

From Bill Baker,

Earlier this summer the University of Prešov in Slovakia organized a two day conference about getting Gypsies into the job market. Nearly a fifth, or 100,000 of the 600,000 residents in the Prešov region are Roma. Business people spoke about how much risk they take when they hire those from the bottom of society. Mayors talked about too many lower skilled laborers and the not enough work. Educators debated whether the system had failed to teach Gypsies or whether it was impossible to teach anything if the students are not interested to learn. Church representatives were supposed to talk about their outreach programs. Non-Roma spoke about Roma. So I asked a young Roma man, Milan to take my 15 minute allotment and talk about himself. We prepared his message together.

Below is what we composed.

The Unspoken Rules of Life on a Gypsy Settlement

Milan K.

My name is Milan. I am 32, married and the father of three children. It has been helpful for me to learn from you about the struggles that you have experienced with Roma in your communities, your schools, your churches and businesses. We need more such opportunities to learn from one another. This speech is not easy for me to do. It describes my life and hundreds of others who are like me.

I am always aware that I am Gypsy. When I ride a bus, go shopping, or enter one of your businesses, I always know that I am a Gypsy in a Slovak institution. Awareness of being unwanted and unwelcome never goes away.

When I look for a job and am accepted for an interview, as soon as they see the color of my skin, I learn that the job was just taken. Yet you hold long discussions with the white people who come in after me. Why should I try to look for a job when you won't even give me time for an interview?

I do not have any Slovak friends. I have never been in the home of a Slovak. I have never had any Slovaks in my home either. You and I live in two separate societies where we share a common mistrust of one another.

Sometimes people from European Union visit our village to see how we live. They walk around the fringe and I feel like we are zoo animals being looked at. The European Union people ask Slovak translators about us and you tell them something. I assume that it is nothing good. Although the European Union people are curious about us, none of them has ever been in one of our homes. They stay at four star hotels. I think they worry that they would pick up some kind of disease if they had a cup of tea with us.

Failure is a part of my life. My parents' lives were also filled with failure. I think the teachers lowered their standards in school so that I would not fail. But I still only made it to 9th grade. I don't envy those who tried to teach us. We made life hell for them.

Since I am surrounded by friends who also fail, no one expects me to succeed. I think that if I did succeed, then most of my friends would be jealous and would hope that something bad happens to me.

My house is two rooms and 400 square feet. Five people live in my home. Some of my neighbors have more crowded homes than us. We worry for our children to go outside because it is not very safe. And when there is stress at home, none of us have anywhere to go or any way to alleviate the tension.

Sylvia and I fight a lot about money. The worst fighting is the week before we get our check. Then we have no money for anything. Then is the time when we feel we must borrow from fellow Gypsies who exploit our dilemma. I hate them and fear them because they live like roaches off of our scarcity.

I feel ashamed that I am not providing enough for my kids. I can't describe my feelings as a father and husband when I am not providing for the family.

I feel useless. I feel humiliated and worthless.

The one nice piece of furniture in our home is a television. We never have vacations or hobbies that cost money. TV is our main entertainment. Most of you judge us because if we are poor, we should not have any kind of entertainment like televisions. When we have no money and nothing to do, we probably do watch too much television.

I smoke a pack a day. I don't believe that the quality of my life would be any better if I didn't smoke. Smoking reduces my stress.

I feel like being poor is my destiny. There is little that I can do to change my fate as an outcast to society. Gypsy fairy tales and traditional Gypsy music is about being poor and rejected.

I can't think in the future beyond the next month. I am always solving some kind of a crisis today.

It seems that someone in my family is always sick or has problems with their teeth. When we have to visit the doctor it is always traumatic.

I hear you complain about Gypsies having too many children. I hear you say that we plan how many kids we will have because we will get more money from the state. Most of us don't want any more children. But what if my wife, Sylvia gets pregnant again? We will not have an abortion. (Gypsies in Slovakia do not have abortions.) And we will try to raise the child the best we can. For us, discussion about planning a family has never happened. Yet, in my settlement you will observe that we too, have social class. The poorest Gypsies tend to have the most children.

Nearly all of us have religious tapestries or crosses on our walls. We believe in God. We want to go to heaven. We yearn for closeness to God. But you don't see us at your churches. We do not feel welcome there. Your church traditions are suitable for you but not for us. When you preach to us it is without ever asking us any questions. Your preaching doesn't sound like good news. You talk down to us.

I feel safer in a group of people who are like me. I would attend a church if it had Gypsies who have the same kind of stories as mine. My brother began attending a home church in our settlement. Jesus, who my brother talks about, doesn't seem to be the same One that I learned when I listen to you. I am learning that Jesus loves me even when I have a very problematical life. And that gives me hope that my life can change.

So then, what do I know for sure?

I need you. When I want to work, I must go to you. even if you do not want me.

You write the rules and hold all of the cards. I must play by your rules or I lose.

I want the honor of bringing home a paycheck.

I want my children to have a better life than me.

I want my children to be proud of me.

I want the courage and power that when I stumble and fail, that I get up and try again.

I am vulnerable. But, I don't want your pity.

I don't want you to judge me either.

I don't want you solving my problems for me. That only makes both of us resentful. I want to have the resources I need to make my life better.

I am your neighbor and your fellow citizen.

Milan K.