

ROMANI CHILDREN GO TO SCHOOL

BY BURTON BOLLAG

HERMANOVCE, SLOVAKIA: Large, stucco-covered houses sit on the hilly green contours of this pleasant village in the agricultural east of the country. This is where the white people live. At the low end of town, in a hollow where a stream flows, is a collection of small shacks with mud-covered walls and scrap-metal roofs. There is no running water or electricity. Little children run naked along the narrow muddy paths between the shacks in the warm autumn sun. This is where the Gypsies live.

The village's 140 white children attend an elementary school located on top of the hill. All but three of the 73 Gypsy—or Romani—children, as they prefer to be called, are sent to a separate, smaller school near the general store and pub in the village center. It is known officially as a "special school," meaning it is for

children with mild mental retardation, and it uses a greatly simplified curriculum.

"They want to be among themselves," says Mária Marková, director of both schools, referring to the Romani children. "Discrimination? No. We have three Romani children from better families in the normal school. But the others come to school with nothing, no pens or notebooks. Their families aren't interested in their education. They could never manage normal school."

The village's white children are being educated to compete for jobs. Most go to high school, and some go to college. Special school, on the other hand, qualifies graduates for little more than pushing a broom; when they finish, students are not eligible to attend

high school. After graduation, virtually all of the village's Roma go on welfare.

Throughout former Communist Eastern Europe, Romani children are getting a raw deal when it comes to getting an education. Even where they attend normal schools, their classes—or the schools themselves—are frequently segregated, leaving Romani children with an education that is separate and very unequal. In some countries, especially Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Hungary, special schools for the mentally handicapped serve as collective dumping grounds where substantial numbers of Romani children receive a grossly substandard education. In the poorer Balkan countries, like Bulgaria and Romania, school attendance by Romani children is reported to have dropped significantly during the last decade, the result of the post-Communist impoverishment of the Roma and the more openly anti-Gypsy attitudes of some local authorities who find excuses to avoid enrolling Romani children.

In normal schools, where they are in the minority, Romani children, who sometimes cannot afford books or proper clothes, are subject to racist abuse, and sometimes violence, from classmates and teachers.

(Below) Roma settlements in Slovakia, in the villages of Sviňa (left) and Jarovnice (right).

With minor exceptions, lessons designed to teach ethnic tolerance, or to celebrate elements of Romani culture, do not exist.

AT THE elementary school in Bogács, a village in the poor agricultural northeast of Hungary, white and Romani children are taught in separate classes. The lunchroom tables and the lavatories are strictly segregated “for hygienic reasons,” says school director Erzsébet Szezensi. Regardless of what her students may be learning about living with members of other ethnic groups, Szezensi says separation is the best solution. “Hungarian parents don’t want their children to study with Gypsies. It would bring down the teaching level too much.”

Since their ancestors set off on several waves of migration from northern India about a thousand years ago, the Roma have remained outsiders in Europe. Sometimes valued as skilled craftsmen, often despised, persecuted, even enslaved, the Roma have managed to hold on to their unique language and culture over the centuries. Eastern Europe’s Communist governments forcibly settled the once nomadic Roma in specified

areas but offered a degree of paternalistic protection and guaranteed employment. The collapse of Communism 10 years ago has led to a sharp worsening of their situation. A majority of Eastern Europe's 5 million Roma are now unemployed. Discrimination against Roma in hiring is commonplace; so is denial of access to public facilities like restaurants. Physical attacks by skinheads are troublingly frequent; dozens of Roma have been murdered in such attacks over the last decade.

The Czech Republic, which separated from Slovakia in 1993 in a peaceful, negotiated divorce, has been embarrassed by the exodus to Western Europe of hundreds of Romani citizens fleeing what they say are discrimination and racist violence. The erection of a controversial six-foot high wall in the northern Czech city of Ustinad Labem last fall, separating a group of Romani apartment houses from an adjoining white neighborhood, has only added to the country's worsening international image.

The situation has pushed the authorities to look more closely at the situation of the country's 250,000 Roma. In a spring 1999 resolution on how to promote their integration into Czech society, the government admitted that "approximately three-quarters of Romani children attend special schools for children with mild mental defects." The resolution goes on to warn that this situation is increasingly seen abroad as "an evil foretaste of a tendency towards apartheid." Only 3 percent of non-Romani children attend special schools.

"You can't get three-quarters of a population mentally retarded" says Deborah Winterbourne, a British human rights attorney employed by the European Roma Rights Center in the Hungarian capital, Budapest. "This is clear racial discrimination." Last June, Winterbourne jolted the Czech authorities when she filed an unprecedented legal challenge on behalf of the parents of 14 Roma children attending six special schools in the Czech city of Ostrava. The lawsuit, which is being heard by the country's constitutional court, names the ministry of education and the local school authorities as defendants, accusing them of practicing illegal racial discrimination. It asks for the establishment of a compensatory educational fund and the adoption of a plan to achieve racial balance in Ostrava schools within three years.

"We had people working for three months trying to find families who would be able to withstand the pressure" and join the lawsuit, says Winterbourne. One of the couples they signed up is Berta Červeňáková and her husband.

Three years ago their eldest daughter, Nikol, was transferred without their permission from first grade in a normal school to a special school. After the parents joined the lawsuit, the local school authorities offered to test Nikol again. This time, she was found to be of normal intelligence, and officials agreed to transfer her back to normal school.

"It's quite hard for her to catch up," says Berta Červeňáková. Twice a week, a tutor comes to their house to help Nikol learn the large amount of material she missed during those three years. "It seems right," says Červeňáková of the lawsuit. "Someone has to start, and then the other families will follow. I'd like Nikol to go to high school and then university. It all de-

pends on her and on the support I give her."

The overuse of special schools does not represent an attempt to save money. On the contrary. With an average of 9.8 students per class, compared to 22.3 students per class in normal schools, the special schools cost the Czech authorities about twice as much per pupil. Their overuse represents, rather, an unwillingness to deal seriously with the education needs of Romani children, an easy way to get rid of the problem.

In Hungary too, where more than a half million Roma live, the misuse of special schools is under at-

tack. In September 1999, Hungary's ombudsman for minority rights (who, like an American ambassador, is named by the president and approved by the legislature) issued a scathing report condemning the practice under which more than half of all Romani children are placed in schools for the mentally defective. The ombudsman, Jenő Karlténbach, an ethnic German law professor from Szeged University concluded, "This sys-

tem which negatively discriminates and segregates has proved to be a failure." He went on to reject claims that placing Romani children in special schools "protected" them. "Children...cannot be 'loved' while we participate in their exclusion and labeling." Karlténbach called on the government to review and modify regulations on placing children in special education. As in the Czech Republic, critics say intelligence tests are often culturally biased and trip up young Romani children for their incomplete knowledge of the national language. The authorities, Karlténbach said, should help parents understand the consequences of

special education for their children, and the parents' right to intervene. He also said Romani issues should be incorporated into teacher training programs.

Hungary's education minister, Zoltan Pokorni, reacted surprisingly positively to the report, promising to organize a conference to look at the issue with the participation of international experts. He said he would take steps to encourage more Romani parents to send their children to kindergarten so they will be better prepared for first grade. He also pledged to begin monitoring how the country's public schools use the \$40 million allocated per year to help improve the performance of Romani children. Critics say many schools simply add the money to their general budgets, where it is used for such things as heating and repairs.

The report, and the minister's reaction, received considerable press coverage, most of it favorable. But critics say the authorities are still not taking the problem seriously enough. "I don't think we need more conferences," says Gábor Bernáth, a gadzo, or non-Rom, who heads the Roma Press Center. The Budapest-based center runs a Romani news service and trains young Roma to become journalists. "Every day the fate of more and more pupils is being decided in a way which makes it impossible for them to get a job." He says, "The education system continues to educate masses of future unemployed Roma."

Not far away from Bernáth's busy and airy third-floor

center is an unassuming ground floor office at the back of a little courtyard. This is the headquarters of the Roma Civil Rights Foundation. On the wall is a large picture of Martin Luther King Jr., and text (in English) from his "I have a dream" speech. There are also large, vividly colored paintings depicting flowing people and fairy-tale scenes—typical of modern Romani art. Two years ago, the foundation launched an unprecedented lawsuit against the principal of a primary school in the town of Tiszavasvári in northeastern Hungary. The suit challenged the school's segregated dining facilities and separate graduation ceremonies for white and Romani students. Last spring, the court ruled in the foundation's favor, and the school was forced to end the practices and pay damages.

THE POSSIBLE impact of this widespread discrimination on Romani children has rarely attracted the interest of the region's social scientists. Rózsa Mendi, a psychologist working at the foundation, says the few Hungarian studies that have looked at the issue have found devastating psychological effects.

"Romani children generally first meet with prejudice at school" she says. "It is especially the teacher who conveys this prejudice. It can reduce students' academic motivation to a minimum. The children easily feel: This is a place where I don't belong." A 1975 study of one class in a village near Budapest "showed big differences between IQ and academic performance. Ro-

mani children stayed on the margins of the class. They wanted to belong, but the teacher never chose them.”

Mendi, whose fine features and unblemished cocoa-colored skin belie her middle age, is one of the few Roma to be working in a highly qualified profession. Yet the prejudice she had to endure has left unhappy memories. In her kindergarten class in Budapest, the other children refused to play with her. “It was very embarrassing and painful to stand alone in the schoolyard,” she recalls.

A recent survey of attitudes of Hungarian young people found that 37 percent of university students favored expelling the Roma from the country. Among high school students, more than half expressed a similar opinion. “Being Romani is a highly stigmatized identity,” says Mendi.

Before taking her job at the foundation two years ago, Mendi worked for the social services department of Budapest city. There she established and ran a “personality development” program for promising but troubled Romani high school students from around the country. They would gather four days each month, sometimes enjoying the unheard of privilege of spending a night in a hotel and eating in restaurants. She used role playing and other techniques to build up the students’ self-esteem and improve their communication and conflict resolution skills. All 15 participants in the program’s first year finished high school—something few Roma do. Three went on to university. Then funding ended and the program stopped.

Mendi is currently carrying out personality studies of 40 young Roma attending university. Hungary probably has more Roma in higher education than any other Eastern European country. Still, Mendi says they number no more than 500. She wants to understand what special qualities have enabled them to go this far, and what costs they have paid in psychological terms.

One thing the participants have in common is particularly strong family ties. “Love from their families is what sustains them,” says Mendi. Psychological testing and deep interviews show they tend to have strongly functioning egos. They are very spontaneous and creative, with strong inner control: ‘I determine my own goals and how to achieve them.’ “The functioning of their superegos is below average,” says Mendi. “They can’t follow strict rules; they need a certain degree of liberty.”

She has also found that these children all had to deal with difficult conflicts during their lives. “But this gives them greater problem-solving abilities than non-Roma,” she says. These successful young Roma “tend to choose constructive solutions to conflict rather than emotional or self-destructive ones.”

Yet there is a downside. “They control their behavior and emotions even when they don’t have to,” says Mendi. “In the short term, this is positive; they can adapt to conflict situations better. But in the long term it can lead to psychosomatic problems.” It turns out that almost all of the 40 have undergone bouts of loneliness, depression, even physical problems—stomach ailments or arrhythmic heartbeats. The whole process of making it in the dominant white society is inherently stressful, says Mendi.

Mendi also heads an innovative program at the foun-

dation called Romaversitas. Established two years ago, it currently provides special academic support to 33 Romani university students. It is modeled partly on the “Invisible University,” small institutions which provide tutors and other support to the best university students in Hungary and several other ex-Communist countries. Romaversitas has more modest goals: to prevent dropping out in the first year and to build self-esteem. It also provides private tutors, monthly lectures for participants, and small stipends since most Roma come from poor families.

Most of the students are doing studies in the social sciences or teaching. “We would like them to develop themselves *and* to help bring about change in their communities,” says Mendi. “Unfortunately, the kind of conviction that was behind the U.S. civil rights movement doesn’t exist here yet among the Roma. We don’t have a charismatic leader like Martin Luther King. You can find self-destruction; you can’t find much self-sacrifice.”

Despite Mendi’s pessimistic assessment, a number of small education projects across the region have been set up by Roma and their gadzo supporters since the end of Communism. While they reach relatively few children, they serve as models, showing that there are alternatives to the current dismal undereducation of the Roma. Some of the projects receive funding from the European Union, UNESCO, or other donors. The open society network established by the Hungarian-born American financier and philanthropist, George Soros, is probably the single largest source of support and encouragement.

GANDHI HIGH School is located in a leafy suburb of Pécs, a historic southern Hungarian town known for its mosques and minarets—today used as Christian churches—that have survived from Ottoman Turkish times. The high school is an island of normalcy in a region where failure is the rule.

It is mid-afternoon and the school’s 200 students, ages 13 to 18, are lounging around the premises of the modern, four-story brick building—the converted former headquarters of a state-owned mining company—where they board and study. The day’s classes have ended, and the students, all Roma, have a couple of hours’ break before the start of the 4 to 6:30 p.m. “silencium” period when they are all required to be in their rooms studying.

The atmosphere is relaxed. Students are mostly in little groups. In one, a student is playing the guitar while others are singing. Sixteen-year-old László Petrovics, in 11th grade, wants to study acting and directing at university. In the small Romani village he comes from, his former elementary school classmates have all ended their schooling. “They do seasonal work in the fields,” he says ruefully, in quite passable English. “They rob, they do nothing, they have babies.”

Fifteen-year-old Kálmán Bogdán, a dark-skinned boy with curly bangs who is in ninth grade, wants to go to military academy and become an army officer after he finishes high school. “In elementary school, the teachers always got angry with the Gypsy children quicker,” he says. “They would hit them on the side of the head

and say: 'Stupid Gypsy.' "It made me feel so bad. The teachers are supposed to help all the students." Yet he sees a bright future for himself now. "If I really study hard," he says, "everything is possible."

Gandhi High School was established in 1994 as a private initiative with funds from Soros and other donors. The following year, the government agreed to take over the \$400,000 annual budget, which covers school operations as well as room and board and books for students. The government generously, and wisely, left management in the hands of the Gandhi Foundation. The school follows the standard Hungarian high school curriculum, including mandatory English and German. It also teaches Romani culture and two Romani languages, Lovari, a Sanskrit-based language like modern Hindi, and Beash, an old dialect of Romanian that is widely spoken by the Roma in the surrounding community.

The school has a group of three or four educators who spend three days each week visiting elementary schools in villages and towns in the surrounding region, recruiting promising new students. Up to 100 sixth-graders are invited to attend a weeklong summer school; the best are offered a place at Gandhi for the start of their seventh grade. Of the 54 students who were enrolled in the first year of the school's operations, only 18 have stuck it out. But admissions criteria have been tightened, and more recent students have done much better. The first 12th-grade class will graduate this spring.

"The aim of Gandhi school," says deputy director Richard Karsai matter of factly, "is to send students to university." Karsai, a gadzo German teacher who sports a dark brown beard and ponytail, lets the older students address him by his first name. "We want a Romani intelligentsia to develop," he continues. "We want them to be leaders of their people: lawyers, doctors, social workers, politicians." Currently only eight junior-level members of the school's 42 full- and part-time academic staff are Roma. "I personally would like all our teachers to be Roma in 10 years," he says. "If we do our work properly, we should be out of a job by then."

Elsewhere, private groups have established pre-school programs to help Romani children deal better with the shock of entering first grade. "There is great liberty in Romani families," says psychologist Mendi. "They are very child-centered. It's just the opposite of the discipline at school." In some Eastern European countries, including Slovakia, there is the added problem that, at home, many Roma speak a language other than the national language, which is the language of the education system.

ON THE beautiful elongated main square of the eastern Slovak city of Prešov are two cozy, little, brightly colored rooms. This is a pre-school center—one of three run by the Foundation for Romani Children, a private Slovak organization. The teacher, Juliana Nagyová, hands out simple percussion instruments to six young children, ages 4 to 6, sitting on the carpeted floor. "What are these?" she asks in Slovak. "Yes, sticks. And what do we say? That's right: Thank you." Then she leads the children in a song. Parents are invited to attend the daily, intensive two-hour sessions, and quite a few do, bringing away educational tasks to do at home with their children.

"My older son Andrej had to repeat first grade at school," says Milan Kiňa, an occasional laborer with a sixth-grade education, who is here with the youngest of his three children. "He had a problem with the language; he wasn't prepared for school. Here they learn Slovak and how to get on with the teacher. It's great. Our daughter Monika spent one year here, and she's had no problem in elementary school."

That is, no problem until yesterday. That's when Kiňa and his wife went to a parents' meeting at school and discovered that their daughter had been transferred from a mixed class to an all-Romani one that is at a lower level. "I went to the school director," says Mrs. Kiňa angrily, "and she said that Monika has to go there because the better Romani pupils must help the weaker ones."

"We can't accept that," says Edita Kovařova, founding director of the pre-school center. She promises to intervene with the school director.

"We hope our children will go on to high school," says Mrs. Kiňa. "They will go," she corrects herself. "And they will find work. They will have a better life than we do."

Even in the normal school system, there are exceptional teachers who have made a real impact on the lives of their Romani pupils. Jan Sajko, a gadzo, has had extraordinary success awakening the artistic talent of his students in an all-Roma public school in Jarovnice, the largest Romani settlement in Slovakia. The vividly colored paintings and drawings of Sajko's

students have won prizes around the world. He lets pupils work at their own pace, dealing with them “from their own starting places,” and encouraging them to paint about things from their own lives.

Large paintings of Sajko’s students line the halls of their school in the impoverished community. He takes students to visit museums and on other trips. It is essential, says Sajko, to “do everything possible so that the models for the children are no longer family members who drink, sit around playing cards, or use drugs. The most active students must be well rewarded, for example, with trips abroad, so the children realize that those who work and achieve certain results, have much to gain.”

In Prague, the architecturally splendid capital of the neighboring Czech Republic, the New School Foundation is training Roma to work as teachers’ assistants. Educators increasingly believe that assistants can play a crucial role in helping young Romani students adjust to the alien culture of public education. Last year, 37 assistants were trained and employed in Czech public schools. About a dozen more are being trained and monitored under the foundation’s auspices in Slovakia, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Assistants are most often women between age 30 and 40 who have their own children attending school. They receive 80 hours of training comprising lectures, observing elementary school classes, and discussing how to help children overcome learning difficulties.

Assistants have been recruited through personal contacts. To be accepted into training, they must present a written agreement from a school, which says that they will be able to work there after completing

training. In many cases their salaries are paid by international donors. “The entire program works on enlightened goodwill,” says David Murphy, an American who runs the program at the New School Foundation. “You need a school director who has genuine interest in the students, and teachers who do not feel threatened by having someone else in their class.”

Assistants earn about \$175 per month in the Czech Republic, half of a teacher’s starting salary. “We insisted the assistants be paid and not work as volunteers,” says Murphy. “We want gadzo children to be forced to look at a Romani person in a position of authority. That is something extremely rare in Eastern Europe.”

For the third year in a row, the New School Foundation is holding a Romani language poetry and prose competition for school children in the Czech Republic. The contest, called “Romani Dream,” is a way of celebrating the culture of the country’s largest minority and helping to awaken a pride in themselves that has been pushed down for centuries. One of the past winners was 10-year-old Michal Husak for his poem, “The Romani Language”—

Each people have their own tongue
So they can speak and discuss
With their own words.
Listen, children, we do too.
When we have something to say,
We say it in our own words,
The same way our fathers
Spoke with their fathers.
Tell me, which language
Is better than ours?
I’ll tell you—there is not one language.
There are no words
More beautiful than our own. □