

INTERVIEWS WITH ROMA AND SINTI ABOUT PORRAJMOS



PHOTO BY MATILDE CIOLLI

INTERVIEW TO SAMIR:

Samir was born in Peja/Pec, Kosovo. He was forced to flee his homeland as a result of the war. At age 23 he is living now in the Casilino 900 camp in Rome together with his wife and 2 children. Casilino 900 is a self-built Roma and Sinti camp without any infrastructure: streets are not paved, there is no sewer system, no water system (just some fountains), chemical toilets, current generators and wood stoves. While 800 people inhabit the camp, Samir is one of three men at Casilino 900 who was able to study until the first class of high school.

What do you know about Porrajmos? Have you ever heard about what happened to the Roma people during the Second World War?

Basically, no. I am very young and I have never heard anything about this. I don't think about studying the past. I think about the future and building a better life.

Have you ever heard about this topic at school?

No, never.

Do you know more or less what happened in that period?

I know something about Hitler; I know that he was powerful, that he wanted to exterminate everyone. This is what I know. Later I read in newspapers about what happened to the Jews.

Did your grandparents or old people from the camp ever tell you something about it?

No, we have never been told about this. Maybe they don't want us to know about it because those times were very hard for them. I don't know why. For certain our grandparents know what happened but they never speak about it.

Do your grandparents tell you about other episodes and stories from the past?

Yes, they tell us about how they worked and about when they fled from Yugoslavia. Nothing else.

Do you think that other young people like you are aware of this part of history?

I am absolutely certain that no young person living in Casilino knows about it.

And what do you think about the current situation?

We have adapted to life in the camps, but we hope for a better life someday.

Are you optimistic about it?

Yes. I think the future will be better. I want to create my future. I am searching for a better life. Every day I think about my children. I pray to God that they will not have the same life that I have had. I would like to live with my children in a house, I would like them to go to school, and I would like to find a normal job. These are my goals. Beside these goals, I would like to help my people; I would like that Roma people were treated like normal people. I would like for Italians, Germans and French to respect Roma people without letting themselves live in fear of being robbed every time they see one of us.

INTERVIEW TO AKIJA:

Akija, a spokesperson of the camp Casilino 900.

Do the older people who have lived during the Second World War speak about the things that happened to them?

Not much. They don't want to speak about what happened because they don't want to trouble the younger generations. For Roma, just like for Jews, it was a horrible period, a massacre. They took them away to slaughter them, death was a certain thing then. The ones who entered, didn't come out alive, only very few escaped.

Atrocious things have happened and what is striking is that there is no memory of it. We believe it is of a crucial importance to speak now about this part of history because the witnesses are passing away.

The European Union had to think earlier about Roma people. Like they had thought about Jews. For such a long time we've been as a cloud, we haven't existed. But we are not invisible people, in Yugoslavia we had houses. But in Italy, even today, concentration camps exist. The equipped camps with guards around are like Auschwitz, they are like those concentration camps. We are back in the Italy of 70 years ago, it is a disgrace. I have relatives in Canada and Germany, and they are doing well, they live in houses, they pay their rent and living expenses. So if you put me in a camp, if you give me and my 6 children a caravan of 30m2, and you don't give me work, what can I do? We want to work, we want a

« I would like that Roma people were treated like normal people »



PHOTO BY ELKA WUEHLING

normal house, where we can pay rent and living expenses. We want to be recognized, we don't want to be invisible.

Today there are some aspects of reality that remind of the past. It is incredible that we haven't managed to learn from the past.

We, Roma people, have learned. When the war in Yugoslavia broke out in the 90s, for example, many Roma people escaped to avoid killing. Now in the former Yugoslavia it is still like that, there is hatred between Croats, Serbs and Bosnians. Whereas, we the Roma didn't go into the war. Only a smaller minority, the ones who didn't have any other choice.

70-YEAR-OLD MAN

P. 70-year-old man from Casilino 900 was willing to speak about his past, but he was only telling us how he came to Italy with his family when the war in Yugoslavia started 20 years ago. He lived in Niksic in Montenegro with his family in a house. Then they had to leave everything because of the war. When we asked him about his experience of the Second World War he said that he was just a boy then. When asked if he remembered anything, he just said that his family ran away from Albania to Bosnia and that he cannot go back to that time. After saying that the Second World War was horrible for them, he changed the subject of conversation, obviously not willing to talk about that anymore.