and how the life of the whole village has changed, she would be grateful. She might say with me: "Oh Lord, how great is your power. I can't understand that you've awakened the Gypsies, not only here, but in the whole country. Are we not lost after all? Can we count on you? Do you really look after us and want us to follow you?" Nothing better could ever happen and we can't be thankful enough.

TEXT: SÁNDOR KISS / PHOTO: ESZTER ASSZONYI

# Writers



**Krisztina Balogh**, journalist. She earned her bachelor in Hungarian as a member of the Christian Roma Collegium in Budapest. As a trainee at the Roma homepage of the Reformed Church she conducted interviews with young Roma. She is committed to helping Roma children achieve their dreams.



**Ágnes Jakus**, journalist. She published reports about the life of the Gypsies and interviews with Roma at the Reformed website [www.parokia.hu](http://www.parokia.hu).



**Sándor Kiss**, journalist of the Reformed weekly, *Reformátusok Lapja*. He is interested in writing about current social issues and other hot topics.



**Virág Eszter Majsai**, romologist, art teacher. She wrote her thesis about the language of the Roma Christian communities and the Gypsy tales. She is also active in a team for integrated pedagogy.



**Kriszta Naszádi**, editor. She is the member of the Roma Mission team of the RCH. She published a book with a romologist, *Honestly about Gypsies* and articles on the Roma homepage of the RCH: [ciganymisszio.reformatus.hu](http://ciganymisszio.reformatus.hu)



**Mária Szádváriné Kiss**, journalist, teacher and cultural manager. She specializes in personal in-depth interviews.



Tibor Balogh: Power Relationships



Kálmán Káli-Horváth: Mourning over the Loss of Paradise.  
Adam - Admonition - Eve

The title of this book, *You Welcomed Us into Your Kingdom*, comes from the last line of the Roma anthem as sung by our Roma brothers and sisters who believe in God. Sixteen portraits are presented in this volume: the pastor who got an MA in theology in Geneva, the research biologist who comes from a poor Roma settlement, the theology student who is dreaming of a multi-ethnic church, the graphic artist who was the first Roma graduate of the Hungarian University of Arts, the young man who found a father in God and attends evening high school to be able to help disadvantaged children, the boy who grew up in children's homes and now studies to be an example for other children in state care, the sociologist, a mother of six who is striving to strengthen the Roma community, the religious education teacher who experienced a calling to serve among her own people, and the professional worker who is one of the elders of the church and gives thanks to God for his family, his community and vocation. Their stories are about finding a new identity as children of God, and about the deep feeling of responsibility for the Roma community and for society.

The church should pay more attention and be more welcoming to this ethnic minority with whom the Hungarian majority form one nation and share a common fate.

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*"I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (Acts 10:34-35). The interviews in this book speak about the love of God who chooses and calls people. The stories reveal the struggles, heights and depths of the lives of our Roma brothers and sisters so that we praise God and love our neighbor in humbleness.*

ESZTER DANI, HEAD OF THE MISSION OFFICE OF RCH

