

From The Journal:

Mike Kelly: Pride, prejudice and why we're all gadgies to the Roma community

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OPINION



BY MIKE KELLY

Mike Kelly reports on how the Roma on Tyneside are integrating into the community



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A mother sits with her young son on the streets of Bucharest, just yards away from a luxury Gucci outlet. There was a grim irony about the fact that, as we approach Holocaust Memorial Day in Britain, the Roma community yet again found itself in the firing line of prejudice.

The event was introduced in 2001 and takes place on January 27, the date in 1945 when the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp was liberated.

It is held to remind people of the genocide carried out by Nazi Germany and while most people can tell you it resulted in the death of up to six million Jews, far fewer know the Roma also suffered unbearably. The wide range in estimate of the deaths the community suffered - anywhere from 250,000 and 1,500,000 - is perhaps a testament to this lack of knowledge. To the Roma, the Holocaust is known as 'Porjamos' - the 'devouring'.

At New Year, restrictions on citizens of Romania and Bulgaria working in EU countries were lifted. Although these countries had joined the EU in 2007, their right to benefits had been limited until this year.

A media storm was generated in the run-up to New Year about a deluge of economic migrants swamping the UK - including Roma people from both countries - taking 'our' jobs, fleecing the state for benefits, or begging on the streets.

Prime Minister David Cameron faced pressure from his own party to introduce an amendment to the Immigration Bill, which would have prevented the two countries joining the European Union's freedom of movement rules by a further four years to 2018, but to no avail.

When the deadline came and went, two things emerged. Firstly, the flood of expected immigrants was no more than a trickle. And, secondly, the British public were not as fearful as many of the politicians and newspapers who took it upon themselves to speak out on their behalf.

A survey revealed 68% of Britons welcomed Eastern Europeans who work hard, pay taxes and speak English.

And, according to Martin Keles, a spokesman for the Roma community in Newcastle, that is exactly what they intend to do.

"We just want the opportunity to provide for our families," he said.

In Britain it is estimated there are about 200,000 Roma, of who 4,000 have settled in and around Tyneside.

While communities have long had a history in this country, the numbers were boosted by the collapse of communism in the late 1980s - the Roma were afforded

more protection by the communist state - and the Czech Republic joining the EU in 2004. Many Roma, like Martin, are from the Czech Republic.



Ferentari, which is only a few miles from the city centre of Bucharest where Roma people live in poverty. He is a Minister with the Agape (meaning unconditional love) church and first came to Newcastle in December 2012 having lived 13 years in Margate, Kent.

“I thought at first ‘Lord, don’t send me there’,” he laughed at the memory. “It was just so cold and, I don’t know why, I thought the people would be equally cold.”

However, he says, he found the people very open. “I do find the people here very friendly and easy to communicate with.”

Many Roma come from east European countries like the Czech Republic, Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia and Russia. There, the adults are discriminated against when it comes to jobs while their kids get a basic level of education. Attacks are frequent, deaths not uncommon, institutionalised prejudice is a given.

As a result, the mere fact that on Tyneside their kids are sent as a matter of course to their local school and treated equally to their fellow pupils, is a source of great delight to them.

“What really matters for the families is their children,” said Martin. “When they know their children are safe and can get an education which is open to them, not just a

basic one, they are happy. If they get opportunities in their life to get higher, that's what pleases them."

The history of the Roma goes back between 1,000 and 1,500 years to the Punjab in India. From there they fled Muslim invaders to Europe and the Middle East.

By the 14th and 15th century they were in Europe, however they were perceived as outsiders and aliens, exploited and enslaved.

In its history, each country they settle in has passed anti-Roma laws at best, while at worst a number made being a Roma or Romany a crime punishable by death.

As late as July 2010, then French President Nicolas Sarkozy began a systematic deportation campaign against the Roma.

Not surprisingly, there are barriers to overcome when they do settle in a country.

"They want to become part of the community, sometimes they just don't know how," said Martin.

As for coming to the UK to sponge off benefits, he commented: "If you want to find somebody who does that, you can. But through my work with the church I come into contact with perhaps 500 people and it is not my experience.

"Often it isn't easy even for me, their spiritual leader, to meet up with them. They are always doing something, are busy working shifts, doing English classes. They want to get on."

Martin is full of praise for the initiatives taken by the local authorities - the council, police, fire brigade - to help integrate Roma into the local community.

They are working with volunteers to form a bridge between the community and Newcastle which is now bearing fruit.

As part of the process of understanding and building bridges Newcastle City Council, through its 'Make Your Mark' initiative, a creative community programme aimed at Benwell and Scotswood, awarded a grant to Peter Sagar of A Living Tradition.

It is a Community Interest Company based in the North East which deals with the heritage of human rights and community work to encourage and promote it now and in the future.

Peter interviewed members of the Roma community about their experiences about living in Newcastle and Gateshead.

“We’re all gadgies to the Roma,” Peter laughed. “Gadgie is their word for someone who isn’t a Roma.”

While some of those interviewed have experienced isolated examples of prejudice, they seemed borne out of individual ignorance rather than collective ill will.

The responses noted by Peter echo the comments of Martin: fleeing their country to escape institutionalised prejudice in search of a better life; less bigotry in Newcastle, more understanding, an education system that offers them and their children opportunities, resulting in a desire to stay and contribute to the society that has so welcomed them.

Peter also talked to local authority officials who dealt with the Roma. One was development worker Becci Varnham of the Gateshead Carers Centre. She described them as “friendly, outgoing, extremely generous people”.

While she found their level of spoken English caused problems, once this was overcome they would contribute positively to the community.

Hazel Stephenson, Newcastle councillor for the Benwell and Scotswood ward and a cabinet member for communities, said the city had a rich history of tolerance.

“One of the things we should say is Newcastle has a track record we’re very proud of, of being a welcoming city.

“At the heart of it is that the people recognise hardship and understand their difficulties because there are difficulties within their own life.”

She said at the root of the understanding is knowledge of a community’s history, one of the reasons which led to the grant for the work of Peter Sagar and other projects.

She said: “By sharing some of their stories, sharing some of their history, we have a better understanding of what they have gone through. Some of their stories are very moving.”

Hazel said there are procedures in place, not just for the Roma community but for all groups coming to the city, which can help them integrate. And she added it was a mutually beneficial thing.

“It’s common sense integration, a two way process. We put in place procedures to help them become an active part of the community.”