

WIND ROSE

- 38 Katalin Forray R.: Courses of life in the higher education
- 49 László Galántai: Analysis of statutes of Gypsy/Roma student colleges
- 57 Katalin Vezdén: Wlislöcki Henrik Student College (An analysis of the efficiency of a complex service-development – in the light of the numbers)
- 68 Fanni Trendl: The Wlislöcki Henrik Student College membership in 2013 and 2015
- 78 Júlia Csigi: Time travel by means of research (Examination of Amrita Orientation Alumni Affaires within the framework of Wlislöcki Henrik Student College)
- 86 Anita Oláh: Supporting the academic progress of underprivileged secondary school students: The Arany János Special College Program



Katalin Forray R.

Courses of life in the higher education

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SUMMARY

The study describes a special project of the University of Pécs (student college, "szak-kollégium"). By analyzing interviews conducted with university students, it discusses the ways of people's lives that illustrate the rise of the Hungarian Gypsy, Roma people in different ways. It describes the different types of self-supporting young people that are supported by their teacher or the Church. Finally, it analyzes the achievements of the special classes and the summaries of the leading teachers.

Key words: student college, Gypsy and Roma, teacher,

Commitment to studying

When the background of the Gypsy, Roma students is examined superficially, it can be noticed that those who managed to get admitted to university came from almost the same social strata as most of the other students, middle or lower-middle class. Graduating as a skilled worker (or with no graduation) can be considered typical of fathers, and the same applies to mothers. Both fathers and mothers feel that they could have achieved better results in their studies if their family circumstances had been better. It can be interpreted the same as the responses of families of workers and farmers provided decades ago: obstacles in childhood could not be surmounted by parents who want to see their dreams come through for their children.

There is rarely a higher educated relative in a large family, usually the same or lower level education can be considered typical. These young people are the first to get a higher educational degree in the extended family. Such thing usually attracts a lot of attention; they can be role model for the young. This clearly shows that however there is no relative with higher educational qualification among the brothers and sisters or cousins, there are some in the group of youngsters who attend secondary schools and are willing to go to university. A young man who successfully finishes secondary school and continues his studies at university is a role model for the members of his extended family who may not live together but positively keep in touch.

When surveying the secondary schools that belong to the church, Pusztai (2011)

ended up with the result that the key to the success in education of the disadvantaged is a widespread supporting social network. This element will be discussed here. This young man felt committed to studying from the age when he was a little schoolboy.

“When I arrived home from the kindergarten, I started to pretend that I was the kindergarten teacher. When I got into school I needed a blackboard, I remember daddy made a wooden board for me so I could pretend that I was the teacher. To me, it was a game. I got home from school and started doing the homework like mathematics and made some imaginary kids sit down behind their desks and started to explain it to them.” (Z. law student)

He has been a member of the municipality of his village, where his father used to be the head of the local minority local government, since secondary school, and he is the only Gypsy among the members. He finished his studies in a secondary school with a good reputation, speaks many languages and also attended university abroad. He does not have any family members in higher education, his brothers and sisters are skilled workers, and his parents started acquiring some education following his example. Like one of his Gypsy friends, he plans to work for one of the organizations of the European Union. In this case, not the education level of the parents or the relatives but their ambition and reputed positions in politics provide a background. This did not make their children consider advancing in life without education, but instead it resulted in the understanding and acceptance of the parents to support their children’s education. Moreover, there is a role model in the close family now that clearly shows that a young Gypsy man can be promoted to an important top position through his own power, all one has to do is to study and make use of what one has studied.

Similar role-model behaviour of parents, grandparents and other relatives of their generation can be discovered in others’ stories too. These are intelligent people with an open attitude, who try to make up now what they could not achieve when they were young. For a lot of families, this is the time to make the dreams of the earlier generations come through.

Accepting your ethnicity

For most of the interviewed students their ethnic origin was known, and they were in close connection with their relatives. However, sometimes a family does not want to reveal their ethnic origin. If someone was born in such a family they may need to cope with other type of problems.

A girl from a remote part of the country was raised in a family that had seemingly no family ties with the Gypsy population. Her parents worked all day and she was looked after by her grandmother who worked in a foster home. This is where she came very close to the other kids, who were mostly Gypsies, and later to Gypsy families. She slowly became aware of the fact that partially she belonged to this population group. She wanted to learn more and more about the Gypsy culture and their problems, read literature and attended Romani language courses. Then she was admitted to university and took Romology despite the objections of her parents.

Self-defence mechanism works very well in a family. In terms of integration, it is considered right to lie about not only one's origin but also all the knowledge and experience, which are believed to be possibly useful. In such case, finding one's roots means finding and facing their socially undesirable ancestors.

With a difficult background

If someone is raised in extremely poor conditions, it is very unlikely that they will get admitted to university. (Forray, 2004). They need to be strongly committed to studying and social mobility in order to get higher and they also need some luck.

The father, a former miner who could only support his family from the revenue of occasional work and the mother who only finished some classes at elementary school started drinking heavily when they finally got a better quality home. However, this home was located in such neighbourhood where neighbours also spent their income on alcohol. This situation meant a serious and unexpected burden on the two boys, particularly on the elder one who had barely reached teenagehood. One of the teachers at the school outside the town recommended the younger one, who was about to fail school, the civil organization where he was taken (and taken back) by his brother. This coincidence granted him the aid to achieve great marks at primary school, got him to a good secondary school and still helps him now. As a university student now, he would like to return the same help to other deprived persons.

He could only finish secondary school with the financial help of a civil organization. It was only him who could talk about it openly, others could manage their situation without major problems.

“You could totally tell that they are a different story. Their biggest problem was what to wear, mine was whether I could have bread for breakfast or I would eat at all. Wherever I got into a place there were mainly non-gypsies, I was the Gypsy that was called „díszigány“ (someone to be displayed). They always highlighted that „you are nothing like the other Gypsies“ when it came to making remarks about my kind. (B. 22, student)

The excluded population group is practically unknown for the middle class. People from an excluded population group do not get attendance to secondary schools, particularly to elite schools. Therefore, these groups do not have the chance to get closer to each other (Varga, 2012).

The gap between the world of a child, later a teen and the route to their goals is difficult to overcome. Owing to school teachers and civilians, these efforts may become a success. However, it can be stated that no student has ever got admitted to university from such disadvantageous environment. His case, however, can serve as a good example of the fact that even the largest gap can be bridged if there is huge personal motivation and professional help.

Romology – the way to escape forward

Founding the Romology major occurred at a time when everything seemed just perfect to make it happen and bring it to success. The Department of Romology, which reached its final development stage by the turn of the century, was established at the end of the 1990s at the University of Pécs. The Gandhi Secondary School gave a major boost to the establishment and then operation the faculty by providing undergraduate students,

G's course of life gives a great example of these dilemmas. Raised in a village in the north-east region of Hungary, this young man grew up in an assimilated Gypsy family. His parents are employed; his younger brother attends a bilingual, English-Hungarian secondary school. His other brother sticks to family traditions, finished a vocational school, works with his father, and his fiancée is a Gypsy girl, who is willing to accept the traditions. The ethnic, cultural and family togetherness is a part of the family members' fundamental values; however, the extended family can only get together on holidays.

As he described, his grandmother wanted to finish her studies and continue, but due to the circumstances she could not (she was responsible to look after her brothers and sisters and help her mother around the house). However, education was a great value to her, perhaps due to the fact that her mother was Jewish. Knowing that they have a remote relationship with the Jewish is a frequently returning element with the young and ambitious Gypsy people.

Hungarian Gypsy (Romani) self-awareness is one of the determining experiences of this young man. He learned to speak the language when he was a teen. Like other Gypsy kids, he was used to the fact that most of the family matters were discussed in Romani by his parents (in this family it is Carpathian Gypsy), and children were usually excluded.

The young man is passionately interested in the culture of the Gypsies, the inter-group relations and the language. This is why he was admitted to Romology, in fact he could only make use of his Romani language examination when attempting to study Romology.

His main scope of interest is the civilian sphere, he is enthusiastic and has a strong skill in organizing events, every day he submits posts about something useful on his Facebook page, organizes events and shows great commitment to similar matters, too. He graduated in a church secondary school of Hit Gyülekezete (Faith Church). This school was everything he dreamed about – he had to study hard but some of the teachers provided aid. He had all the freedom, he was allowed to take up a Romani language course at Gandhi Secondary School. He involved himself in civilian activities and helped a municipality candidate to get prepared for the elections in a nearby village.

“I am in a different situation, a much luckier situation”

Living in extremely poor conditions - however, this may not apply to the university students - exists even today. They struggle for their everyday food, have a life that we mainly know from folk art literature, work hard and have no real chance to escape from the situation. Breaking out from this loop might only be possible for those with great luck and strength. Some of our students have managed to achieve it.

"There is a colony in B. I didn't live there, I lived across the road on the Main Road in a home with my mother's parents, later they passed away. And then my mother's sister, my aunt moved there with her three kids, they got in trouble because of her man. That was when my mother said that it couldn't go on, you couldn't share your place with 9 or 10 other people. She grabbed me – I still can remember and never forget it. I was about 10-11 years old. She took my clothes whatever she could, had me sit on the sled and pulled me, pulled me like sled dog. And then we arrived at grandpa's place. He greeted us heartily." (I, girl)

The girl is a half Boyash, her mother's family is Boyash. Her father, a heavy drinker who hardly works, left her and her mother soon. The grandfather took them healthily, their life seemed to become regular and orderly, the mother got a job, and the grandfather was still occupied, too. They did the gardening, cooked meals and had regular dinners together. She was at primary school when she was invited to Gandhi. The mother felt very good about it, she believed that her girl got a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that she should not miss. 'But she let me leave, she didn't want to see me lost in life. If she hadn't let me go to Gandhi then, I wouldn't be here now,' she says.

She was hardly 16 years old, when her mother suddenly became ill, had cancer and died soon. Later she learned that other members of the family lost their lives similarly at a young age, in some forms of cancer.

"I was 16 years old, living my sulky period of life, and we could not speak that way. Oh, I was scratchy. I was roaring. There was such stress with my father when I was younger, the constant persecution. I was a hyperactive child. But then over time the situation made me calm down. When I realized that I was 16 years old and I stopped being a child, I would have liked to stay a child, I would have liked to be a teenager but going out to parties was out of my life. I do not care as what one does not know is not missing. Anyway, I can cook anything, so I do not care. Of course I regret that it happened like this, but otherwise I do not regret. (I, 24 years old)"

In traditional societies, as among the Gypsies, much more chores fall on women than on men. Men can afford to go to pubs after work – and it is the task of women to make them get home somehow from there. Men hand over a part of their earnings support their families, but providing the food and appropriate clothing for the children and their mother is not their obligation. Even in this case with the eighty-year-old grandfather, it was the task of the girl to take care of the family, including those kids, the youngsters who had come into her family through her mother's brothers.

Today, he could not really decide about his further fate after he intermitted his studies then continued them when his teachers persuaded them to go on. He wanted to get into university level, then after completing the MA he would try to find a job. He was hoping to find a place in the civil sector that would match his interests and qualifications. Choosing Romology (Roma studies) was not the result of a careful consideration. Although it was not typical only of him but it was also characteristic of the majority of the young Roma. They did not dare to choose a major which might have been more for their taste, if they went to university, Romology (Roma studies) "remained". Being a Gypsy, they felt here more secure than in any other major.



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I have always wanted to belong somewhere, and now I do belong here. Besides, I also like that this program strengthened my Roma identity because at home I have not experienced such thing, and here I got into an environment where it was possible.

Inclusion – religious ties

Neither religion nor the church was ever the subject of the routine at Henrik Wlislöcki Student College. Previously it could have been judged, as the College had tried to prepare for a wider spectrum of literacy, civilization and education, and religion may be included in it.

Religious people are more common among Roma people than in the population as a whole. It has not emerged as the result of more accepting atmosphere of the past years. Previously, in fact, politics was not interested in the religion and beliefs of the Roma people, and even today it is treated as a peripheral question by the experts. However, all churches – maybe with the exception of the Jewish denomination – have missions aimed at certain groups of the Gypsies. The church-sustained further education colleges could be fitted in the line of this activity. (Forray-Martón, 2012)

One of the Roma (Vlah (oláh) Gypsy) youngsters describes how his family has joined the Baptist congregation.

“We got into this congregation, we were accepted. They were rather old, mainly middle-class people but there were some homeless people among them too. Now we are in another congregation. The Methodist was a bit depressing, there were rather elderly people and only a few of us remained. Some fell asleep during the service. Then we moved to a bit merrier and livelier one. The Sunday School Guild is Baptist. In the Baptist congregation a woman paid a visit to our family in order to teach the Bible to young children. And they told us to visit that congregation. My uncle went to the Sunday School Guild, he wanted to go there, that was what he wanted to do.” (K. boy)

The family has unusually great many members: nearly 20 people inhabit the five-room flat. The size of the family was due to the fact that they held together and the uncle moved the broken families into the big house.

The Gypsies, particularly its most traditional group, the Roma group, tie close kinships especially because of its devotion to traditions. In fact, there is no real importance

of who is a “full brother”, who is a “half-brother”, who is a cousin, only “brother” has real significance. It refers to kinship and social and emotional commitment. It is therefore not easy to count the number of the family members during a conversation. The degree of kinship among adults is easily recognizable, while the children were born from different, even sometimes out of the kinship relationships. They are considered to be brothers and treat each other accordingly.

The other aspect is the religious binding which interweaves the family. The head of the family regularly delivers Bible classes to disabled children in a foster home in addition to his normal daily work. He has involved his elder sons into this job, as they should know the Bible written to children, but today only one of them participates in this activity.

In addition to the commitment towards religion, education and social mobility are crucial too. The three older sons go to university or are just facing the secondary school leaving exams. Besides that, they do some sports and participate in public life in the civil sector. Moreover, they have strong political commitment. The opinions about politics and parties are approximately the same as the well-known intellectual views, however, their ethnical identity gives a stronger than usual emotional power to the hostility towards the extremists.

In the region of the South-West Transdanubia only a few Roma (Vlach Gypsy) live, the majority of the Gypsies living there are from the so-called ‘Boyash’ Gypsy group. It was the small Vlach (oláh) Gypsy group and not the ‘Boyash’ who were struck by the inhumanity that took place in the last year of the war: they were collected in the Komárom dungeon and many of them were killed.

“My daddy usually tells me about things that the German did to them. My dad was taken to Komárom, to the large collection camp. He was walking on mass graves, and told me other similar things. The family lived in Diósvizsló. There used to be a smaller camp then. There were German and also Hungarian among the ones who collected them. As the Hungarians collaborated with the Germans. The local gendarmes came from Pécs, but mostly spoke German. Once the Gypsies were herded, they were told to work. He was 6 then. His parents were taken and so he followed them. And then he told me that raw maize was thrown to them, those who caught some could eat, and the others could not. It happened in Komárom. I was there with my class. That castle is quite dark. They used to draw on its walls.” (K. boy)

The family has preserved the memory of atrocity and it has been passed on to younger generations, but – as the above cited quote indicates – only the pain could remain. We might think that it attracts anger or vengeance but due to the strong religious commitment, it does not at all. The unusually large but strongly binding family takes care of its members but at the same time strives for fitting into the wider social network.

However, tolerance is not complete. The lack of trust by the small group of Vlach Gypsies towards the region’s representative Gypsy group, the Boyash, is striking. This attitude is well-known, yet it is also known that the members of the two groups would be reluctant to admit it in public. An outside observer would only recognize that friendship is rare between them. The Student College only stimulates young people to cooper-

ate regardless of who actually belongs to which ethnic minority. However, life outside university is still dominated by different rules.

"The family has no Boyash friends but I do. They are referred to as stinky. That is not the way I see these things. They say such things as 'I am smelly' or 'you are like a Boyash'. For example, if somebody does something, then they say 'Oh, it is like a Boyash'. But I think they are not as aggressive as the Vlach Gypsies, but richer. I guess gangsterism is more typical of them. The Vlach Gypsies want to achieve something. And there are so many musicians. But also unfortunately there is the crime from which they can really make their living. But many from the 'Boyash' Gypsies live in slums. (K., boy)

This family with its own unusually wide range is a rarity today. However, it should be taken into consideration that this is an ethnic minority that feels necessary to protect itself. The extreme openness of the family is indicated by the various ranges of life management plans and strategies among its members: the girls are preparing to be full-time mothers or skilled workers whereas there are some who prepare for an intellectual career. This does not cause any conflicts, and neither one nor the other young person is excluded from the family.

Teachers' support

Quite often condemning statements can be heard or read about primary and secondary school teachers, especially about their prejudice and bias. However, it can hardly be surprising that teachers and masters have played an extremely crucial part and a supporting role in the life of our scholarship students.

All of the respondents went to kindergarten. Some of them even today, approaching their degree, visit their former kindergarten and marvel at Aunt Piri or Aunt Zsuzsa – who have barely changed since they were preschoolers. The well-studying girls or boys were liked and supported by the teachers. The often mentioned reason for this was that teachers were proud of the high-achieving, successful Gypsy and Roma children and youngsters. These young people performed well at school from an early age. They were hard-working, enthusiastic and accurately-performing students at school. Knowing their ethnicity has forced their teachers to give them special care as a well-performing, ambitious Gypsy student is pride both for the class and the school. One of the interview partners, a particularly diligent boy, speaks about his school situation in an extremely precise way.

"I had such problems with my teachers that they have always expected more from me. They kept urging me by saying that 'yes, you were able to do that'. I was always expected to go; if there was a competition I had to go. I think they wanted it because I was a Roma so they gave me even better attention. Of course, a Gypsy boy who is so super and fabulous means an extra good point for the school! When I go back, they welcome me with glad hands even today. Because they love me. They may love me because I am a talented Roma boy." (Z., aged 20)

The students of the College are all familiar with and follow the stories and rumour about the teachers and masters' prejudices. Although it is a rare exception in their own lives who remembers such prejudiced teachers. The well-performing, talented students – our students – belong to this group – they deserve a teacher's attention and care.

The future

The consulted students have a clear vision about their life after graduation. They are aware of their strengths, they know what they want and do not want to do. After an initial review of the interviews, it is apparent that all the interviewees are willing to make use of their degrees and those who belong to an ethnic group also want to exploit the fact that they are Gypsies. It may not be agreeable, but the fact should be considered rather self-evident that these young people have and still receive a substantial amount of money on the basis of their ethnicity. Financial support is a monthly grant that complements the grant they receive from the university. As there are some students among them whose family or a family member is struggling with serious financial problems, a part of the grant is used to support them.

Every public opinion survey highlights the pessimism of the Hungarians. On the basis of the surveys, it could reasonably be expected that these young people see their future from a rather pessimistic perspective. However, these people are certainly optimistic and, at the same time, very constructive too. In their vision, they are ready to undertake their ethnicity and the smart exploit what they studied at university.

Many of them plan to attend at a doctorate course (PhD) for which the Romology program of the local doctoral school provides a good basis; those who are interested in research are offered such tasks – and the necessary support - that can even establish a research career.

Others are willing to work in their profession, in the field of health law. However, they intend to move towards and become European Union experts or perhaps experts in health.

In general, the respondents' planned future career is in sync with the future plans of other graduates, in fact it represents an even higher level. This can be considered as normal. Students of the vocational college represent a social category in which having a university or college degree is less common. For their social environment – education level, members of their family and their wide social network – they are considered to be role models whose career are being watched anxiously and with full of hope by many. Their social and family environment, their family members - with whom they maintain close relation - i.e. members of a relatively wide group are about to start emerging in society. The results of being a role model radiate far as they are the first in the community that take the first steps on the road to a degree. This is a responsibility and, at the same time, a possibility for them and for those who want to follow their examples.

Summary

The study summarized the survey that is based on the interviews done with the students of Wlislóczky Henrik Student College. These young people came from many different parts of the country, mostly from the entire area of the country and represent all the population groups of the Gypsies. It can be clearly noticed that the majority of them did not come from a disadvantaged family, meaning that their parents and grandparents made their first steps to advance in society. It is not surprising because passing a successful final and entry examination is a filter of success in education even if it grants ease for the applicants. There are some to whom their ethnicity is not an issue; however, there are some that accept their ethnicity as a result of the programs of the vocational school. The family of the majority of the scholarship students already made their steps to become intellectuals. Their achievements as well as their problems are monitored by many. If they succeed there will be many others, the talented members of the community, to follow their example. The support of the university does not necessarily mean financial aid, it also means the transfer of education, which the students do not have access to because of the financial state of their families and for social and educational reasons.

The Gypsy (Roma) population came a long way to integrate into society. Those young students who were introduced above are already on the way to get a university degree. This is of course not the only way to rise in society but it is one of the possibilities and the way towards to it is through higher education and getting a degree. It is also important that this journey starts with accepting your family background rather than denying it. This is the exact message of the vocational school and similar scholarship programs that one can emerge into the group of the privileged by undertaking their family background or their ethnicity.

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