

It's About Respect

**Reflections on the lives of the Roma
Community in Newcastle**

A Living Tradition

A Living Tradition CIC

North-East England has a fascinating and proud heritage of concern and work for human rights over the last 250 years. The heritage of fairness, tolerance and solidarity is very much a living tradition as people in the region continue to struggle for their own rights and for those of others across the world. The vision of A Living Tradition is to help people to continue the traditions which began at least as far back as the late 18th century. Examining the heritage can help to give people in the region today both inspiration and examples of good practice to help keep communities cohesive.

A Living Tradition is an organisation based in the North East of England which uses the heritage of human rights and community cohesion work in the region to encourage and promote it now and in the future. A key emphasis is on human rights and how these impact on individuals, families and communities. There is also an emphasis on working on human rights and community cohesion issues today.

Whilst the North-East of England has a very good record in various aspects of community cohesion, there is very little knowledge in region of its human rights heritage. There is a great need to help people understand their heritage so that it can give inspiration and examples of good practice to be used to help bring about greater community cohesion. This heritage could in turn be very helpful in helping to maintain community cohesion.

For more information about A Living Tradition go to www.alivingtradition.org

Thanks

My heartfelt thanks for help in making this book possible go to the following:
Newcastle City Council and the Make Your Mark fund
Beverley Ogle
Hardrus Duplessis and Viv Heywood-Hill, Westgate College
Martin Keles Agape Church
Kirsty Mcdine, Millin Centre
Barbara Cage, Healthworks Newcastle
Becci Varnham Gateshead Carers
Karla Daly
...and last but not least to all those interviewed.

Peter Sagar November 2013

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Introduction

It has been estimated that there are 4 000 Roma currently living in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Where have they come from? Why are they here? What is the history of the Roma in Europe? How have other large-scale immigrations into Newcastle and Tyneside fared in the past? These are some of the questions this book tries to answer.

The first section consists of interviews with members of the Roma community in Newcastle (and Gateshead) between February and November 2013. Here they speak of what life was like in the Czech Republic and how they have found life in Newcastle.

These comments are then put into context, through a short history of the Roma people in Europe, since they emerged from the Punjabi Region of India around 1 000 years ago. It is by no means a comprehensive history, but if any reader is interested in learning more a Bibliography is found at the end.

Following that section, there will be an examination of the situation for Roma in Eastern Europe in the second decade of the 21st century. Discrimination in housing, education, health service provision and in the job market will be investigated. Again this is intended to give a context to the testimonies of the Roma community presently resident in Newcastle. This supplemented by a short account of and reflections on a visit I made to Chanov Roma ghetto in the Czech town of Most in August 2013.

Newcastle and the wider Northeast of England have seen many waves of immigration over the last 200 years. Studying these can give us clues as to how best help new arrivals to successfully integrate for the benefit of all. The influx of Irish, both before and after the terrible potato famine of the 1840's and the settling of Yemenis in South Shields after the turn of the 20th century provide illuminating examples of how Tyneside people in the past have overcome their differences and been able to set an example of good community cohesion for the rest of the country to follow.

Finally, there are the lyrics for a song, partly-based on thinking about the situation of the Roma community in Newcastle. This can be heard at www.alivingtradition.org >Music/Writing.

Peter Sagar November 2013

Roma Testimonies

I have lived in Newcastle for three years now. Before coming to Newcastle, I used to live in Chomoutov in the Czech Republic. I left the Czech Republic, because we had problems in our country.

I would like people to know that governments promise things for the Roma, but don't always deliver. They don't want to give Roma work. Some people were put in schools where there was racism, so the Roma are then put into elementary schools. There they can't get the qualifications, so they can't get a decent job.

I think Newcastle people are aware that their families also came originally from elsewhere.

School in Newcastle has been alright and I have been treated the same as other pupils. I have learnt English to a better standard. I knew some English before I came. I have also met Danielle! I have been able to travel to a few places, such as Manchester, Bradford and even Sunderland.

However, I have also had to put up with racist abuse and assaults. There was also a robbery. My mobile phone was taken with violence when I was bitten by a racist. I had had problems with him at school and he had a few friends with him so he attacked me.

Another time I was on a bus and I gave the bus driver £10. He said he had no change and he took me all the way to town, but I did get my change back!

I went to the barbers in Benwell and I caught an infection on my head. My head swelled up and I was in the hospital for about five days!

I think people might be hostile towards us because they think we are taking all their jobs.

One person called me a Paki B***** and I asked him why he called me a Paki as I am not from Pakistan!

Some people are brought up as racists.

When I am with them on my own they do nothing, but they can be racist when they are in a big group. Would I beat a person up for no reason?

Some people think we came from the tramps and they don't understand that we have clean houses. There are many other people who don't care about their houses and their children.

My family is very important to me.

As Roma people we have a lot of music to offer.

When I finish my exams, I want to go on to 6th form or college.

I probably won't stay in Newcastle permanently. It is difficult to say what I will do.

My uncle is a hard worker and has worked hard as a cleaner at Newcastle United for five years. My dad is a painter and builder.

Martin Kaleja

I have lived in Newcastle for three years. Before coming to Newcastle, I used to live in Chomoutov in the Czech Republic. We came here because my mum had family here. Mum hadn't seen her family for about 10 or 12 years.

There is a lot of discrimination against the Roma in Europe. Sometimes people have to live in metal containers, which should be used to carry things on boats. There needs to be more education for Roma children and others need to know more about the lives of Roma. Sometimes people are racist at schools, so Roma children don't want to go. Some Roma children are not well educated by their parents, but other families are like that too.

A lot of people moved here for a better education.

A lot of Roma people in the Czech Republic end up having to be binmen, but I don't want that future and I want my children to grow up in a better way.

I think some Newcastle people know their heritage of tolerance, but not all of them.

Education here has been a good experience for me at Newcastle College. I have been able to do any courses I want and there has been no discrimination.

When I am bored I can go to town and look around, go to a coffee bar, meet friends, go to the cinema.

I like the area down by the river; it is a nice view, especially at night-time.

There are lots of good people in Newcastle. If people are good to me then I will be good to them. I think it's about respect.

One day I went through the park and I saw some lads and they asked me for a tab. I said I had none. They started to throw bottles at me. I ran away, but I fell on the ground and they started to kick me. I covered up my head, because one wanted to kick me in the head. Fortunately a white woman came to help me. Others had just sat and watched it for five minutes.

In another incident in the same place, some people accused one of my friends of trying to steal a bike and they started attacking us with a car jack. A lady came and helped us.

At the bus-stop near the Murco petrol station, I got on the bus and paid £1.35 to get off near where I live. However, the bus driver tried to throw me off before my stop. He said if he saw me again, I wouldn't get on his bus.

People might be hostile towards us because I look different and they are unpleasant just for the fun of it. They like to bully people, because it's their sense of humour. Sometimes there is also peer pressure.

Many people don't understand that we are also Christian. They don't understand that we are really very similar to them. People should communicate more and learn from each other. There are a lot of good people here. There are good and bad people everywhere.

My family is very important to me, including my extended family. My grandparents live nearby.

Roma have a lot to offer the people of Newcastle. We have our music, our food and our dancing. The first thing in our culture is our children; we want to take good care of them.

One good way of building bridges between people is to collect young people together from different backgrounds. This happens with Action For Children at the old library in Benwell. I have lots of English friends, who have been good. I have seen local kids and Czech and Slovakian kids going out and playing together.

I want to be an architect, when I finish my education.

I might stay in Newcastle for a long time, but I might move because of work.

Robert Kaleja.

I have lived in Newcastle for six years. Before coming to Newcastle, I was living in Slovakia, in Poprad.

In my country, it was very hard to find a job. If they see my race, they don't have a job for me. I was working as a binman. There were 350 people working for the company, but only 3 people from the Roma community. After 3 years I was told I was not needed. It was definitely because I was Roma. I can't live a normal life in my country. My life is better here than in my country.

Also, living in my country, me, my partner and four children we would only get 230 Euros a month.

Friends in my country have school certificates, but none of them have jobs, because of the discrimination. On the news about Roma they say there will be 25 million Euros to sort out the problems. However, the people in the government are taking the EU money, without doing anything with it to help the Roma. Many people in my country are living in very bad conditions. People don't have any water in their homes, some don't have any electricity.

When we were living there we had a good house, but the problem was looking for a job. All Roma people keep everything clean in their homes. In a country where you are poor and don't have money for stuff to clean with it is hard.

I know how life is in my country. Government people are not checking housing, just taking money into their pockets. They only come round when it is election time, with food and alcohol to bribe us!

Three or four people working with someone say the way to change Roma people is with money, but there is no information on how the money is spent. People sent food stuffs, but it went to the city council and ends up on the black market. For example, I send you money to help but you just take my money and do nothing. As a result the European Union then say there is no money.

There are three kinds of people living in my country:

- a) Crazy people
- b) People with mental health problems
- c) People who have a lot of money in the bank

I knew in 2007 that I could have a life in the UK.

When I arrived, I started work straightaway, cleaning. I was working lots of hours, for £600 a month and then the wages started to get less. I spoke to the supervisor and I asked about wages, but the manager couldn't say what was happening. Somebody was fiddling the timesheet and taking some of my pay for themselves.

Now I am looking for a job, but the Job Centre lost my ID card. If I have no identification, I can't work. People from the Job Centre say they sent it in the post, but the post was lost. I know I have to pay for an I.D. card, even though I didn't lose it.

Some people coming to this country will not have any chance of benefits and there are no jobs to just walk into.

There are people who come who are playing the system and a lot of people who just want to get on with life get judged in the same way as the people who are playing the system.

It is important that people are told more about what is happening to the Roma back in Slovakia and Serbia.

I came to Newcastle because at the airport in Prague, there were Easyjet planes coming here! Some people might have family, friends living here. My brother-in-law is in Bradford. He says it is a good life, without anti-social behaviour, living with people from Pakistan. However, there are less people to help my brother-in-law than there are help me in Newcastle.

I have lived here for six years. It was hard to start from zero. But people have been friendly. I have had few bad incidents with English people. One person did get angry with my children, but he was Korean! I was let down on a council flat by the local Housing Officer.

The people in the street where I live are O.K.

One local person who was a neighbour was racist to me. She used to sniff gas and was stockpiling gas cannisters. It was a health hazard. I reported it and then the night noise team came round to me. The

neighbour and her friends, who, according to the police were alcoholics, used to abuse me racially.

One day in the morning, my front door was open and my neighbour burst in, without asking, ran upstairs and tried to throw herself out of our upstairs window! I phoned 999, told them what was happening, a police officer came and after 10 minutes a big van came and they arrested her. Her partner was deported back to Africa and she became more wild after that.

She started knocking on my door, the police arrested her. She started again asking for money. I gave her a little money, a pound or two, for a quiet few hours, but then loud music started.

My house now is nice and I have nice neighbours. However, I am still waiting for housing benefit, since I moved.

For three to six months, I have been waiting for a new passport and ID card. It is a long time for everybody.

On Job Seekers Allowance, I cannot go home and visit my family and I have no ID at the moment. I could get temporary ID for one day, but it wouldn't be worth it.

Some people asked me about my culture, when I was working with English people. They asked me about my country and showed interest. People from the Czech Republic and Slovakia are not very different, with the same food.

We love our kids. Family is very important. First place, I am very protective of my children. It is a natural thing to do. Roma music is very important to us. I don't play music, but my wife's brothers do play.

This country is perfect! I like the rule of law and the equal educational opportunities. We do worry about Britain pulling out of the European Union.

Jozef Conka

I have lived in Newcastle for three years and four months. Before coming here I lived in the Czech Republic.

We only came here for a holiday, but we stayed. I was pregnant and couldn't go back. I hadn't seen my sister for 11 years. My sister came here around 2003 or 2004.

When I have had problems, I have had someone to turn to. Some people haven't had someone to turn to. I am sometimes scared to go out, because of what has happened to my family.

There are racist people. One man was going to throw a bicycle at me. He was more than 18 years old.

One day I was shopping at Lidl with my sister and a man followed us until we left the shop.

Two people from other countries came to buy bread and were kicked out of the shop. They were kicked out by a man on the till, who thought he was a security guard!

Then there were people from the former Yugoslavia buying loads of bread and he didn't like them to buy so much bread!

Another day, I was at the doctor's for the first time to register. I didn't have a passport for the baby who was born here. The receptionist said that if I hadn't got a passport, then I couldn't register the young one. She gave me forms to register. The little baby ripped up one of them and the receptionist made Martin, my son, take the form out of the bin.

She asked me why I came to register here. I said it was because it is a Slovakian doctor and we speak a similar language. It should only take ten minutes to register, but the receptionist kept asking us questions for 4 hours! I gave her the passport and the receptionist took the passport for 2 hours to photocopy it. There were only 3 or 4 people waiting at the doctor's.

I called her back after 3 or 4 days to see if we were registered, along with my son Robert, but the receptionist said that the registration would have to be done again. After a while we returned. The receptionist then

said that I couldn't make appointments over the phone and that appointments would have to be made face to face.

I went up there again and made an appointment and I asked about registering my sons Lucas and Martin, but she said she wouldn't give me the forms. She wouldn't give the forms without passports or birth certificates.

I went in a third time for an appointment and I had the little baby with me. I asked what was going on and gave passports to register Lucas, the young one and the receptionist said she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't give the passport back, because the visa had run out. She said if I didn't like it I could go and register somewhere else. The receptionist was abusive to Janana, who is a support worker from Action for Children. Janana was angry as well.

One day, I was getting off a bus and was half-way out when the bus-driver pressed the button and closed the doors on the pram. The pram was stuck in the doors. The little one was still in the pram.

Another time, I went from Lidl's with my friend and I was going home. When I was paying he was giving me dirty looks and said, "go back to your country and get off my bus", before calling us 'bastards'.

With me my family comes first. The Roma have a culture of music and dancing, which we keep traditional. In Slovakia some people don't care about their babies and bin them, but Roma people will always look after their babies.

I know people with many children, but they still care about them even though they don't have much money.

Adriana Hancova

I have lived in the UK for five years and in Newcastle for 3 years. It is better here than in the Czech Republic.

Every Gypsy child in the Czech Republic is segregated because the Czech government is not fair. The Czech people push away Gypsy people. They are not allowed in restaurants.

I have worked with this problem for 10 years, when I lived in the Czech Republic. It is not only a problem for the Czech Republic, but it is also a problem for Gypsy people, because they don't have their own national identity. Gypsy people live all over the world.

Gypsy people came from Northeast India after countries in Europe were already taken. After coming to Persia, they came to Romania, Albania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and then onto Western Europe.

There is a lot of racism in Czech Republic now. Before there was the Czech Republic, the Communists kept the racism down. Officially there was no racism. The Communists were good for gypsy people. Gypsy people got jobs, houses and education. The problem with democracy for Gypsy people is that there is no democracy for Gypsy people. No-one gives us democracy.

Gypsy people need more education and better healthcare.

Things are not improving. Officially Czech politicians say everything is O.K. They have many programmes which are supposed to help Gypsies. They get money from Europe, but it does not go to Gypsy organisations. It goes to Czech organisations.

These Czech organisations are supposed to work for Gypsy people, but they do not work with Gypsy people. They do not ask what Gypsy people want.

For example, say the European Social Fund give 200 Euros to the Czech government to help with the education of Gypsy people. The Czech government will give it first to a Czech organisation. After that, there will only be 100 Euros of it left. Then that money will be passed on to another Czech organisation, who will take 50 of those Euros. Then it will go to another Czech organisation, who will take another 20 Euros. This

will continue until at the bottom, there is an organisation run by Gypsies, who will get 10 of the original 200 Euros.

There is no sense of partnership. They treat us like children.

I worked for 10 years in the Czech Republic for a non-profit organisation to help people from children to adults with European Social Fund money. This organisation had problems with the Czech government, because the Czech government help Czech organisations working for Gypsy people.

70% - 80% of Czech people are racist towards Gypsy people. However, Czech politicians in some towns have a better understanding of Gypsy people and it is better.

Gypsy people have no problems with getting a job here, except with the lack of English language. Those who speak English get jobs and education. I like the equal education (opportunities). I have been treated O.K. in the Job Centre in Newcastle.

Nothing changes in the Czech Republic. English people have an understanding of Gypsy people because they have had other groups who came here before, such as Indians. This is because there was colonialism in the past.

Arnost

I am from the Czech Republic. I have lived 6 years in Britain, one and a half years in Newcastle. Before that I was living in Manchester.

In the Czech Republic, I went to proper High School for 9 years from 6 to 15. But I couldn't go to college. I came to England for education.

I have papers from my school (about my qualifications). However, if I go to show my papers, for college or education, I will have problems, because I am Roma and a Gypsy.

In Newcastle, if you go to government organisations, there is no racism, but sometimes there is from young people who have been drinking. They shout abuse. If they drink, they are not scared. This happens on the street.

Last Saturday, I went to play football. One English boy started shouting "Come on you black bastard, come on fight me". One English lady was listening and called the police, because the person was drunk.

Newcastle is O.K. In Manchester I was working for 2 years in a big factory. It was quiet and I was treated O.K. After this the company was quiet and there was not enough work for everyone, so my job went. It was because of lack of work, not because of racism.

I came to Newcastle, because I have family here.

I like Newcastle, because I am studying here. I am studying English. I need a job, because I have a house and a girlfriend.

Michael

I have lived in the UK for 7 years. 3 years in Newcastle and before that in Liverpool.

Scouse is harder to understand than Geordie!

I lived in the Czech Republic, in Most.

My family left the Czech Republic because there was racism and no chance of a decent job. All Gypsy people in the Czech Republic have the same problem.

In Newcastle I have a better life. There was more racism in Liverpool. Most people are O.K. and I have lots of English friends.

I have had no experiences of racism in Newcastle. People have been friendly. No problems in Newcastle. People are racist because they have been drinking.

It's normal for them to be abusive. They are abusive to English people as well.

My family is very important to me. I live with my family here in Newcastle.

I want to learn. I am just 21. I want to learn English up to Entry 3, then Level 1. I would like to stay here and work here. If I have Level 1, I have a big chance to get a job, because the job goes to the person with the best English.

Andre Kirvej

I have lived in Newcastle for 6 years.

Before that I lived in the Czech Republic.

I left the Czech Republic because there was no work, no proper houses. Every month I was paid a little tax credit and child benefit. We did not have a job because I have a very young child. It was difficult to get a job because I was Roma.

Life was not good. Here they have much better schooling at Excelsior and at Atkinson Road. Good educational opportunities is a main reason why we came for my children.

Family is very important to me.

In Newcastle, people have been good to us, speaking nice to us. The doctor has been good, as have people helping us with benefits.

Newcastle is a nice city and my children are happy.

We have looked for jobs. I worked in Primark, but I had to leave because I didn't have a proper contract. I didn't have a work permit. I worked at Primark for 2 years.

We had to wait a long time for Child Benefit. My partner was working in cleaning services for 3 hours every day.

Sometimes I have had some abuse. Sometimes I have been called a Muslim - and I am not Muslim.

I want to stay in Newcastle and my children to do well in school and college. Then they can give something back to the country.

Viola Pokvtova

I have been in Newcastle for 5 months.

I came from the Czech Republic.

Life was difficult. There was no guarantee with the jobs, as the economy is in a poor state in the Czech Republic.

It was hard. In school for my son, it was very stressful. They do not allow the Roma children to progress. This was in a mainstream school, but they still wouldn't allow him to progress. There was too much pressure and they didn't get the best out of him and saw him immediately as a bad student.

He is at school here and I am really happy. Here he is in school for three hours longer and still comes home happier!

My family is very important to me.

When I go to local authorities they receive me as a person, there is no difference with me. I don't feel Newcastle is racist; I don't sense racism around us.

Pavlina Gvanova

I have lived in Newcastle for 15 years.

I am from Zatec in the Czech Republic.

I came here as an asylum seeker and I live in Walker. I came here because of the racism in the Czech Republic. My father was arrested under the Communists in 1978. I came to live here with the children. Educational opportunities were not good in the Czech Republic.

I like Newcastle. I lived in Wakefield and then Bradford, but Newcastle is the best. My family and children are all here. The children are in school or college. My son is at school and my daughter is at Newcastle College doing a course in Travel and Tourism.

People generally are friendly and I never have a problem. I have been working as a carer, working with disabled people and I have done training in manual handling and lifting. I enjoy the work.

I have had problems. I am not allowed to get benefits now I am on the sick, because I do not pass the residency test even though I have worked for 8 years and paid taxes.

Pavel

I have been in Newcastle for a few months. Before that I was living in Margate in Kent and 6 months in Bristol.

We left the Czech Republic when we were in our twenties, not long after finishing our education and I had my first child and we were struggling to find a job even though we had education. We left to get more opportunities to get further education.

I have a CLAIT plus in computing. I have been working in agency work, including loads of factory work and then I had my other children. In the past 7 years, I have worked as a carer, looking after a couple.

We moved to Newcastle so Martin my husband could be a church leader, so this was the main opportunity.

It doesn't feel very different to Margate. There are more different nationalities - Margate is more English. This city has many very different nationalities.

People have been O.K. There has been no great hostility, since I came to England.

I already spoke English and got involved in a migrant helpline, but I didn't come across racism. So many people have a problem because of the language barrier.

Older people find it very difficult to learn another language - children find it easier in schools.

Family is very important. The Roma community is still together and is very lively. They love music and entertainment. They like the social life.

Petra Kelesova

I came to live in Newcastle a month ago.

I came to live with my wonderful daughter!

I used to come over for the holiday. I have come to stay as I am a little bit older now! My seventies are coming soon!

Vratislav Rehak

I have lived in Newcastle for 6 years. I have four children. They are all in school. They are 15, 13, 10 and 8. Two are in secondary school and two are at Atkinson Road Primary School.

I lived in the Czech Republic in Louny.

There was no chance of a job in the Czech Republic or opportunities for my children.

Newcastle is very good. The children have done well in school. They can speak English very well. There are good teachers in England and they treat everybody fairly.

Peter Balaz

I see a lot of need. There are so many different parts of the need. Particularly important are the poverty, the lack of language and education. Even with qualifications it is difficult for immigrants including those from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The qualifications are not recognised and because of the language barrier we find people struggling in different areas.

They are living in houses and environments which are not healthy. There is a lot of emotional suffering from the past and through facing new things. Some people don't know what to do. They have tried to help themselves, but many run out of options. We want to be there for anybody who we might help.

We just met a young girl of 23 or 24. She has 2 young children. Her situation is difficult; she is a single mother. She doesn't have much to give the children to eat. We want to be a refuge, even if it is just a listening post with volunteer counsellors, or food banks for the family and perhaps a budget to buy educational toys - to provide things like that for families, because then if their income situation is not too good then we can help.

If you really see the situation for people you can be hurt by it, but if you don't have much to give them, you can feel the pain with them, but never be in a place like them.

We are a church called Agape. When we see need we try to support families with bags of food. We have collections at services and we would like a budget to buy food. Even a tin of soup is something - not just the soup, but the act of caring. If they have any spirituality or faith background, then that's fine and we can pray with them, but even if they are not spiritual we can still talk with them.

Agape means unconditional love. We will still love you if you deserve it or not. God doesn't have a favourite. We don't want to know the story, we just want to help people.

I am inspired by the words of Isaiah 61:1-3: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

² To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn;

³ To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified."

Faith without works is dead. That is not just a message sent by Jesus - it is about what we can offer to people and about not being selfish and about following the example of Jesus. We don't make boundaries to people who don't believe - we are open to everybody.

We would love to find people with businesses who can invest in our project, so that we can buy toys and for people at Christmas. We also want to buy educational material for children.

Martin Keles (Minister Agape Church)

I came to England about 2007 and straightaway found a job as a cleaner. I have also been working in a restaurant and at St James' Park.

I knew that I had to do something to provide for the children. I was able to pay my rent and for my food and clothes for the children. It made me feel that I was fulfilling my identity as a mother.

Then I went off on the sick and I was lonely. I had 2 daughters in Ireland. Irena had been living there for 12 years and Jane was there for 7 years. They came here to support me like a family. I invited them to come to visit me. Irena was here one day and she found a job as a cleaner! 2 years later Jane came and the same thing happened!

They are a really great support for me and I support them as a mother. My young son went to school in this country and to college and graduated and he has a young family now.

When we first came, it was very difficult, with everyone living together in one house. They got jobs, got education and made things better. Now they all their own homes.

We were working in the Czech Republic; I had to work and my children are now making their own living.

In the Czech Republic I did shift work - I was a fork lift truck driver. I was working on small cranes.

Then in the Czech Republic we were working in a factory, but when that closed we didn't have a job and we lost our identity. It was a massive factory in Kladno near to Prague. Hundreds of people were working there so when it closed people had to follow the work.

We tried to go to one factory where they fold cardboard boxes or picking potatoes, but eventually we just left.

I was invited to Newcastle by friends. I was told there were vacancies and jobs. I stayed for a week with friends, got jobs and a week later had my own place and everything.

Newcastle is my home! The people are O.K.

I know people just round me who have lived here for 8 years and I have good friends who are English and Asian. There is a community. I have found my spiritual life, with the church. The church is like a real family, sharing and working together.

The people from the church and neighbours mean that I never feel alone. When I came in the first place, I came alone with the little children, but we were together.

I don't need much for life. Just to be healthy, with friends around me and the fellowship of the church and that my life means something for somebody else.

I'm not looking for riches. I just want the things I need for living. After two years living in England, I went on holiday to the Czech Republic and after 2 days I couldn't stand it. I had seen the differences in the system and the countries. Here people walk with their heads lifted up. I never went back to the Czech Republic!

We owned our own house in the Czech Republic and left it, but my heart is here.

My children all speak English and have had a good education and support from the schools, from the teachers.

In the Czech Republic, it is not like it used to be. Everybody is closing their houses, because they are full of problems and pain. They don't want to open their hearts because of the system. There is so much pressure and they put up boundaries.

Irena Sovakova

I came from the Czech Republic, from Pilsen

I left because of the discrimination and because there were no jobs.

In Newcastle I am working in Primark, in Newcastle City Centre. 18 hours a week. Sometimes just 12 hours a week. I am paid £220 for two weeks. It is only a little.

I have lived in England since 2010 and in Gateshead for five months.

I want to stay here, because there is no housing or work back home. People in Czech Republic look at us badly in shops and there is no work.

Robert Conka

I come from the Czech Republic from Ostrava.

I left in 1999, because of the skinheads and so Czech Roma started emigration.

There were always protests against gypsy people and after 15 years nothing has changed. They protest even though Roma were born there.

I have lived in Gateshead since February 1999, after 4 months in London and a few months in Durham. I came as an asylum seeker. I have lived 14 years in Gateshead. In 2004 I was allowed to stay after the Czech Republic became part of the European Union.

Everything is better here. I look after my grandson. I came here for a better life. My daughter has just finished university and two of my daughters are helping gypsy people and another is working with children.

My grandson is still in school. He is 17. He is staying in school in the sixth form in Whickham. He plays football for the school and is also a referee.

The education has been very good - my dream is coming true!

I have never had any problem with racists and it is the same with my family. I came here with 3 daughters and my grandson - we have never had problems with racism in the little school or big school.

I am very proud of my children and now I am waiting to see what my grandson does.

I am going to stay here!

I have no plans to go home; there is nothing for us there. Nothing seems to be getting any better. Even if you are a millionaire, or a doctor or a jobseeker, you are a gypsy. That is it. Nobody likes you if you are a gypsy.

Eva Karchnakova

I am from Kladno in the Czech Republic.

In the Czech Republic, life was not good. It is better here. It was absolutely awful; the political system, the economic system were rubbish.

I came here in 1999. It was very difficult to come here, before the Czech Republic became part of the European Union. 1989 was the year of the Velvet Revolution and then there was democracy and the end of the Communists.

Life is better here. I was married here; my second wife. I live in Bensham.

The Jewish people around here are no problem at all and are very nice.

Some English people are a problem, but not everybody. Some English people attack us, but there are good English people as well.

I like English people and the country and it is a very good economic system, with help with everything. English country gives life, helping other countries. A very good country and a very good political system.

I understand English politics and economics and system and have been here for 14 years, because it is a very good country. People are kind. English country is number one.

I worked as a kitchen porter and a cleaner, but now I have a heart problem.

Thank you very much to English people for help and everything!

English country gives very big chance for life to people from the Czech Republic and other countries.

Děkuji moc Angliji za pomoc! (Thank you very much for your help, England!)

Milan Graga

It is interesting that you say that many of the Roma in Newcastle's West End are Roman Catholics

One thing which I have noticed in school is that Roma children have been bringing rosary beads into school.

A number of the non-Roma children have begun to wear them as fashion items.

When asked what the rosary beads are for, the non-Roma children have no idea!

However, it does seem to be a positive example of assimilation and acceptance.

My Year 9 History top set has a number of Roma children in it.

It is nice to see that if one Roma pupil is good in English, then they will help each other. Then white local kids will help out as well - they will help the Slovak/Czech kids if they need it.

The Roma children want to learn English.

Teacher (local school)

I am a Development Worker at Gateshead Carers Centre. The Czech speaking Roma community is one of many local BME groups that I work with, to ensure they have equal and culturally appropriate access to our services and support. I've been arranging fortnightly drop-in sessions for the Roma community, sometimes in our Carers Centre, sometimes at an external community centre. The local Roma community that attend, tend to live in a densely populated urban area of Gateshead called Bensham, characterised by terraced Tyneside flats and houses. Bensham itself is an excitingly diverse mix of Jewish ultra-Orthodox, Kurdish, North-African Arabic, Polish, Pakistani and White working class, and with the recent addition of the Roma community, the area feels like it has the whole world in it!

The Roma community members that attend our sessions are positive, friendly, outgoing, extremely generous people, but their main challenge is their level of English. Of course there are some individuals who have been in the country longer whose English is excellent, and even act as interpreters for us. But the majority really struggle with English, and this forms a large part of some of the work we support them with - because they have misunderstood a letter from the health service, or from a debt company.

I've heard anecdotally that some of our Roma attendees have left some traumatic conditions back home in the Czech Republic - discrimination, second class treatment, poor access to education, adequate housing, fear of attacks from far-right groups which seem to be gaining popularity across Europe.

However, generally I find that those I have gotten to know are very forward facing people, they only look to the future - working hard to improve their lives ahead, rather than dwelling on the pain in their pasts they have left behind. If the barrier of English can be removed, then I think we should all be really excited about the contribution that this new community will make to Gateshead and to wider society.

Becci Varnham, Development Worker, Gateshead Carers Centre

I first came across Roma residents about 2002 when there were individuals and families claiming asylum in Newcastle. At the time I met them they were mainly accessing the services of The Rights Project in the West End and the workers there had built up a great rapport with this community. Other agencies believed this community was "hard to reach" but I believe that the wariness of the Roma people had roots in their past but once trust was gained they were very loyal to the agency dealing with them. Following the changes to the European Community these families were joined by other Roma and so the community grew.

Since then I have myself built up a connection with the community mainly because of the work I initially did with a family who were being racially harassed and had to be moved. I had referred them onto Shelter Multilingual Project who in turn did excellent work to help them find suitable accommodation. The Roma community are based mainly in the West End of Newcastle and appear to be a tight knit group who seem to be either related to each other by blood or by marriage. This can be a problem when one mobile number is shared by several family members (I presume whoever is the head of the family or whoever has the best English will have the phone)!

Whenever I visit these families I am greeted with great hospitality and kindness, have refreshments "forced" on me, and find that their homes are all, without exception, immaculate. While there they share with me their fierce loyalty for family. Such is their love of their children they find it very strange how others in Newcastle want to put their young children into nurseries at what they believe is a very young age. Whenever the older children take exams they will proudly boast of them having "diplomas", and have great ambitions for these children. Both mothers and fathers are keen to work and sometimes will have more than one job.

Karla Daly, Victim Support, Newcastle

Roma Persecution; the Historical Context

Roma people first began to arrive in Europe in large numbers during the Middle Ages. They brought many skills with them and consequently at first they were welcomed, but as perceived differences between Roma and the host communities in different countries developed so did a pattern of systematic persecution. This persecution reached its nadir in the terrible treatment and massacre of Roma during the Porrajmos or Holocaust under the Nazis. The following is an attempt to give a flavour of the historical background to the persecution of the Roma people.

There is some debate as to where the Roma come from, but it has been noted that the Gypsy race originated in the northern part of India near the Punjab Region. They call themselves Roma. It has been argued that this term has been mistakenly called a cognate for wanderer. It is argued rather, that Roma is instead derived from the word, "Rom," meaning man. The Gypsy language is called Romani and, like many European languages, is derived from the oldest written language, Sanskrit. It is also noted that it is a, "myth that the Gypsies never had a country of their own is not logical or factual. The fact that these people had a language, an army, and shared common interests gives great evidence that a country did exist." (1)

Following on from this, there has long been speculation that the Roma were nomadic people who had always wandered, but this has been disputed by the Gypsy scholar, Dr. Jan Kochanowski. It is noted that, "he has concluded that the Roma people were originally sedentary and did not wander and were not a nomadic people. ...most of the speculations on the origins of the Roma are unfortunately based on traditional linguistically reached a conclusion which had previously been neglected or not recognized, namely that a people or group of tribes who speak a common language must have lived in one country for many centuries, sharing common interest, a common administration and an army: in short, that they must have formed a State".(2)

Indeed it is then argued that the Roma people could not have been of nomadic origin. Evidence for this has been said to come from, "an analysis of the Romani vocabulary shows that its original speakers were more the 'home-loving' type: we find no words like cave, tent, bison, but on the contrary words like house, cow, pig, etc." If we accept this, then what happened to this independent Roma state? It has been stated that an examination of the history of 11th century in the Punjab Region of northern India, can provide an answer. (3) If they were once settled in their own state, why then did the Roma start to move westwards about this time?

It has been stated that nobody can be sure exactly why this great migration began. It does seem certain however that they first settled in Persia. Some would argue that the great migration began in the 10th century, although the Persian historian Hamza is reported to have written of the "Shah of Persia between 420 and 438, who 'full of solicitude for his subjects', imported twelve thousand 'Zott' musicians for their listening pleasure (although 'Zott' is the term that Arabs then used for all Indians)" (4)

William Duna however, sees the 11th century as the time when the wanderings of the Roma began. He argues that, "it was in the 11th and 12th centuries in the Punjab Region that great turmoil arose. This region was constantly being invaded by Afghanistan resulting in many wars with the Romany people. The Afghans were successful in winning a major battle that caused the Roma to split into three groups. Two of these groups scattered in the Punjab Region. The third group, which called themselves Romane Chave [the sons of Roma] set off across Afghanistan toward

Europe. It was difficult crossing Afghanistan but the Roma were shrewd and cunning. As Dr. Kochanowski relates, "At this period, the two major factions of Islam, the Shiites and the Sunnites, were almost perpetually feuding; all the Roma had to do to ensure their free passage was to tell the Shiites that they were being pursued by the Sunnites and vice versa" . Thus we have the beginning of the Roma on the move travelling through Afghanistan to Turkey, Greece and eventually to all points of Europe." (5) By the time the Roma began to arrive in Europe, it had begun to develop nation states with what were perceived as people with common characteristics. Outsiders, be they diaspora Jews or Roma from the east, were seen as outside the national family and not always welcome.

It was therefore in Medieval Europe that the Roma first made an appearance and it is important to understand the mindset of Europeans at this time to really understand how and why such virulent prejudice against the Roma developed. At a time when the Christian church was dominant in society it has been suggested that, "when Gypsies first appeared, Christianity had shaped the doctrine of war between light and dark and personified the white angels against the black devils. To the church, the Gypsy culture was non-acceptable and their dark skin exemplified evil and inferiority. Hence in western Christian Europe the dark-skinned Gypsies became victims of prejudice as a result of this Christian doctrine." (6) All this boded ill for the future of the Roma in Europe.

This problem for the Roma was then exacerbated by ignorance about their language. There was very little understanding of where the language came from and this caused suspicion to grow. An example of this can be seen by a remark made by a Spaniard at the time: "When I go to the market there in the corner stand the accursed Gypsies jabbering to each other in a speech which I cannot understand." (7). Indeed it has been argued that many people believed that the only purpose of the Roma language was for it to be used to deceive others. (8)

Roma who came into Europe in the Middle Ages included farm workers, blacksmiths, mercenary soldiers, musicians, fortune-tellers and entertainers. Initially they were welcomed because of the skills they brought with them. However they met with increasing hostility from state, church and guilds – seen respectively as suspicious outsiders, 'heathens; and rivals. This hostility developed into organised persecution. (9) This was also a time when monarchs often ruled by what they said was divine right, enabling them to justify any tyranny they committed. Human rights for the Roma were not at the top of their agenda.

Roma were subject to persecution, harassment and expulsion from around the late 15th and early 16th centuries. They had to leave where they were living. These problems probably go back even further. It has been argued that there is a possible connection between Romani migration into Europe and Islamic victories in northern India in the 10th century. Furthermore, connections have also been made between the fall of the Byzantine Empire and Ottoman Conquests and Romani migration from the Balkans to north and west Europe in 14th and 15th centuries. (10) The father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, stated that, "Jewish homes should bebroken or destroyed . Jews should then be 'put under one roof, or in a stable, like Gypsies, in order that they may realise that they are not masters in our land'" . (11) The Roma, along with the Jews, were not seen as part of the 'national family' in many European countries.

It was therefore seen as quite reasonable for Roma to be taken as slaves. In September 1445, some 12 000 people who were reported as looking like Egyptians

were taken from Bulgaria to Wallachia, by Prince Vlad Dracul (Vlad the Devil), without 'luggage or animals' and thus became the first large group of gypsies, imported as slaves by a European ruler. (12) Slavery would go on to become a feature of Roma life in Eastern Europe for centuries to come.

In the 1490's Europe saw the first laws banning Roma from the Holy Roman Empire. Before long every country in Central and Western Europe had passed similar laws. In 1530, the Egyptians Act in England banned Gypsies from the country, whilst those already in England had to leave within 16 days. This act was amended in 1554, to the point where any gypsies remaining in England were liable to suffer the death penalty. Meanwhile similar measures were taken in Scotland, where the Privy Council ordered gypsies to leave the country, "never to return, on pain of death." (13) The situation for the Roma across Europe was getting ever more difficult.

In the 16th century gypsy caravans were seen in fields in England. The name was mistakenly adapted from the word Egyptian. After the 1530 Act, in 1540, a group of gypsies were treated to a short stay in Marshalea Prison, before they were herded onto a ship bound for Norway. In 1554, the death penalty was introduced for anybody caught fraternising with gypsies. This was no idle threat; in 1577, six people were hanged under this law in Aylesbury and five more in Durham in 1592. Three years later 9 gypsies were executed in York. In 1598, the Act for Punishment of Rogues, Vagabonds and Sturdy Beggars described gypsies as a "rotten and unwelcome menace." (14)

It has been noted that anti-Romani laws were issued in March of Moravia in 1538. Three years later, in 1541, Ferdinand I ordered that Romanies in his realm, "be expelled after a series of fires in Prague." Then in 1548, the Diet of Augsburg declared that "whosoever kills a Gypsy, will be guilty of no murder." Eight years later however, the government stepped in to "forbid the drowning of Romani women and children" (15)

In the East, the Ottoman Empire was more tolerant, but still laws were passed forcing Roma to settle, whilst even more seriously, Roma in Macedonia and Wallachia (now Romania) provinces found themselves enslaved. Other countries had forced assimilation policies, whereby Roma were banned from wearing their distinctive clothing, speaking their own Roma languages or even marrying other Roma. (16)

Despite the persecution, in the late 18th century there were several thousand people of Indian origin in Britain. After the earlier hostile reception in Tudor times, Roma worked as, "entertainers, animal dealers, herbalists and astrologers." (17) They were still very much on the margins of society however.

Meanwhile on the European continent the persecution of the Roma continued apace. It has been noted that, "in 1710, Joseph I issued an edict against the Romani, ordering "that all adult males were to be hanged without trial, whereas women and young males were to be flogged and banished forever." In addition, they were to have their right ears cut off in the kingdom of Bohemia, in the March of Moravia, the left ear. In other parts of Austria they would be branded on the back with a branding iron, representing the gallows. These mutilations enabled authorities to identify them as Romani on their second arrest. The edict encouraged local officials to hunt down Romani in their areas by levying a fine of 100 Reichsthaler for those failing to do so. Anyone who helped Romani was to be punished by doing a half-year's forced labour. The result was "mass killings" of Romani. In 1721, Charles VI amended the decree to include the execution of adult female Romani, while children were to be put in

hospitals for education." Later in the 18th century, in 1774, Maria Theresa of Austria issued an edict forbidding marriages between Romani. When a Romani woman married a non-Romani, she had to produce proof of "industrious household service and familiarity with Catholic tenets", a male Rom "had to prove ability to support a wife and children", and "Gypsy children over the age of five were to be taken away and brought up in non-Gypsy families." A panel was established in 2007 by the Romanian government to study the 18th and 19th century use of Romani as slaves for Princes, local landowners, and monasteries. Slavery of Romani was outlawed in Romania around 1856 (18)

There were also efforts to force the Roma to settle. For example, in Britain in 1835, the Highways Act, made it difficult for Roma to stop and camp at the roadside. Consequently Roma communities established settlements on wasteland, but having done that they were then evicted by the authorities and so were back on the road. (19) It seemed like the Roma just couldn't win.

However the pull towards the west still exercised a great deal of appeal to Roma people. Exodus of groups of Vlach Roma (including Kalderash, Lovari and others) from Romania towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century was in part the result of the abolition of Roma slavery and resultant freedom of movement. (20)

Persecution of Romanies was often justified by claiming that they were involved in petty theft. The *Nachrichtendienst in Bezug auf die Zigeuner* ("Intelligence Service Regarding the Gypsies") was established in Munich in 1899, under the direction of Alfred Dillmann. This organisation catalogued data on all Romani individuals throughout Germany. Amazingly, in light of the Holocaust, it did not officially close down until 1970. It has been noted that, "the results were published in 1905 in Dillmann's *Zigeuner-Buch*, that was used in the following years as justification for the Porrajmos. It described the Romani people as a "plague" and a "menace", but almost exclusively presented as *Gypsy crime* trespassing and the theft of food." (21) The situation for the Roma in Germany and then across much of Europe was about to get much, much worse.

When the Nazis came to power in Germany in 1933, they saw the Roma as 'racially inferior'. Subsequently they were deprived of their civil rights, subjected to forced sterilisation and used in medical experiments and interned in concentration camps. By 1945, thousands had been gassed, shot or died of starvation and estimates of the number of Roma murdered range from 250 000 (22) up to 500 000, murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. (23)

Indeed the Second World War saw a terrible Roma genocide otherwise known as the Porrajmos. In terms of the percentage of Roma in Europe at the beginning of the genocide, it has been argued that the Nazi persecution of Roma equals that of the Jews. It came as we have seen, as the culmination of many centuries of virulent racism. The Nazis built on the pre-existing prejudice and declared the Roma as dirty, alien, and outside the bonds of social obligation. It has been pointed out that this is somewhat ironic as the Roma are originally thought to have come from Northern India and could have been classified as Aryan. (24)

The Nazis coined the appalling phrase "lives undeserving of life" with reference to the Roma, in a law passed only a few months after Hitler came to power. 'Mixed marriages' between Roma and Germans were outlawed in 1935. This 1935 legislation against 'hereditically diseased progeny' specifically included Roma. (25)

The situation for the Roma continued to worsen. In July 1936, Roma men dispatched in their hundreds to Dachau concentration camp. This was fully two years before the mass round-ups of Jews began. Many Germans showed pleasure at this measure. It is also notable that raids on Roma families continued even during the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The following year, Heinrich Himmler wrote a polemic entitled, "On Combating the Gypsy Plague". It "marked the definitive transition from a Gypsy policy that was understood as a component of the extirpation of 'aliens to the community'....to a persecution sui generis". (26) The first steps on the road to Auschwitz and the other camps had been taken.

From January 1940 to August 1941, more than 70 000 Germans were killed by gas in five different euthanasia institutions – this was known as *sonderbehandlung* – special treatment – The main victims of this action were, "the chronically sick, gypsies, people judged 'unworthy of life' because of mental disorders and, after June 1941, Soviet prisoners-of-war." (27) This was only to be the start. The murder of innocent people including many Roma would only speed up during the next three and a half years as one of the very darkest periods in the whole of human history unfolded. This was to mechanised factory killing, using poisonous gas to murder as many people as efficiently as possible.

Shortly after outbreak of the Second World War, 250 Roma children at Buchenwald became guinea pigs for the use of Zyklon B cyanide crystals later used in the mass extermination of Jews. Then from late 1941 to early 1942, about 4 400 Roma were deported from Austria to the death camp at Chelmno to be murdered in mobile gas vans then being deployed against Jews in Eastern Poland and U.S.S.R. Up to 250 000 perished in Einsatzgruppen executions, reportedly, "legitimised with the old prejudice that the victims were 'spies'". (28)

In Lodz ghetto in December 1941, there was a terrible typhus epidemic. (29) Meanwhile in Chelmno, the gassing of whole communities went on day after day, with Gypsies among the first victims. On 7th January 1942, the first of 5 000 Gypsies, who had been deported to the Jewish ghetto in Lodz from encampments in Germany, taken to Chelmno by truck. It was reported that, "all were gassed"(30), 613 having already been killed in the ghetto of Lodz (31)

Early experiments in gassing took place in a lorry. Gilbert reports that, "the leader of the guard detail was a high-ranking SS man, an absolute sadist and murderer. He ordered that eight men were to open the doors of the lorry. The smell of gas that met us was overpowering. The victims were Gypsies from Lodz." (32) The prisoners were usually killed on arrival, but not without a number of cruel deceptions, often seen elsewhere. Isabel Fonseca has noted that, "they were promised 'good food and a transfer for work in the East' But first, a shower". (33)

On Thursday 8th January 1942, an eye-witness account from Yakov Grojanowski, a Jew who managed to escape from Chelmno on 19th January 1942. He commented on events he witnessed on 8th January 1942, as follows, "two hours later, the first lorry arrived full of Gypsies. I can state with one hundred percent certainty that the executions had taken place in the forest. In the normal course of events the gas vans used to stop about one hundred metres from the mass graves. In two instances, the gas vans, which were filled with Jews, stopped twenty metres from the ditch. This happened once on this Thursday, the other time on Wednesday the 14th". (34) Grojanowski went on to note that on Friday 9th January 1942, "on the third day of our tragic experience, the work was particularly difficult and harsh. Within an hour the first van with dead Gypsies arrived, twenty minutes later the second." (35)

On the day Grojanowski escaped, Monday 19th January 1942, he stated that he got away by managing to jump out of a transport, which had no SS men on it. Having got clear of it, Grojanowski, "lost no time but ran as fast as I could across fields and woods. After an hour I stood before the farm of a Polish peasant. I went inside and greeted him in the Polish manner: 'Blessed be Jesus Christ'. While I warmed myself I asked cautiously about the distance to Chelmno...he told me they were gassing Jews and Gypsies at Chelmno. I took my leave with the Polish greeting and went away....An hour later I came to another Polish farm, where they gave me sweet white coffee and a piece of bread. The people there told me: they are gassing Jews and Gypsies at Chelmno and when they have finished with them it will be our turn" (36)

In December 1942, Himmler decreed that Roma be deported to Auschwitz.-Birkenau. They lived in a so-called family camp, so-called because Romani families, unlike Jewish families were kept together. Nazi authorities then had to decide what to do with them. Conditions were described by a camp doctor as "extraordinarily filthy and unhygienic, even for Auschwitz, a place of starving babies, children and adults." (37). Many died from privation, disease or horrendous medical experiments with the rest consigned to gas chambers in August 1944. In all, "almost 20 000 of the 23 000 German and Austrian Roma deported to Auschwitz were killed there" (38). It has been noted that Roma mortality rates in the Holocaust were similar to those of the Jews.

It has been argued that, "the extermination of Romanies by the German Nazi authorities in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia was so thorough that the Bohemian Romani language became an extinct language". The policy of the Nazis was not the same across every country they conquered: they killed almost every Romani in the Baltic countries, yet they did not attempt to eliminate all the Romanies in Denmark or Greece. (39) Additionally, there were hardly any Romanies left in Croatia after the war, as they were also persecuted by the fascist Ustaše in Croatia, who were allied to the Nazis. (40)

Vera Alexander, a survivor of Josef Mengele's appalling experiments told a courtroom after the war of how two gypsy twins, one of whom was a hunchback, had been sewn together. Their veins were connected together by Mengele who often concentrated on blood transfers in many of his experiments. Alexander told the court that, "their wounds were infected and they were screaming in pain. Their parents managed to get hold of some morphine and used it to kill them in order to end their suffering." (41) In all it has been estimated that some 250 000 Gypsies were murdered in the Holocaust. (42)

Until recently the Porrajmos has been little more than a footnote in history of the Holocaust. This was partly because there were less Roma than Jews and many were illiterate, so survivors were not as able or articulate in documenting what happened to them. Anti-Semitism did subside after Holocaust (although sadly still present). It has been noted that, "Gypsies' oral and itinerant traditions have not thrown up great numbers of Gypsy scholars." (43) Roma marginalisation and persecution however are still high across Europe. (44) There seems little doubt that the fate of the Roma in the Holocaust has been under-represented. Surely if it was better known and understood then there would be less hostility towards them today across Europe.

Even more worrying, the historian Sybil Milton has claimed that there was, "a tacit conspiracy of silence about the isolation, exclusion and systematic killing of the Roma, rendering much of current Holocaust scholarship deficient and obsolete." (45) That nothing seems to have been learnt from the horrors of the Holocaust can be

seen in what Hancock said in 2009, when he declared that, “anti-Gypsyism is at an all-time high” It is further argued that it has only been since the late 1970’s that a civil-rights movement along with scholarly literature, has arisen to confront discrimination and to remember Romani suffering during the Nazi era. (46) Clearly there is a need for a greater understanding of this suffering and the connections between this and what is happening today.

Alana Lentin has identified two strands of racism, which might go some way to explaining the actions of the Nazis and why discrimination still occurs. These are naturalist and historicist racism. Naturalist racism contends that non-white people are inherently inferior and the differences are immutable. Consequently, such people are seen as primitive and without any history (47) and therefore as being without any worthy culture. It is not a big step to then consider them as sub-human and worthy of the kind of treatment meted out in the Holocaust to the Roma. As a people who entered Europe after the nation states had begun to coalesce and be formed, then the Roma have been classified for too long as people who are ‘non-white’ and somehow inherently inferior and deserving of what the Nazis called ‘special treatment’.

The historicist version of racism is perhaps more subtle, but equally dangerous. This contends that Western Europeans are more progressive and therefore superior. (48) Again, the Roma are seen as falling outside this idea of progress. They were seen by the Nazis and others as somehow holding society back and therefore their extermination was legitimised by the Nazis as being for the benefit of the many. Again we can see just how a bogus construct this can be and how dangerous totalitarian states can be when false prophets claim that means are justified by ends on the road to some elusive utopia. Yet similar feelings also pervade in western democracies, which politicians cynically exploit for electoral gain.

Efforts have been made to limit discrimination against Roma. In 1969, the Council of Europe’ Consultative Assembly made the recommendation that member states should try and improve the conditions of life of their Gypsy citizens. In 1975, the Committee of Ministers of the Council decided that little had been done as a result of the above recommendation, so they passed a strongly worded resolution: Resolution 75-13 called for, “an end to discrimination, the safeguarding of the culture of the nomadic populations, the building of caravan sites and the encouragement of the education and training of adults. It also established a sizeable fund for promoting Roma educational work”. (49) The question however was whether or not these initiatives would really bring any advance in tolerance of Roma people.

The Council of Europe in 1993 proposed a number of measures in Resolution 1203, which stated that Gypsies were “a true European minority”. The Council of Europe also initiated a project for the history of minorities, including gypsies, for the inclusion of their history in textbooks and teaching programmes now known as the ‘Interface Project’ which has been seen as being very successful. . . (50) In 1995 the Council of Europe established a new advisory body Specialist Group on Roma/Gypsies (MG-S-Roma) There were seven original members of the group coming from Finland, Spain, the Netherlands, Romania, Bulgaria and Poland. In 1999 the European Union adopted its document, ‘Guiding Principles for Improving the Situation of the Roma’. In addition, it is argued that the European Convention on Human Rights has helped gypsies. (51)

There is a long history of persecution of Roma people across many parts of Europe as they were perceived, often by those in power, as dangerous outsiders who came to settle in Europe after many of the nation-states and language groups of people

had begun to coalesce into modern nation states. This persecution reached its nadir when at least 250 000 Roma were murdered by the Nazis in the Porrajmos as part of the wider Holocaust. Since then, there have been attempts to improve the human rights of Roma in Europe although more needs to be done, just as more needs to be done with regards to remembering the Roma deaths in the Holocaust.

Peter Sagar

Footnotes

1. William A. Duna, 1985; *Gypsies: A Persecuted Race*; With an Appendix reprinted from *Land of Pain: Five Centuries of Gypsy slavery* by Ian Hancock, DUNA STUDIOS, Minneapolis, Duna Studios ISBN 0-942928-04-0
2. *ibid.*
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The Roma and Human Rights in Europe today

"That which has happened is a warning. To forget it is guilt. It must be continually remembered. It was possible for this to happen and it remains possible for it to happen again at any minute. Only in knowledge can it be prevented."

(Karl Jaspers, German philosopher talking about the Holocaust/Porrajmos)

"Uncomfortable truths travel with difficulty" (Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, p.129)

"Once we had a country and we thought it fair,
Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:
We cannot go there now, my dear, we cannot go there now"
(W. H. Auden, *Refugee Blues*)

The legacy of Roma persecution in Europe during previous centuries is still bearing bitter fruit today. The racist notion that the Roma are somehow different and inherently inferior still appears to inform much of the behaviour of both local and national governments in many European countries. It is also sadly reflected in many sections of the media and public opinion in Europe also. This has led to injustices and discrimination in a number of areas of society including housing, health provision and education.

Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights has been an outspoken critic of the persecution of the Roma, both in reports and periodic Viewpoints. In August 2008, Hammarberg noted that "today's rhetoric against the Roma is very similar to the one used by Nazis and fascists before the mass killings started in the thirties and forties. Once more, it is argued that the Roma are a threat to safety and public health. No distinction is made between a few criminals and the overwhelming majority of the Roma population. This is shameful and dangerous." (1) It appears from this that little or nothing has been learnt from the Porrajmos. Why are Roma still perceived as dangerous and what evidence is there that they are still being persecuted?

As in the past there are many in Europe today, who continue to view Roma as outsiders, resulting in widespread discrimination against Roma people, despite the passing of laws, which in theory should give the Roma full citizenship and the rights which accompany it. Indeed it has been noted that, there is a crucial difference between formal and substantive citizenship rights. It is quite possible to possess the formal citizenship rights on paper, but this is not always matched by the practice of being able to exercise those rights. (2) As we shall see this has had disastrous consequences for Roma people in a number of European countries today.

This is emphasised by the fact that a survey in 2009 by the Fundamental Rights Agency entitled "European Union Minorities Discrimination Survey", concluded that, "the Roma were Europe's most discriminated group, with one in two Romani respondents claiming that they had been discriminated against at least once in the previous 12 months". (3) This is clearly a shockingly high level of respondents who claim they have been discriminated against. In what ways have Roma tried to escape persecution?

Roma people have long tried to escape discrimination in Eastern Europe, by fleeing to the West; often only to find discrimination there as well. It has been noted that up to the mid-1990's there were three phases to recent Roma migration patterns as

summarised by Matras in 1996 Phase 1, which can be said to be pre-mid 1970's was a time when recent migrants could find employment and take up residence and in some cases be granted formal and substantive citizenship rights. Phase 2 took place from the late 1970's to the early 1990's. During this phase, migration was only possible by entering and staying illegally or by applying for political asylum. Phase 3 was post 1992-3 when regulations were introduced regarding so-called 'safe areas' of origin and transit and provisions of speedy refusal of asylum applications from Eastern Europe. Consequently Roma entering the West had to do so on 'tourist visas' and overstaying or entering illegally. (4)

The major 'Push' factor for migration has been Romani non-confidence or non-identification with state institutions of current 'host' society. Indeed it is argued that, the high risks of emigration seem minor compared with dangers and threats of staying in a country which rejects Roma at all levels and has historically marginalised and segregated them as has been the case in the former Czechoslovakia. (5) Roma people have therefore migrated west for a number of reasons and for a number of years.

In 1997, Roma from former Czechoslovakia emigrated to Canada then Britain. Before 1997 the main countries of origin of Roma migrants who travelled to Western Europe have been Romania, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. It is now estimated that between 50 000 and 150 000 have gone to W. Europe. Small numbers of Serbaya Kalderash from Bosnia and Serbia have arrived in the UK since 1990. Similar numbers, perhaps more, have been prevented from crossing borders since 1990. (6)

Other countries Romani have come from include Bulgaria, Croatia and Poland – with figures much lower than for the three main countries. Favoured western locations for Romani migration have been Italy, Germany, France and Austria. Some have gone to Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands. Between June and July 1990 small groups of Romanies from Czechoslovakia went to Finland and claimed political asylum. The first group of 150 had applications almost instantly rejected. Many were forced to return to their country of origin. (7)

Despite the history of the Porrajmos, Amnesty International argue that in Europe today, it is still seen as acceptable to use abusive and discriminatory language towards Roma. Indeed mainstream politicians quickly gain popularity by cracking down hard on 'Gypsy crime' or 'Gypsy beggars'. Indeed, even extreme prejudice is seen as acceptable by many. In 2006 in Romania football fans chanted 'We hate Gypsies; and unfurled a banner proclaiming 'Death to Gypsies'. Meanwhile in Hungary, the extremist Jobbik party, standing on an explicit anti-Roma platform, won four seats in the European parliament in 2009. (8)

Integration can be culturally difficult, especially when immigrants are perceived as having a different (and inferior) set of moral values (9). This can be the case with the Roma, who are perceived as somehow culturally different and inevitably inferior. Yet much of the stereotyping is very unfair. They are seen as somehow dirtier, yet their homes are often spotless. They are seen as being a potentially destructive force in society, yet their family structures, arguably the cornerstone of any society, are stronger than many sections of the host populations they live amongst.

It has also been noted that the prevalent view of immigration, in Britain as well as other parts of western Europe, especially of long discriminated against groups such as the Roma, is of immigration being a problem. (10) When stoking up fears on the issue can help newspaper owners to sell copy and politicians to win votes, then a one-sided view of immigration can easily become that most dangerous of forms of

information: 'common knowledge'. Indeed it is often said that there should be a proper debate on immigration. But how can there be a proper debate when so much of the media and the political parties of this country only speak in terms of it being a problem? It is also said that it isn't racist to talk about immigration. But surely it becomes racist when racial stereotyping and one-sided negative views of immigration are accepted as the norm and there is no balance in the debate about immigration.

Many people are fearful, when they read so many one-sided stories and hear so much negative rhetoric from politicians, engaging in a cynical 'arms race' to try and outdo each other in a grubby race to the bottom for political gain. At the end of the day, it has been proved time and time again, that immigrants are net contributors to the UK economy and often do many of the vital jobs in public services. Certainly there will be individual cases of immigrants abusing the system and these should be dealt with. However, to portray these cases as the norm is both dishonest and dangerous. It gives the real racists carte blanche to cause mayhem and suffering.

Lenten speaks of the "new assimilation" and how multiculturalism is being perceived as being "out of control". This is seen as being part of a new racism. (11) One of the interesting aspects of this particular piece of 'common knowledge' is how little evidence is ever given to back up these claims.

With the extension of the European Union in 2004, Roma could move more freely, but this led to more anti-Roma sentiment in Western Europe. In Italy, the government declared a 'Roma emergency', whereby Prefects in some regions were given extra powers to respond to the perceived threat from Roma. This has caused numerous forced evictions of Roma, with no alternative accommodation or prior consultation afforded them. This helped to add to a climate of hostility leading to Roma being physically and verbally attacked by mobs and Roma settlements set on fire. Meanwhile in France in July 2010, the government ordered the eviction and expulsion of Roma in around 200 unauthorised camps. It was claimed that they were the source of "illegal trafficking" and denigrating living conditions. Amnesty International argues that the French and Italian governments are typical governments across Europe in terms of the marginalisation of Roma. (12)

Generally, states are not protecting Roma against racially motivated crime. In one example of this, 20 Roma families were forced to flee their homes in Belfast in June 2010 after crowd gathered outside their homes, "shouting racist slogans, smashing windows and kicking in doors" Similar attacks have taken place in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia in recent years. In addition Amnesty International points out that, law enforcement officials across Europe often indulge in racist and stereotyping behaviour, including ethnic profiling. Roma are disproportionately stopped and searched, often just for being Roma. (13)

There are high levels of discrimination faced by Roma in area of employment and in accessing goods, services and housing and this demonstrates the failure of European governments to protect Roma against discrimination in the private sector. (14)

To be fair it is argued that there have been improvements in anti-discrimination legislation, but high levels of discrimination persist. However is that European Union countries are also failing to prevent racially motivated against Roma. One in Five respondents considered they had been victims of racially motivated assaults in the previous 12 months. Amnesty International argues that the criminal justice systems in

many European countries are failing to prevent, investigate and prosecute effectively. There is a widespread lack of confidence amongst Roma in law enforcement officials. More than two-thirds of Roma victims in the 2009 FRA survey did not report crimes against them to the police and 72% reported that they did not think that the police would do anything to help them. These failures are the “result of both inadequate procedures and guidelines for law enforcement officials and the failure of states to eliminate prejudice against (Roma).” (15)

More attention has been paid to the rights of Roma in the last 10 years, with a number of initiatives developed at national and international level including the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma, Sinti and Travellers from the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the establishment of a Roma, Sinti and Travellers Forum by the Council of Europe. There have also been various European initiatives and the Decade for Roma Inclusion 2005-15. However there has been a lack of concrete targets, implementation has been fitful and monitoring has been ineffective. Consequently there has been little real improvement in the lives of Roma. (16)

Amnesty argues that comprehensive measures rather than the present piecemeal measures are needed to break the cycle of poverty, prejudice and human rights violations. There needs to be greater social inclusion to combat entrenched discrimination in the provision of public services. This in turn requires concerted action at all levels from the local to the international, with the political will for a long-term commitment, one in which the voices of the Roma themselves are at the heart. (17)

Discrimination in housing

Amnesty International is running a major campaign against discrimination against the Roma in terms of housing. Much of the following information comes from Amnesty International publications.

“I wish that all the Roma here get adequate housing and work, so that they can educate their children and live their lives in a normal way – and live without fear. For me I would like to have a little house to call my own, a house covered with flowers, just a little house. It should not be too far away as I have a plot in Bezanjinska Kosa (graveyard) where I will be buried one day; it’s where my parents were buried. I am almost 60 years old, but for as long as I can stand on my feet I will preach the truth and fight for human rights.” (Borka, Belvil Settlement in Belgrade) (18)

There is a pattern of forced evictions by City of Belgrade which particularly affects Roma communities living in informal settlements. Amnesty International argues that Serbia has failed to comply with obligations to respect the right to adequate housing by failing to prohibit and protect against forced evictions. (19)

Many Travellers in Britain have been forced into bricks and mortar housing due to the shortage of suitable sites. Often the housing they have had to go into has been public sector housing. Those who have stayed on sites have regularly suffered serious ill-health as sites have been deprived of suitable facilities. (20) This element of forced settlement can perhaps be viewed as a more subtle version of the forced evictions, which have taken place in Serbia.

It has been noted that many travellers do not like having to live in brick and mortar buildings. Too often in Britain, they feel isolated away from their families and friends.

They often come from close knit communities and can be very unhappy, when forced to live away from them. At the same time these problems are often exacerbated by them being subject to racial abuse and harrassment. (21) There is a problem here in that Roma and Traveller culture is not always fully understood by those in authority. The fact that they are seen as being on the margins of society has meant that their concerns have too often being seen as irrelevant.

It is argued that the Serbian government has failed to put in place procedures and safeguards under international law to protect the rights of evicted persons. These procedures include processes to ensure people who may be evicted have the following:

- a) access to all the information that they need
- b) the courtesy of being consulted about proposed evictions and alternatives to eviction
- c) the right to appeal against eviction and right to remedy for damages (22)

Housing provided in the resettlement process is often not up to international standards. This has contributed to further discrimination and segregation. Some of the Roma involved have had to move to the outskirts of Belgrade and forced to live in metal containers. Others have been forcibly moved to southern Serbia where yet again their rights to adequate housing have been denied to them. (23)

What is particularly disturbing is the role of organisations which are supposed to behave in a fairer way. A number of the resettlements have been justified by stating that space needed to be found for large infrastructure projects, supported by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) and the European Investment Bank (EIB). This is of great concern to Amnesty International because the EBRD and the EIB are both institutions of the European Union and therefore have a responsibility to ensure that they do not “support projects that lead to, or contribute to, human rights violations. To this end, they must have effective safeguard policies and due diligence processes in place to ensure that the activities they support respect human rights”. (24)

The lack of safeguards against forced evictions under Serbian national laws means that city and municipal authorities are able to carry them out and this has particularly devastating consequences for Roma families. Indeed the Serbian government has failed to ensure that adequate systems have been put in place to ensure that there is no segregation or discrimination in housing. (25)

Roma living in informal settlements face considerable difficulties gaining access to personal documents such as birth certificates and as a consequence it is hard for them to register as residents. Therefore, they are frequently denied access to services which are vital to Roma human rights. These include education, health, social insurance and employment. These problems apply particularly to Roma from Kosovo and significantly to those forcibly returned from countries in Western Europe. Amnesty International report that since 2009, some progress has been made by the Serbian government and the City of Belgrade, but there is still much to be done. (26)

In some parts of Eastern Europe, Roma have decided that the best way for them to deal with discrimination over housing is to build their own homes. One Bulgarian Gypsy leader has stated that, “we must build houses for our people, new houses in new neighbourhoods, not mixed in with the Bulgarians with whom we cannot get along. We must have our own homes for our own way of life. One day we will have our own country – Romanistan. Now we don’t even have our own places. To have a

home, to have a house, is, after all, more important even than to have a country". (27) Before that can happen, the Roma in Serbia must struggle on.

Roma have clearly been denied adequate housing in Serbia. With regards to the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005-2015, on 1st July 2008, the Serbian government assumed the Presidency. It might then have been hoped that the Serbian government would begin to take the issue of discrimination against Roma more seriously. Subsequently, the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights (MoHMR) said that housing would be one of the government's four priorities. Commitments were made to legalise and improve Roma settlements, relocate slum settlements and provide low-cost housing. (28)

A conference in November 2008 included the examination of a number of case studies. In April 2009, the government adopted a new National Strategy for the Promotion of the Position of Roma (National Roma Strategy). This included education, employment, health and housing and also included sections on the status of women, information, culture, participation in public life and discrimination and specific sections on documentation, social insurance, Internally Displaced Persons and persons returned under readmission arrangements. (29)

However Amnesty International "considers that there is an enormous gap between these strategies – including the National Roma Strategy – which recognises that forced evictions are incompatible with international standards – and the reality of housing rights for Roma. Since 2005 the government has made little progress in implementing these measures and has thereby failed to guarantee the right to adequate housing of Roma. The City of Belgrade has also taken few measures to improve Romani settlements, but has instead violated the right to adequate housing in a programme of forced evictions". (30)

Amnesty International considers that the Serbian government has failed to comply with its obligations under international and regional human rights treaties to prohibit, prevent and end forced evictions. These mostly affecting Roma communities living in informal settlements. Many are Internally Displaced Roma from Kosovo or significantly, Roma forcibly returned from EU member states. (31)

They are driven to live in informal settlements as there is a lack of other living options in Belgrade. Subsequently some have been forcibly evicted and ended up losing their homes, livelihoods, possessions. Furthermore some Roma are not offered any alternative housing and others have been offered inadequate housing, which does not meet international standards. (32)

The Roma and Discrimination in education

Amnesty International has also highlighted the problems of discrimination in education in the Czech Republic. It is noted that Roma children in the Czech Republic are unable to have an education which is free from discrimination. There have been serious negative consequences of this situation in terms of the impact upon their education. Many Roma children have been wrongly designated as having "mild mental disabilities" and sent to special schools. It is argued that other Roma children have been allowed to stay in mainstream education, but only if they are segregated in Roma only classes. Both these ways of treating Roma children have led to them being given an inferior education. (33)

The tests for children, which have led to Roma children being disproportionately admitted to special schools have been found to, “not take into account the social, cultural and linguistic specificities of Romani children, especially those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, children are assessed on communication skills, but for Romani children, Czech may not be the language they speak at home. (34) This would seem to indicate that the age-old problem of Roma people not being seen as part of the ‘national family’ is again causing them problems.

There has also been a problem with parents of Roma children placing them in so-called ‘practical schools’, which have a limited curriculum, without having sufficient information to make a truly informed choice. This can be particularly troublesome as once children are locked into the ‘practical school’ system or in a class in a mainstream school for pupils with ‘mental disabilities’ it can be very difficult for them to leave. There is no legal requirement for regular assessment of the pupils. Even if they can get back into mainstream classes, it can be very difficult for Roma children as they have been subjected to such a simplified curriculum and it is further reported that, “often, no assistance is provided by the mainstream schools to help children catch up.” (35)

The government has taken steps recently to remedy this situation and make it fairer for Roma children, but Amnesty International argues that these steps have been ineffective. It is further argued that, “the continued failure of to ensure the right of Romani children to an education free from discrimination restricts their enjoyment of a whole range of human rights, as it perpetuates their social exclusion and drives them deeper into poverty.” (36)

On a visit to the Czech Republic in August 2013, I noted down the following from a panel in the National Museum in Wenceslas Square in Prague. The piece was part of an exhibition about childhood in the Czech part of the Austrian Empire und ether Hapsburgs. It is long but worth repeating in full as it reveals a number of things about the attitude towards the Roma today and the link with their history:

“The Child in Romany Culture

Gypsies have never been a single community. They were divided into various groups that differed in the way of life. However let us try to present a general characteristic of Romany children at the time of the Austrian monarchy.

Upbringing and education was not organized: children participated in the community and could see and learn everything that the Romany needed to know about life school was perceived as a repressive institution and parents as well as their children approached it with indifference or even distrust. Moreover, the people “who lived on the margins of society”, had very low prospects of learning anything at school that they could later use to sustain themselves.

Children had to help in providing income for the family. Senior sons would learn thetrade and business skills of their fathers.” (37)

There were also photographs to go with the words. These included a historical postcard showing Romany children begging in the first quarter of the 20th century and another showing a Romany woman with a monkey from around 1900 (38).

Now let us be clear here. It can be dangerous to read too much into a few paragraphs taken somewhat out of context. However, I do find the second paragraph interesting in that it puts forward the perception that traditionally Roma

parents have not been very interested in the education of their children. Is it really such a large step to having that perception that Roma are still living on “the margins of society”, which I can testify to seeing with my own eyes having visited a Roma ghetto in Chanov in the Czech Republic town of Most, and so are still not interested in the education of their children? If that perception is there then why bother taking education provision of Roma children seriously? Yet is anybody asking the Roma parents what they want for their children, or the children themselves for that matter?

The Roma and Discrimination in Health Provision

We have already seen that many Roma are forced to live in poor conditions. This causes many of them to be in greater need of health care services. Amnesty International has argued that there are four main obstacles to the Roma gaining appropriate health care. Firstly, they are often excluded from health insurance programmes. Linked to this their poverty, often as a result of discrimination in the jobs market has resulted in them often not being able to afford the cost of health care and medication. Thirdly, they are often discriminated against by health care professionals. Finally, there is a lack of health care in some of the remote, segregated Roma settlements. (39)

Many Roma cannot afford the health insurance programmes in numerous European countries. Additionally, they are often not able to register because of a lack of birth certificates and other documents. In other examples, because they have been long-term unemployed, they no longer receive benefits as they have fallen off the national unemployment registers. As an example of one European country where these problems have occurred, Bulgaria in 2008 was found guilty of violating Articles 11 and 13 of the European Social Charter, which, “guarantee the right to protection of health, for failing to provide adequate medical assistance to Roma” (40) Here again we see Roma being excluded from the ‘national family’ as somehow not being worthy of the same rights as others.

Many Roma have also complained of discrimination in the area of work by health care professionals. Emergency aid has been reported as denied to Roma, Romani patients have been refused treatment, money has been exorted from them, they have been segregated in hospitals and had to endure verbal abuse and degrading treatment. In Macedonia, Amnesty International took the following testimony from a 27-year old woman about a recent experience in hospital: “I was the only Romani person in the hospital room. The medical personnel regularly changed the sheets of the others but not mine. When I complained, they told me that I don’t have clean sheets at home and I sleep on the floor. Therefore, I’m not allowed to ask for more than I deserve”. (41) This shows a typical stereotyping of Roma people as somehow backward and primitive; something which is not borne out by my experience of Roma homes.

The last major problem is that Roma often live in segregated housing and this makes it harder for them to access health care. It was reported in 2005 by the EERC that in Baranya and Somogy counties in Hungary, 40 per cent of Roma were living in villages without a doctor, while in 2005 in Spain it was discovered by the Secretariado Gitano Foundation for the Ministry of Housing that 12 percent of Roma in the country did not have a nearby health centre. (42) As often is the case there are examples of multiple denial of human rights as the housing segregation is leading to poorer health care.

Hostility towards the Roma

The Roma people have been through a huge amount of suffering through so many centuries. The suffering continues. In 2013, the hatred and prejudice towards the Roma shows no signs of abating. Below are just some of the many examples of what has happened during 2013.

At the beginning of August it was reported that protests against the Roma were to be staged in 13 towns in the Czech Republic, the country of origin of many of the Roma in Newcastle today. It was further reported that one of the demonstrations was planned for the town of Vitkov, which was of particular concern. It was here that in 2009 a house was set on fire, which almost caused the death of a two-year old girl called Nataalka. (43)

Again in the Czech Republic, it was reported in late August that an anti-Roma march in Ostrava was attended by between 600 and 800 marchers and ended in violence as marchers clashed with police. The marchers had attempted to get to Svatopluk Čech Square, where a Romani demonstration had been taking place. It was argued that, "on Sokolská Street the neo-Nazis attempted a pogrom against the residents of the Halfway House (Dům na půli cesty), which is occupied by Romani people and others". (44) Commenting on this, Regional Police Director Tomáš Kužel stated that, "the demonstrators started throwing bottles and rocks, damaging the building and threatening the health and lives of the people living there, so police began to organize an intervention that last several hours." (45)

The last weekend in September saw another upsurge of violence reported from the Czech Republic. It was claimed that in Ostrava, a group of anti-Roma activists met up in Náměstí Slovenského národního povstání (Slovak National Uprising Square) and as this was only a few dozen metres from a Romani-occupied hostel it was thought that the hostel would be the target for anti-Roma violence. (46)

It was further argued that the anti-Roma protestors, "attempted to break through the police cordon defending the residential hotel. When the racists did not succeed in breaking through, they divided up into smaller groups, attempting to fight through to the residential hotel by constantly attacking the police officers at random. The battle did not calm down until it was night. The psychological aftermath of this event for the Romani community in Ostrava is serious, as are the repercussions for inter-ethnic coexistence there. Hatred won on Friday in Ostrava." (47)

Perhaps the most disturbing comments about the many anti-Roma marches in the Czech Republic, during the summer of 2013, came from David Tiser, a young educated Roma man, who is director of a Prague NGO. David commented that, "these are not just marches by extremists. Regular citizens are joining in as well. And this is what is dangerous". (48).

In late August 2013, a serious case came to court in Hungary. Four defendants stood in court accused of murdering six Roma in Debrecen in eastern Hungary in 2009, including a four-year old child and injuring a further 50 members of the Roma community. In a frightening throwback to the era of the Porrajmos, it was reported that one of the defendants, "wore a buttoned-up collared shirt that covered up his "88" tattoo – a numerical reference to "Heil Hitler."" (49)

A journalist who attended the court case made the following observation: "These victims were not the usual unemployed, criminal Roma stereotype. They were honest, hard-working families who didn't live on handouts. In everyday Hungarian

slang, the phrase 'don't gypsy' is very common – it means don't lie or cheat. This country is divided on every topic, except hatred for the Roma." (50) It was further suggested that the group of people most hated by racists in Europe today was the Roma. (51)

Meanwhile in Germany it was reported in the second week in September that in the western German town of Bad Hersfeld, election posters had been put up stating, "Money for Granny, Not for Sinti and Roma." The slogan rhymes in German – "Geld für die Oma, Statt für Sinti and Roma". (52)

These are just a snapshot of the kind of prejudice Roma are having to face across Europe today.

Conclusion

It appears clear that in many respects the hard lessons of the centuries' old persecution of the Roma in Europe culminating in the Porrajmos have still not been learnt. Roma are still seen by many as outsiders, outside of the 'national family' in many countries and therefore not deserving of the same rights as other citizens. In many cases although Roma have rights on paper in reality they are not being given them. Areas of serious discrimination in numerous European countries include the jobs market, housing, education and health.

The Decade of Roma Inclusion has meant that billions of Euros have been made available and those countries in Europe with the highest Roma population – Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and Slovakia – have agreed to improve conditions for Roma people in the areas of education, employment, housing and healthcare (53)

I will leave the last words to Isabel Fonseca, who has noted that in Romania, the charity Ovidiu Rom have been the major force in getting school aged Roma children into schools, training teachers and supplying books and where necessary shoes. The work is hard. As mentioned earlier, Fonseca points out that groups such as Ovidiu Rom and others in the same area of work, "have figured out that even where the law is on your side and opportunities do exist they can remain off-limits for an unusually discouraged population. That is... Ovidiu Rom's efforts are guaranteed by the passion of its volunteers and teachers who set out before school, cajoling parents into sending their children to class, sometimes with just the promise of a hot school lunch. Door by door, row by row, case by case." (54)

Footnotes

- 1) <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antiziganism>
- 2) C. Clark and M.Greenfields; *Here To Stay: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, p. 266
- 3) Amnesty International: *Left Out – Violations of the Rights of Roma in Europe EU* 01/02/2010 September 2010 p. 22
- 4) C. Clark and M.Greenfields; *Here To Stay: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, p. 269
- 5) *ibid.* p. 270

- 6) *ibid.*
- 7) *ibid.*
- 8) Amnesty International Briefing: *Human Rights on the Margins: Roma in Europe*
- 9) A. Lentin; *Racism: A Beginner's Guide*, One World Publications, Oxford, p. 132
- 10) *ibid.* 135
- 11) *ibid.* p. 140-1.
- 12) Amnesty International Briefing: *Human Rights on the Margins: Roma in Europe*
- 13) *ibid.*
- 14) Amnesty International: *Left Out – Violations of the Rights of Roma in Europe* EU 01/02/2010 September 2010 p. 22
- 15) *ibid.*
- 16) *ibid.* p. 26
- 17) *ibid.*
- 18) Amnesty International '*Home is More Than a Roof Over Your Head*' – EUR70/001/2011 April 2011 p.3
- 19) *ibid.*
- 20) C. Clark and M.Greenfields; *Here To Stay: The Gypsies and Travellers of Britain*, p. 112
- 21) *ibid.* p. 108
- 22) Amnesty International '*Home is More Than a Roof Over Your Head*' – EUR70/001/2011 April 2011 p.3
- 23) *ibid.*
- 24) *ibid.*
- 25) *ibid.* p. 4
- 26) *ibid.* p. 8
- 27) I. Fonseca, *bury Me Standing; the Gypsies and their Journey*, Vintage, London, p. 299
- 28) Amnesty International '*Home is More Than a Roof Over Your Head*' – EUR70/001/2011 April 2011 p.8.
- 29) *ibid.* p. 10

- 30) *ibid.* p. 61
- 31) *ibid.*
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- 32) Amnesty International: End Injustice: Elementary Schools Still Fail Romani Children,
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- 34) *ibid.*
- 35) *ibid.*
- 36) *ibid.*
- 37) Display panel in Czech Republic National Museum in Prague
- 38) *ibid.*
- 39) Amnesty International: Left Out: Violations of the Rights of Roma in Europe,
September 2010, EUR 01/021/2010
- 40) *ibid.*
- 41) *ibid.*
- 42) *ibid.*
- 43) amnesty.org *Saturday*, 3 August 2013.
- 44) Romea.cz Sunday, 25 August 2013
- 45) *ibid.*
- 46) Romea and Prague Daily Monitor Wednesday, 2 October 2013
- 47) *ibid.*
- 48) Deutsche Welle Friday, 30 August 2013
- 49) The Atlantic *Friday*, 23 August 2013
- 50) *ibid.*
- 51) *ibid.*
- 52) Spiegel Online Tuesday, 10 September 2013
- 53) I. Fonseca, 2006, *Bury Me Standing; The Gypsies and Their Journey*, Vintage,
London, p. 313
- 54) *ibid.* p. 319

Visit to Chanov

Chanov is a Roma ghetto in the Czech Republic town of Most, a town of about 67 000 people, 48 miles northwest of Prague. I arrived by bus in Most, shortly before 2 p.m. on the afternoon of Thursday 8th August. Having expected the bus from Prague to stop at a bus station I was a little nonplussed to be dropped off at the last stop, which was a bus stop near a small shopping centre. It could have been anywhere in Most, a town which appeared to have been built in pretty much one go with at least one large power station nearby. It did have a medieval centre, but that was knocked down in 1964 by the Most Coal Company. Coming through the town on the bus, it seemed a quiet place, mostly composed of Communist-era blocks of flats and neatly looked after parkland in between replete with pleasant trees. I stood on the side of the road, with the mountains on the border with Germany in the distance and wondered what I should do.

I decided to walk back along the way the bus had come. Fortunately this was the best move I could have made. To my right I noticed a large building with buses nearby and surmised that it must be the bus station. And then I saw the magic word – informace – information.

I walked smartly down to the building, only to discover that it was actually a railway station. Inside, what was a stridently functional structure, leftover from the Communist era, I located the information desk. I asked the two women there if they spoke English; they didn't. However after saying where I wanted to go, they were able to write the number 10 on a piece of paper for me and point to where I could get the bus. Things were looking up. I thanked them in Czech and made my way to the bus-stop for the number 10 bus, which was due fairly soon. Chanov it appeared was only a few minutes' walk away. After about ten minutes the number 10 bus arrived and after showing a map of where I wanted to go to the driver I was able to pay my fare and I was on my way.

After a few minutes journey along a quiet road lined by trees and bushes, a passenger nearby kindly signalled that the next stop was mine; I thanked the passenger and the driver and alighted from the bus. Immediately I noticed Roma people around, in what was otherwise a remote area, away from the rest of the town. I went past a cul-de-sac sign and into a small estate of high-rise blocks of flats. There were about ten in all. One block was derelict and another unfinished. There were no trees, bushes or flowers anywhere in sight. There was a small school; was this here just so that the children of the ghetto could be educated away from mainstream schools?

Apart from a car from Peterborough, the main thing I noticed was that there were many people around; more than had seemed normal for Most as I had seen it on the way in. I would check that later. I made my way towards the Romansky Kultury Center in the middle of the estate, which I had been given as an address where there might be people I could talk to.

A woman sitting outside the centre, who could see that I was a stranger in town looking for someone, called me over. I said I was English and she asked two lads playing pool in the centre to help with translation. I showed her the names of the two people I had been given by Arnost in Newcastle.

I discovered that one had moved to Prague, whilst the other was not around. Behind us, in the centre teenage boys were playing pool in a room, and showing interest, one or two asked why I was there and where I was from.

I explained that I was from Newcastle in Northeast England, where I worked with Roma people and I knew Roma from Most who were now living in Newcastle. I also mentioned that there were many Roma now living in Newcastle.

The conversation over, I walked around. There were many people outside – it was warm and fairly sunny – and there was a feeling of it being one community, different to what I had seen elsewhere in Most – and in Newcastle. There were many people outside and others on the balconies of the flats.

The overwhelming impression was one of high unemployment as all ages and genders were present, but I couldn't be sure. The ghetto looked very tough, with not a tree in sight, but there was no hostility towards me.

I began to make my way out via the only road in and out of the ghetto, when I heard shouting behind me. I wondered if they were shouting at me or somebody else. I turned round and a teenage girl, with a Germany, Phillip Lahm football shirt on beckoned me back.

A group of people gathered around me and a teenage boy amongst them had good English. Unsurprisingly a number of those around me were wondering who I was and why I was there. I explained how I was from Newcastle in Northeast England and how I worked with Roma in Newcastle. I was centre of attention! – but I never felt threatened; those around me just seemed curious.

I talked a little bit about how there was some racism in Newcastle towards Roma people, but also how others were supportive. I said that I was against the racism and wanted to explain to people in Newcastle why the Roma were there. The teenage boy understood all this and even commented that he understood how people felt threatened when new people moved into their country. He then asked me if there was anything else I wanted to know and that he really had to go. I joked that I was friendly and the teenage boy laughed and said that he understood. We shook hands and I bade farewell to the people there and made my way back to the road.

Chanov is clearly a ghetto; out of the way with only one way in and out – it looked like people had just been dumped there. There was a distinctly run-down and neglected feel to the place. It certainly looked quite different to other parts of Most I had viewed through the bus window.

Having walked back to the railway station, I then decided to have a look at the housing estate near to the station, by way of making a comparison. Again this estate was made up of high-rise flats, some more than 10 storeys high. However they were in a much better condition, with nice parkland and trees in between them.

There was also a much wider group of facilities. In Chanov, there was a small school, the Romansky Kultury Center and a kiosk with a few chairs and tables outside it. In the estate near to the railway station, there were 3 bars, a gym, a furniture shop, a bowling alley and nearby a large Tesco supermarket. Whilst the area was still reminiscent of Communist era planning, it was clearly far more prosperous than Chanov.

Chanov seemed to be a place of grinding poverty, lack of opportunities, the people existing rather than living, marking time, treading water, whilst all around others were swimming.

The place looked tough and messy. A casual visitor could easily go away with a very negative impression of the people who live there. But those people would be missing the point. The Austrian born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, who lived in Newcastle, at 28 Brandling Park, Jesmond, from 29th April 1943 until February 1944 made the following point picked up by British writer James Burke

“Someone apparently went up to the great philosopher Wittgenstein and said ‘What a lot of morons back in the Middle Ages must have been to have looked, every morning, at the dawn and to have thought what they were seeing was the Sun going around the Earth,’ when every school kid knows that the Earth goes around the Sun, to which Wittgenstein replied ‘Yeah, but I wonder what it would have looked like if the Sun had been going around the Earth?’” Burke’s point is that it “would have looked exactly the same: you see what your knowledge tells you you’re seeing.” (James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed*)

If you don’t know the history of the persecution of Roma people throughout Europe over the last 1 000 years and the recent discrimination, it would be easy to look at Chanov and think badly of those who live there. However, armed with just a little knowledge, of what the harsh realities of life for Roma have been for so many years you see something very different in Chanov. Instead you can see how there are very few facilities, how it is deliberately out of the way, how there is a grinding poverty and sadness about the place. Perhaps it is best summed up by the road sign on the road on the way in from the main road. Chanov does indeed seem to be a cul-de-sac in so many ways.

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Examples of previous immigration to Northeast England

How the Irish became Geordies

Introduction

There is a large Irish community in North-east England who came here in the 19th century to escape poverty and the terrible potato famine in Ireland and also to work in the coalmines and the new industries which were developing in the region, such as shipbuilding, iron and steel and engineering. A large influx of Irish to other parts of Britain has caused many social problems.

Yet North-east England never experienced the same scale of problems as other areas did. So what did happen?

Early problems

It was not always sweetness and light between the Irish and the local communities on Tyneside and across the region. The Irish had begun to arrive in large numbers in the early years of the 19th century. It has been noted that when the original St Andrew's Church on Pilgrim Street was opened, on 11th February 1798, there were no obvious Irish names among the members. However by 8th December 1823 a mere 25 years later, names of members included McKenna, Connolly, McGuire, Boylan, Donnelly and Brennan. The Irish were becoming established on Tyneside. (1) This was to be only the start as there was a great increase in the Irish population in the decades after 1823. (2) The Irish Catholic population would occasionally come under attack from or be aggressive against both the local population and their fellow Irishmen, who came from the Orange side of the Northern Irish community.

Indeed as far back as 1817, an Orange March was mentioned in the autobiography of the Tyneside Victorian entertainer Billy Purvis, imaginatively entitled, '*The Life of Billy Purvis*'. In the same year a book called '*Loyal Orangemen's Song Book*' was published in North Shields, whilst '*The Orangemen's Companion*' was also published in 1817. (3) In the 1840's a local Protestant organization, the South Shields Loyal Standard Association, held a dinner for seamen at which, the *Gateshead Observer* reported that, "the Rev. Mr. Griffiths, curate of St. Hilda's Church, instructed his audience to set a 'good example' when they visited other parts of the world. This was important not just in 'heathen lands', he said, but 'shores where the people were sunk in Roman Catholic idolatry and superstition.'" That this attitude against the Irish could be expressed in more violent terms, was amply demonstrated in June 1846, when the *Gateshead Observer* reported that between three and four hundred Irishmen had attacked their fellow English workers, who had retaliated, leaving a number of Irish men as casualties. Notably the newspaper refused to get involved in further stoking the fires of prejudice, concluding that, "meanwhile we will not enter into the causes of the conflict". (4)

It was just after 1846 that the massive Irish immigration into the region occurred, in the wake of the terrible Potato Famine in Ireland. The 1840's did see further violence between Protestants and Catholics in Consett, which was divided almost like modern day Belfast between Protestant Consett and Catholic Blackhill. Then in 1851, came the Sandgate riot, by the banks of the Tyne in Newcastle. This was begun by a Protestant preacher, who decided to criticize the Catholic faith. It has been noted that, while the Catholic Church could be described as having a martyr complex, the ordinary Irish were not so keen to turn the other cheek and were not prepared to tolerate a slight on their faith. Indeed it was quite common that they would spontaneously react in a dramatic way, when they felt slighted. It was no wonder then, that there were problems one Sunday evening in May 1851 when, "Ranter Dick preached frey a chair/while singing oot wi' cuddy blair/'an gi'en the Pope a canny share/ o' hell-fire comfort and declare, sparked the Horrid war l' Sandgyet". (5) North-east England could see expressions of anti-Irish sentiment and also belligerent behaviour by the Irish themselves.

According to *The Tablet*, the Irish, "unable to restrain their feelings commenced an attack on the preacher, who had speedily to fly to save himself from a severe chastisement; some of the people present took part with the

preacher; the Irish rallied on their side and a general row commenced; for an hour or two in spite of the police, the Irish were in possession of that part of the town...upwards of sixty Irishman were taken into custody". (6)

The riot in Sandgate in Newcastle on 11th May has also been reported in terms of an alliance between local people and the local police against the Irish. It has been noted that police confronted the Irish crowd and made it clear that they wanted them to disperse. The Irish crowd refused to disperse and began to fight against the police and was soon on top. However, news of the confrontation soon spread to the teeming tenements, which wound their way down to the Tyne, housing full of local Geordies. These locals, often antagonistic towards the police themselves, came out in support of the police against the Irish and as a result, the combination of local police and local residents proved too strong for the Irish crowd. This incident went on to inspire a song called, 'The Horrid War i' Sangeyt' (7)

Meanwhile in the mid-1850's Lady Londonderry, wife of the notorious landowner, Lord Londonderry was busy with some anti-Irish work of her own in County Durham. She tried very hard to stop Catholics in Seaham Harbour, who numbered as many as 500 from having a Catholic church on her land. (8)

There was a serious clash between Irish Catholics and their countrymen of an Orange persuasion on 12th July 1856, the 166th anniversary of the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne and still the main event in the Ulster marching season. On this day, the Orange Lodge at the Black Swan on Clayton Street had arranged a procession to a fellow Orange Lodge in Felling with the marchers to be joined by members of a third lodge from Gateshead en route. Irish Catholics known as 'Ribbonmen', were waiting. Trouble ensued as has been noted:

"The procession went from Newcastle to Gateshead and proceeded along the Sunderland Road, until somewhere near the Felling Gate, the Ribbonmen blocked further passage. The Orangemen retreated but.....the Ribbonmen closed in and 'avenged on the Tyne, the defeat of James on the Boyne.'" (9)

Another example of violence was in Sunderland on 27th September 1858, when an Irish publican named Michael Digney, lost his licence to sell alcohol, while a rival beer seller, Michael Norton was able to continue in his trade. This so enraged Digney, that he went round with some friends to Norton's pub and attacked him. A riot ensued. The result of this trouble, naturally was a session, not in a pub, but at the magistrates. This was reported in racist terms in the *Sunderland Herald on 1st October 1858*; "As complainant after complainant came into this court, and the unmistakable Milesian phiz popped up in the witness box, the display of adhesive plaster was seen to be most abundantly spread over each luckless skull.....(but) the breadth of the plaster did not exactly correspond – a broadly hinted insinuation that Pat trusted more to the number of square inches in the plaster than to the strength of his case on its own unadorned merits" (10)

As late as 1869 there were problems, this time brought about by the visit to North Shields of a notorious anti-Catholic preacher who went by the name of Murphy. It is reported that his visit, "sparked off considerable disorder, shots being fired into the hall where his meeting was taking place, followed by a prolonged combat between police and a crowd of Irish Catholics." (11)

How did the Irish become accepted?

It might seem like the Irish Catholic and British Protestant communities did not forge a healthy relationship, but when one considers that these were isolated incidents, then one can well imagine that things may have been much worse. On

Tyneside, the Irish did become a remarkably well-integrated community, to the extent that, long before there was a Green party, the Labour party's colours in Newcastle were as much Irish green as Socialist red.

Perhaps it was actually a major world event, which finally sealed the deal and ensured that sectarianism had no major role to play in North-East life. Both Scots and Irish communities

were perceived by the local media as playing a major part in the war effort during the First World War. Indeed in the days after the Easter Rising of 1916, it has been reported that, the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* played up the loyalty of the 'local' Irish men in the army in the face of German provocation. Regular reports of their bravery paved the way." (12)

The scale of the sacrifice can be seen by the following account of what happened to the Tyneside Irish on 1st July 1916; the first day of the Battle of the Somme:

"The 103 Brigade (The Tyneside Irish) left its position on the exposed slopes of the Tara-Usna Hills at 7. 40 a.m. and advanced with its four battalions abreast towards the front. Because of a fold in the ground, none of them, could see even their own front line and as all communication with the front had ceased, no one from the brigade was aware of the debacle ahead. The attacking force had gone only far enough to shake out into regular waves when it ran into a heavy and accurate German artillery barrage. This was soon accompanied by scything machine-gun fire. Even so in the words of one account, 'the forward movement was maintained until only a few scattered soldiers were left standing.' 'Glorious' is a word often mentioned in accounts describing the martyrdom of the Tyneside Irish. It is hardly appropriate. This episode scarcely amounted even to battle. By the time some units of this brigade had arrived *at their own front line* they had suffered 70 per cent casualties. Two years in the making, the Tyneside Irish had lasted just 80 minutes as a fighting formation." (13)

But then even as far back as the 1840's the potential was there, as it is also true that positive expressions of Irish identity were well received, from earlier days of Irish settlement in the region. On the 21st March 1846, the *Gateshead Observer* reported that, "On St. Patrick's Day (Tuesday), the members walked in procession through the streets of Newcastle and Gateshead, with music and banners. The number was about two hundred; and they presented a brilliant spectacle, arrayed in their peculiar dresses and decorations, of which green formed the predominant colour." (14) Roger Cooter sums up the assimilation of the Irish in North-east English society, by stating that incidents such as the Sandgate riot and the opposition of Lady Londonderry were the exception not the rule. Compared to events in places such as Stockport and Glasgow, the Irish assimilated very well in North-east England. (15) Perhaps ultimately the reason why the Irish assimilated came down to the numbers game. There were pockets of the region where there were a high number of Irish-born people. Jarrow's population in the 1860's was about 3 000; by 1871 it had grown to 18 000 and by 1891 33 000, of whom one-third were Irish, many attracted to work in the chemical works (16). However, in the middle of the 19th century, while the Irish-born population on Tyneside was as high as 7.9%, it was still less than the 17% in Liverpool, 16% in Glasgow and 12% in Manchester. It may well have been simply that there were not quite enough Irish on Tyneside and in the wider north-east for them to be really perceived as a major threat, especially at a time of expanding industries in the region.

I will leave the final word on the assimilation of Irish people to Harold Heslop, the North-east writer, who wrote in his autobiography about working with Irish immigrants when he went from his home in New Hunwick, near Bishop Auckland to Harton Colliery in South Shields in 1915. Heslop wrote that,

"All my new fellow-workers were of Irish extraction, descending from those immigrants who had fled the poverty of Ireland and who had caused great dissatisfaction among the proletariat living and working north of a line drawn from Liverpool to Hull. I belonged to that generation which had forgotten to be angry with the invasion. In my time Roman Catholic churches had lost themselves in the clutter of housing where women lived and bred. They were the first Irishmen I had met. Later I was to recognize many of them as consummate miners and far-seeing trade union leaders, even though I was more aware of their being disgruntled, landless peasants." (17)

Conclusion

The North-east has a proud record on integration. The Irish assimilated very well into the region and became part of our people in a way which didn't happen in other parts of Britain. It can be argued that there was always a great solidarity amongst working people in North-east England. If you were working in a place as dangerous as a coalmine and your life depended on your relationship with your workmates, then you didn't have time to worry where they came from. Certainly, there were teething troubles and it wasn't all sweetness and light. But surely that illustrates and even more important point; when new group of people come to our region, there are usually tensions, indeed it is to be expected, but these tensions are traditionally overcome and the incomers go on to play their part in defining what it is to be from North-east England.

Timeline

- 1798 St. Andrew's Church opened on Pilgrim Street – no obviously Irish names in church register
- 1817 Orange March mentioned in autobiography of North-east Entertainer Billy Purvis
- 1817 Loyal Orangeman's Songbook published in North Shields. The Orangeman's Companion also published
- 1823 St Andrew's Church register contains numerous Irish names
- 1840's Provocative anti-Catholic speech at dinner held by South Shields Loyal Standard Association
- 1845 Potato Blight occurs in Ireland – leading to Potato Famine
- 1846 Successful St. Patrick's Day March through Newcastle and Sunderland
- 1846 June – large battle between Irish and English workers in Gateshead
- 1840's Violence between Irish and English in the Consett area
- 1851 Sandgate Riot provoked by 'Ranter Dick'
- Mid-1850's Lady Londonderry tries to prevent a Catholic Church being built in Seaham
- Mid-19th century Irish make up 7.9 % of population of Tyneside
- 1856 12th July Clash between Orangemen and Catholics in Felling, Gateshead
- 1858 Riot in Sunderland
- 1869 Disorder in North Shields
- 1871 One-third of population of Jarrow are Irish
- 1916 July - Tyneside Irish Regiment suffer heavy losses at start of the Battle of the Somme

Footnotes

1. J.A. Burnett and D. M. Macrauld, quoted in *Northumbria; History and Identity*, p. 181
2. T.P. MacDermott, *Irish Workers on Tyneside in the 19th Century, Essays in Tyneside Labour History 1977*, ed. by N. McCord, p. 157
3. *ibid.* p. 156
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5. J. A. Burnett and D.M. Macrauld, quoted in *Northumbria: History and Identity*, p. 183
6. R. Cooter, *When Paddy Met Geordie, The Irish in County Durham and Newcastle*, p. 76-7
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8. R.J. Cooter, *Lady Londonderry and the Irish Catholics of Seaham Harbour, No Popery Out of Context*, p. 1-11
9. R. Cooter, *When Paddy met Geordie, the Irish in County Durham and Newcastle*, p. 109
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12. N. McCord, *Some Aspects of NE England in The 19th Century Northern History Volume VII, 1972*, p. 85-6
13. R. Prior and T. Wilson, *The Somme*, p. 98-9
14. J. A. Burnett and D.M. Macrauld, quoted in *Northumbria; History and Identity*. p. 181
15. J. Wilson, *Memories of a Labour Leader*, p. 238-9
16. Tom Kelly, quoted on Little Ireland film, Gary Wilkinson and Tom Kelly
17. R. Cooter, *When Paddy Met Geordie, the Irish in County Durham and Newcastle*, p. 110

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The Assimilation of the Yemenis

Yemeni seamen began settling in the port of South Shields from the late 19th Century, finding employment in the coal and shipping industries. (1) They lodged together in boarding houses, because they were prevented by law from staying in private homes with local families. Indeed there was a general distrust of foreign seamen throughout Britain in the years after the turn of the 20th century, with particular anger being aimed towards Chinese seamen. In Cardiff, the *Maritime Herald* claimed that “you know, we know and they know that a Chinaman isn’t worth a toss as a seaman; that his only claim to indulgence is that he is cheap.” (2) They were not to be treated as equals and were not seen as worthy of equal rights. In London, in 1908 the docks saw riots when British seamen expressed their anger at the presence of Chinese competitors. (3) In various parts of Britain a feeling of being threatened economically by foreign seamen prevailed. How would the Yemenis fare in South Shields?

It was in this national atmosphere, as a feeling of loyalty to Britain was arguably at its peak, in the lead-up to and outbreak of the First World War, that the Yemeni community became established in South Shields, in what had previously been an almost exclusively white community. As we have seen, there had been a large influx of Irish into north-east England during the 19th century and, although there were some problems, this had largely passed off without the sectarianism which has long characterized other places. The Irish were arguably following the work and came to Tyneside when jobs were plentiful. How would Arabs, who looked different and followed a very different religion and customs, fare in the more economically and politically more challenging environment of the 1920’s and 1930’s as jobs became more scarce?

For a number of years the Yemenis were refused entry to cafes and other public places (4), and by the late 1920’s the atmosphere in South Shields towards the Arabs was often hostile. At this time, the letters pages of the *Shields Gazette* regularly contained letters against the Yemeni seamen (5), often sent in anonymously above pen names such as ‘Freedom’, ‘A Mill Dam White Man’ and ‘One who did his bit’ (6). October 1929 saw the Wall Street Crash in New York and a wave of economic problems and unemployment began to spread around much of the world. In this situation in 1929, the National Union of Seamen (NUS) stepped up its campaign against the number of Arab seamen at British ports. On 9th December, it sent a deputation to the Board of Trade, part of the government, about this matter to complain about the number of Yemeni boatmen being employed. The deputation also attacked Arab boarding-house masters for smuggling men in (7). It went on to portray the Arabs as a social menace, who had many illegitimate children who would then go on to be a burden on the state. (8)

There was a strain of racism which was noticeable among members of the local council, as demonstrated by a report from a 1929 council meeting when Councillor Cheeseman commented that having examined the Arabs’ customs, languages and general conditions he could honestly say that, ‘it is not fit for them to live among white people’. *The Seaman*, the NUS house journal, tried to temper these kinds of claims a little by stating that, “we have no kick with the Arabs as such, but charity begins at home.” (9) People were becoming scared; for their jobs and their livelihoods, and the Yemenis provided a convenient scapegoat.

This pressure, along with that of the National Union of Seamen, whose right-wing leadership was against the employment of Yemenis, led to a rota system being introduced. This made it more difficult for the Yemenis to gain places on the boats. Responding to this, the left-wing Seamen’s Minority Movement, a breakaway from the NUS, established a close relationship with the Yemenis main spokesperson Ali Said and opened an office at 6, Brewery Lane, while many Arab seamen manned the picket line outside the NUS offices. The Minority Movement held a series of meetings at Mill Dam to win support for the cause of the Arab Seamen.

On 24th July 1930 speakers included Peter O’Donnell, the chair of the Committee of Action. O’Donnell strongly condemned the NUS and urged the men to refuse to sign the PC5, which had to be signed to join the rota system. It was stated at the meeting that 1 100 white

seamen in South Shields and 900 Arabs and Somalis were supporting the boycott. Some Arab seamen continued to sign on to work on ships during this period, but the picketing of the NUS and Board of Trade offices was generally successful. It has been noted that, "the temperature at the Mill Dam was clearly rising fast.....the explosion came on Saturday 2nd August when a 'riot' broke out at Mill Dam." (10)

By August 1 there were sympathetic strikes in Liverpool and Barry. The big confrontation was to occur the next day, and was to be seen by sections of the local press as a racist incident. The conflict was started by an abusive comment directed towards Yemeni seamen by a white seaman named Hamilton. Hamilton had declined to sign the rota, having taken a place on a boat left free by the Arabs. It was claimed by the Minority Movement that Hamilton was an agent provocateur and if this was indeed the case, then he could be deemed to be an extremely successful one, as he was soon attacked by the Yemenis, who in turn were charged by fifty baton-wielding policemen. There was no direct fighting between white seamen and the Yemenis; rather the fighting was between the Yemenis and the police. In the battle which ensued, P.C. Harry Gash had his lung punctured with what was a near fatal wound, another two constables, Addison and Darling also being stabbed, whilst the Arabs were driven back to their main area of Holborn. (11)

The next day the local press reported the riot in racist terms, almost all of them reporting it as a race riot. This was despite the fact that there was no direct confrontation between Yemenis and white seamen. There was only vague mention of the issue of the work rota.

The *Shields Gazette* even began to report that Constable Gash had been killed in the riot until a young reporter, Jim Slater, corrected the mistake and the newspaper also claimed that the Watch Committee of the local council described the trouble on more than one occasion as an "Arab riot" or "Arab riots" (12). On August 18th, it was reported in the *Shields Gazette* that,

"The case for the prosecution was put forward by Mr. A.G. Flintoff, who alleged that at the meetings under the auspices of the Seamen's Minority Movement men were urged to stop others signing on under P.C. 5 form and the rota system. When two men were about to sign on there was a cry of "Don't let the 'scabs' sign" and "Now's your chance". The rioting followed, knives, stones and sticks being used" (13)

Three months later, in November 1930, the *Shields Gazette* reported the opening of the trial of those accused in connection with the Mill Dam Riot, at Durham Assizes Court; "Assize Court at Durham presented a cosmopolitan appearance today, when as a sequel to the Mill Dam Riot at South Shields on August 2nd, 19 Arabs and six white men were charged before Mr. Justice Roche." It was also noted that the men who had attacked P.C. Gash were described as "childish" (14). This was followed, eight days later, by graphic descriptions in the *Shields Gazette* on 19th November 1930, of the violence alleged to have been perpetrated by Arab men against the police:

"Inspector Goss, of the River Tyne Police, described seeing Ali Anon attack P.C. Walker with a knife, and said that Abduda Saleh attacked him (witness) with a length of chain. He found about sixteen Arabs armed with knives, sticks and stones...." (15)

The same edition did also report the role of Hamilton and another provocative character, who went by the name of Bradford:

"In spite of the provocative attitude of Bradford and Hamilton there was peace until about 1.30, when Hamilton produced a steel lined whip and flourished it before the crowd, shouting, 'Come on you black _____; try to stop me signing on'.

The seamen were provoked beyond endurance and a rush was

made towards the Board of Trade offices, in which both white and coloured men participated." (16)

Despite the problems which boiled to the surface in such a violent way during the Mill Dam

Riot, the Yemenis were able to establish their community as an integrated part of South Shields. Indeed the riot was to be the turning point. Thirty-eight Arabs who spent one night in the Poor House were deported and the Arabs' spirit was crushed. (17) It was now hard for them to be portrayed as a threat. In the event it was an interview in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* which was to see their fortunes improve. Hassan Mohamed from the Arab community reported the situation for the Arabs as follows, poignantly published on Christmas Eve 1931;

"I do not think the public know the extent to which the Arabs are suffering. Many have had to pawn clothing and other personal belongings to buy food. There are scores of Arabs in Holborn who are living on one meal a day. We do not grumble, everything comes from God and the men are suffering quietly; they only want a chance to earn a living and believe that they only have the British flag behind them" (18)

From being perceived to be a threat, the Arabs were now transformed into objects of pity. This is portrayed in the character of George from the Peter Mortimer play *Riot*, who for most of the play is very much against the Arabs saying at one point that the Arab wants to "come here, steal our jobs, seduce our women...". (19) Towards the end of the play, he is seen trying to stop a policeman from deporting the main Arab character, Yussuf. There was continued prejudice but the incidents and their intensity did gradually diminish as the 1930's wore on. Perhaps it was the distinctive identity of the people of north-east England which helped this to happen. The Arabs' children began to speak in Geordie accents, while it has also been noted that "the whole ethos of Tyneside working-class culture was anathema to the bullying on which racism is built." (20)

This point of view is an echo of the comments of Inspector Crawley, chief of Newcastle police, speaking after huge anti-fascist demonstrations in the city against Mosley's Blackshirts on May 13th and 14th 1934, which led to considerable disturbances. Inspector Crawley commented to the Home Office that Mosley and his men were provocative to Northern working people, despite the high unemployment in the region at the time. (21) This seems to suggest that while economic fears could provoke a backlash against incomers they were not enough to initiate a long-term political hostility in terms of the growth of fascist politics in the region. The Fascists did attempt to stir trouble up in South Shields on 3rd November 1935, with a meeting addressed by Mosley at the Palace Cinema near to where most of the Yemenis lived. Although Blackshirts arrived from as far away as Leeds, London and Liverpool as well as Newcastle, Mosley's attempt to stir up trouble for the Yemenis failed. Fighting broke out and the Blackshirts retreated, either being chased away or leaving in buses which were subject to "a shower of stones". (22) The people of South Shields were showing their new-found solidarity with the Yemenis in no uncertain terms.

In the end the Yemeni community in South Shields did become an accepted part of the town as the twentieth century wore on, and even an example to other parts of the country on how racial integration can work. A number of reasons have been put forward as to why this happened and South Shields became, in the words of Ussuf Abdullah, the service coordinator of the South Shields mosque, "a harmonious mix". (23)

South Shields in the second half of the 20th century

It can be seen then that the story of the integration of the Arab population in South Shields during the 20th century is an example of local identity changing and causing people to find solidarity with people from overseas, and eventually allowing them to become integrated into an inclusive identity. Indeed South Shields became something of a model for racial integration throughout Britain. In October 1958, an edition of the *Sunday Sun* included a full-page spread about South Shields which was headlined, 'The Town That has Solved its Colour Problem' and went on to describe how, "since that fateful day in August 1930, South Shields had become a model of racial harmony, with Arabs, Somalis, Indians and Pakistanis now fully integrated into the community." (24) Three and a half years later, this theme was picked up by the national press as on 1st March 1962, David Bean informed *Guardian* readers, that

“Shields is a study in integration; a place where colour prejudice died years ago” (25)

The mosque in South Shields even became world famous for a moment when heavyweight world champion Muhammad Ali had his third marriage blessed there, by himself (26) , in mid July 1977 as part of a visit to Tyneside, which also saw Ali visit Pendower School for Handicapped Children, Grainger Park Boys Club and Denton Boys Club, all in Newcastle (27). Ali became the second Afro-American hero to be feted with a procession through Tyneside, following in the redoubtable footsteps of singer, actor and activist, Paul Robeson, who had visited Britain in 1949. Ali also said that “Newcastle was nicer than America” (28). The visit of Muhammad Ali, which had originally also seen a plan for the world champion to perform in a South Shields boxing booth, seemed to cement the successful integration of the Muslim community in South Shields.

The situation today is complicated. There have been some stirrings of trouble since 9/11, including a mosque attacked with a petrol bomb and graffiti scrawled on the wall in the immediate aftermath of the attack on the Twin Towers. However, there can be no doubt that the settlement of the Yemenis has left a positive legacy in South Shields. Racism can be found across Britain and indeed the world. In that context, it would be wrong to suggest that South Shields is a particularly bad area for racist activity today.

Timeline

Late 19 th Century	Yemeni seamen begin settling in South Shields
1908	Riots in London against Chinese seamen
Late 1920's	Atmosphere in South Shields towards Yemenis often Hostile
1929	National Union of Seamen step up their campaign against Arab Seamen
1929	Hostility to Yemenis expressed at South Shields council meeting
1929	Left-wing Seamen's Minority Movement form close relationship with Yemeni seamen in South Shields
1930	24 th July – meeting held by Seamen's Minority Movement hold one of a number of meetings at Mill Dam, South Shields to win support for Yemenis
1930	Late – July -Yemenis and some white seamen boycott new rota system aimed at excluding Yemenis from jobs on boats sailing from South Shields
1930	1 st August Mill Dam Riot
1930	November – 19 Yemenis and 6 white men charged at Durham Assizes Court
1931	24 th December – Letter from Hassan Mohammad published in Evening Chronicle highlighting plight of Yemenis remaining in South Shields after numerous deportations
1935	November – failed attempt by Black shirts to stir up trouble in South Shields
1958	October – Sunday Sun article – ‘South Shields; the Town That

Solved its Colour Problem'

- 1962 March – South Shields described in The Guardian as a 'study in integration'
- 1977 July – Muhammad Ali has third wedding in mosque in South Shields
- 2001 September - South Shields mosque firebombed and vandalised in wake of 9/11 attacks in USA

Footnotes

1. Carr B; quoted in Colls, R. and Lancaster B. (eds), *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 134
2. Winder R.; *Bloody Foreigners* (2004), Abacus, London, p. 261
3. Carr B; quoted in Colls, R. & Lancaster, B. (eds): *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p.135
4. *ibid.* p. 137
5. Mortimer P.; *Cool for Qat* (2005), Mainstream Publishing Co. Edinburgh, p.58
6. *ibid.* p. 180
7. Lawless R; *An Arab Community in the North-East of England during the early 20th century* (1995), University of Exeter Press, Exeter, p.113
7. *ibid.* p.114
8. *ibid.* p.114-123
9. *ibid.* p. 125-137
10. *ibid.*
11. Carr B; quoted in *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p.139-140
12. Mortimer P.; *Cool for Qat* (2005), Mainstream Publishing Co. Edinburgh, p. 167
13. *Shields Gazette* 18th August 1930
14. *ibid.* 11th November 1930
15. *ibid.* 19th November 1930
16. *ibid.*
17. Carr B. ; quoted in *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p.140
18. *ibid.* p. 141

19. Mortimer P.; script of *Riot*, p. 43
20. Carr. B.; quoted in *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p. 143
21. Todd, N; *In Excited Times* (1995), Tyne and Wear Anti-Fascist Association, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, p.82
22. *ibid.* p. 94
23. Mortimer P.; *Cool for Qat* (2005), Mainstream Publishing Co., Edinburgh, p. 237
24. Mortimer P.; *Cool for Qat* (2005), Mainstream Publishing Co., Edinburgh, p.235
25. Carr B.; quoted in Colls, R. & Lancaster, B. (eds.): *Geordies* (1992), Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, p.132
26. Mortimer P.; *Cool for Qat* (2005), Mainstream Publishing Co., Edinburgh, p.14
27. *Northern Life August 1977*
28. Routledge R., quoted in in Flowers A. and Hilton V. (eds) *All Right Now 1970's Newcastle; Memories from people who were there* (2011), Tyne Bridge Publishing, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, p. 214

A Last Thought

There have been concerns raised in recent years that the Northeast is following a trend seen across Britain and indeed across Western Europe and is becoming less welcome to incomers.

At the end of his book *Colour Blind*, about the history of migration into Northeast England, Dave Renton says this:

“The rights of all migrants have diminished. The ease with which people were able to settle in the post-war period was the product of specific factors, including labour shortages and a strong sentiment that society should never be allowed to go back to the 1930’s. The postwar consensus saw a rejection of both mass unemployment and racism. In a different historical moment, the legal rights of all migrants have been greatly reduced. There has been a greater tendency to define citizenship in terms of blood and ancestry.....Unless popular movements for welcome can challenge both popular and institutional racism, then the future could be bleak indeed. The task then lies with all of us, to demonstrate that hope can win out after all.”
(1)

I couldn’t put it better myself. We have a proud record in Northeast England of welcoming incomers and having strong communities. Let us not lose it.

Peter Sagar/A Living Tradition November 2013

Footnote:

- 1) D. Renton: *Colour Blind*. University of Sunderland Press, Sunderland, p. 224-5

Song lyrics

Love Will Blossom in the Spring

You think you know me so well
With a special window into my soul
But you can't see beyond
Your own prejudiced role

Doctor's receptionist rejects us
Bus driver treats us like dirt
Shopworker follows with suspicious eyes
We've had hundreds of years of this hurt

Perhaps hope and love will come
Conquer every heart one day
Like redemptive rain pouring down
Washing all the hatred away

They say love will blossom in the Spring
In the warm's sun gentle glow
But what if the spring, it never comes
And winter's harsh winds still blow?

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Top hear a recording of this song go to www.alivingtradition.org >
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