

Szilvia Varró on Kisléta: We Had a Dream

“I think our courage came from the fact that we had nothing to lose. There was no way further down, our lives and our future were in danger. We had to show strength if we wanted to live on”, declared an African-American woman in the fascinating documentary series, *Eyes on the Prize* which charts the history of the American civil rights movement. It was the African-American people by means of civil protest and legal redress who broke the frameworks of racial oppression, segregation, police violence and institutionalized discrimination so characteristic of America in the 60s.

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“We have nothing to lose. Even our kids are being killed now”, said Csaba Csorba, father of Róbert Csorba, and grandfather of four-year-old Robika, both slaughtered in Tatárszentgyörgy in February. The moment of the slaying of his son and grandson marked the beginning of an agonizing and awful 12-hour period for Csaba Csorba and other family members as they vainly pressed unwilling police officers to take the spent cartridge shells and bloodstained clothes. A pathetic exchange of media statements ensued between the fire department, doctors and the police as to who made the mistake in classifying the incident as one of accidental death due to smoke inhalation. The police were at the forefront in denial and evasion and straight away laid the blame on the other actors. Eventually, instead of punishing those responsible in an open and appropriate manner, the long-awaited internal police investigation concluded with two rather soft disciplinary actions. One can only speculate whether this grave error was due to purely professional incompetence or was motivated by total disrespect for the Roma. In any case, it is hard to believe that the same could happen if the victims were not Roma.

Prior to the atrocity in Tatárszentgyörgy it definitely appeared that the law enforcement authorities did not treat the assaults on the Roma seriously. Since then, however, they have modified their public stance. In 2008 they excluded racial motivation at the very outset of investigations of several Molotov cocktail attacks and homicide cases. In some cases they were more concerned with the past record of the victims (the implication being they got what they deserved). The police did not dare to repeat the same errors in the wake of Tatárszentgyörgy. They could identify the (irrelevant for foreigners) perpetrators in only two out of the several dozen cases, although obviously, the intention was to kill in Galgagyörk, Piricse, Nyíradony-Tamásipuszta and Alsószolca alike. Despite the National Police Chief József Bencze’s announcement as early as March that they were close to finding the perpetrators, the killers responsible for the attacks in Tatárszentgyörgy, Nagycsécs and Tiszalök still remain at large. Instead, they feed us with nonsense about a 50, 80 or even 100 member-strong special detective squad tracking millions of phone calls and cars. The course of the investigations has been marked by many blunders: for quite a time their main suspect was a Roma man with a criminal record, who according to the logic of the police, committed the murder in Nagycsécs because he wanted to free his son from prison. It remains far beyond comprehension why the police cannot communicate in a proper way without compromising their investigations and disseminate information that could reassure the general public rather than attempting to justify themselves.

“The death of my godfather shows that it does not matter what we do, how we try to prove to the majority of the society and to ourselves that we can get along. The only thing that matters is that we were born Gypsy”, stated Ágnes Kóka in *Magyar Narancs* following the murder in Tiszalök. This successful young Roma intellectual must not only find a way to cope with the death of her relative but also with the cruel fact that what matters in Hungary today is the color of your skin and not your personal achievements, that your ethnicity matters more than whether or not you hold a university degree, whether or not you are integrated in society.

“The murderers will come back and shoot us all”, whispered eight-year-old Vanda to her four-year-old sister Diana on Monday in Kisléta. Right-wing pundits dispute whether there was a racist motive behind the attacks, stating that until the perpetrator is found there is no way to know what goes on in his or her mind. It remains an undisputable fact however that the victim is always a Roma person in this series of murders and attempted murders and that there is a pattern to these attacks. From the point of view of the Roma it makes little difference whether the murders are committed by homegrown lunatics linked to the Hungarian far-right or, according to the wilder conspiracy theorists, by secret service agents – the assassins regard Roma as something less than human.

From the far right there are claims that the serial murders serve the interests of the Hungarian government. This bizarre interpretation was made clear to me in the company of a senior US newspaper correspondent by the mayor of one of the affected villages. He claimed that in order to preserve their power, the Jews massacre the Roma so they can play the “racist card” to prevent the victory of the right-wing. “But where are the Jews?”, my overseas colleague inquired. Well, they’re in the government, responded the mayor.

Whatever the primary motive driving the serial murderers of Roma might be, it remains a fact that several hundred members of an ethnic minority spend their days in fear in Hungary. The kids, wide-eyed and nestling close to the fence in Kisléta, are just as severely traumatized as the children in Tatárszentgyörgy: their aunt would get the same kind of fancy wreath from politicians that Robika Csorba and his father received, and that’s it. In Hungary the state does not feel any obligation to provide counseling or assistance for coping with, and living through the trauma and grief that follows tragedy, as in the US, where for example special assistance is provided for victims and relatives immediately after shootings in schools.

Several months after the murder in Tatárszentgyörgy children were put into bed fully dressed with their shoes on so they could flee in the event of further night attacks. A few months ago in conversation with dedicated teachers from the local school at a conference in Olaszliszka,¹ one told me proudly: “When the kids brought up the death of Lajos Szögi, we switched the topic of conversation. There was some general outcry and concern for a day or two, but then order was restored as if nothing had happened”. The teachers in Olaszliszka, the local non-Roma community, the families and children of the perpetrators were all left alone to cope with almost unmanageable tragic stories just like the Csorba family in Tatárszentgyörgy and the Kóka family in Tiszalök. If the critically wounded 13-year-old Ketrin, victim of the latest attack in Kisléta were a non-Roma girl living in Rózsadomb (an affluent residential area in Budapest) the world would be turned upside-down by now. She is the third child victim of this terror, yet sections of the media are still spitting the same prejudiced stereotypes. If Ketrin

¹ Lajos Szögi, a non-Roma teacher was pulled from his car and murdered by a group of local Roma in 2009 after his car struck a glancing blow to a young Roma girl. Olaszliszka became a symbol of the so-called Gypsy crime. One man was sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder, five people were given 15-year prison sentences, and two others were given 10 years in a juvenile detention center.

were a girl from Rózsadomb, these same sections of the media would not be reporting on how the relatives drove away or abused reporters, for the reporters would not have been able to make it to the Rózsadomb in the first place, if the mourning relatives had not wanted to meet them and had asked the police to keep the press away. Instead, in Kisléta the police helped the press correspondents to make their exit.

I witnessed several reporters, not only from the right-wing, who were outrageously provocative and aggressive towards the shocked and grieving family. Immediately afterwards they were cunning enough to use the opportunity to once again portray the Roma as “uncivilized and barbaric.” The lack of self-control, intrusion and incitement of some of the reporters is most striking in such cases, although it is part and parcel of the media reality that we have to live with. While the mainstream right sometimes openly embraces the anti-Roma rhetoric of the extreme right-wing, some left-liberal commentators covertly encourage the prejudices of the majority, while others do likewise, provocatively posing as courageous heroes overturning long-standing, but in reality non-existent, taboos. The common denominator is the exclusion of, or at a minimum, disdain for the Roma. Similarly in the sphere of politics we all remember Gyula Horn’s (Prime Minister 1994–1998) words about Roma criminals, Viktor Orbán’s (Prime Minister 1998–2002) words about the Roma who tear up the floors of their apartments. Most recently Prime Minister Gordon Bajnai, an excellent student who has newly mastered the old Socialist rhetoric of doublespeak, in a display of enormous courage, scolded the Roma (in general) telling them that they should be so kind as to adapt.

The Prime Minister should not only summon the police to request information but should also condescend to visit the victims. In between taking a strong public stance for two national parks and three protected bird species perhaps the President could also drop in to pay a visit to the wounded little girl, shot down in cold blood, and communicate by his presence to the Roma in Hungary and in Kisléta: we will do everything in our capacity to protect you.

The Roma are living in something akin to a civil war psychosis in the villages across Hungary: entire communities feel trapped as a result of the repeated bloody assaults which strike at the poorest people living on the edge of villages; they do not see a way out, a goal to strive for. “But when should we strike back?” a man in Kisléta asked. We will all be held accountable if we allow this process to begin.

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