



Nicolae Gheorghe

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"I grew up with the idea I am a cigan, I wanted to get rid of this identity I was taught to be Romanian (...). I rediscovered my identity (...). I want to die as a Human person." (Nicolae Gheorghe)

For a long time, the issue of Roma minority and human rights was neglected, if not completely ignored, on a political level. It was only at the beginning of the 1990's thanks to continual lobbying by a few Roma activists that this topic entered into broader European and international debate. One of these activists was Nicolae Gheorghe, who, thanks to his personal background, his professional experience as a sociologist, and his decades of work with the Roma, significantly contributed to the discussion.

Whenever possible, he took part in meetings and seminars in order to speak for the Roma and untiringly followed every discussion. His personal socialisation predestined him for a dialectic way of presenting his argument in order to bring the oppositional views of *Gadže* and Roma closer together. Thanks to his wise diplomacy, he became something like a link between the two groups.

Born on November 12th 1946 in Rosiori de Vede, Romania, Nicolae Gheorghe was the youngest of 3 children. His father was a member of the *Zlatari* ("goldwashers"); his mother belonged to the *Vatrasch* and *Lautari*, two Roma groups who have been residing in Romania for several centuries. [→ Roma – Sub Ethnic Groups / → Index of appellations] He was nine years old when his family moved to Bucharest. His new surroundings were foremost Romanian, which meant that Nicolae's playmates were mainly *Gadže*.

Gheorghe's childhood was characterised by the attempt to escape from his own identity. Both his mother's and his personal interests aimed at adapting to the culture and behaviour of the *Gadže*.

"I had to communicate only with non-Roma as a result of which I more and more resembled them, accepting their own culture. At the same time I was more and more losing my own connection with Roma(...)in terms of behaviour, manners, style of dressing and communication." (Kovacheva, 52)

His friends in turn considered him a *Gadže*. Gheorghe's alienation grew even stronger when against his parents' wishes he decided to attend a military academy 80 kilometers outside of Bucharest. There he developed his love for working out strategic concepts, which later became useful to him in his efforts to offer suggestions for improving the condition of the Roma. At the academy, he also discovered an interest in philosophy. After graduating from military school in 1968, he thus began to study philosophy and sociology.

When he finished his studies in 1972, Nicolae started working at the Institute of Sociology in Bucharest. At that time, Communism in Romania was experiencing ideological changes. The Internationalism of the 1950's and 1960's was replaced by a more nationalistic ideology which emphasised anything Romanian. This process caused Nicolae to reconsider his own identity.

"Being Romanian no longer meant being a citizen of the Romanian State who is integrated into the social development and feels bound to it. Rather, one suddenly was confronted with terms such as blood, heirs and ancestors. I however had a hard time stating that my predecessors had been *Dakers* or Romans. I knew that it wasn't true and that it made me differ from other



Romanians. My predecessors were Gypsies. I grew angry and started to ask: Who am I really?" (Gheorghe, 146)

More and more, Nicolae started to combine his personal interest with his professional activities. He worked on sociological studies leading him to other regions and cities in Romania where he got to know various different Roma groups and began to learn Romani. His encounter with "Pitu" (Ion Cioaba) was to influence his further life in significant ways. Between the "King of the Roma" and Nicolae, a deep friendship developed.

"Pitule was known as Cioaba Joan, he was extremely rich, owning a fortune of golden coins. That was indeed the reason why he became such an easy victim of the Romanian militia. They arrested him, charged him on the basis of manipulated evidence, and then started to blackmail his entire family and mostly his wife. The price for his release from prison was two golden coins each time. The arrogance of the militia at that time seemed amazing to me, and I started writing complaints on behalf of Pitule. I addressed those to Nikolae Chaushesko, as a private secretary of Pitule and even today I keep these letters at home. They make a whole big bag." (Kovacheva, 53)

In official Communist politics, there was no public discussion of Roma issues. Starting in the mid 1970's, however, the Communist party initiated several efforts to integrate marginalised groups: in 1974, Nicolae was asked by the Communist central committee to investigate the causes of minority marginalisation. In 1975, the Romanian Parliament started a discussion on minority issues. In 1976, Nicolae worked on the "social integration of Roma youth" in the course of a large investigation. He took a stand for the Roma and, realizing that their problems could not be solved merely on a social level, he advocated minority rights for the ethnic group. Through his cooperation with American sociologists and anthropologists as well as his intense engagement with the issue itself, Nicolae increasingly came into conflict with the official ideology. In 1981, he was repeatedly questioned by the Securitate.

"People grew suspicious and critical, accusing me of diversion. They claimed I was being manipulated by foreign countries, exaggerating the Roma problem in Romania, etc... The Securitate questioned me, my research project at the institute was stopped and I had to go back to working on "rural sociology"." (Gheorghe, 147)

His realisation that the sad situation of the Roma was no isolated problem of individual states but could only be improved within a global context, caused Nicolae to intensify his international contacts.

"Roma politics must be dealt with in relation to general human rights; it must be related to common values and moral codes and must not focus on an exclusively ethnic or national problem. I thus prefer a course of action that doesn't pass by international human rights standards nor their according institutions and organisations." (Gheorghe, 50)

For the realisation of Roma interests on an international level, Nicolae worked "internally", that is within the international Roma movement (1991-1993 he was one of the vice presidents of the **International Roma Union**), as well as at various seminars and meetings of the OSCE, the UN, the **Council of Europe**, the **European Union**, and other internationally active organisations (**Project on Ethnic Relations**, **Open Society Institute**). His personal aim was to improve the acknowledgement of the Roma by international organisations. [→ Emancipatory activities on an international level]



In cooperation with the **International Federation on Human Rights**, Nicolae spent more than two years working on a document about **Human Rights Protection of Roma**, which was accepted into the Resolution 65/1993 by the **UN Commission on Human Rights**.

Thanks to his wise diplomacy and profound knowledge of languages (Romanian, Romani, French, English) as well as his abilities to work with various different political groups, Nicolae became an internationally known Roma expert. As a NGO representative during a period of five years, he functioned as an official observer at the meetings of the European Council's group of specialists on issues of the Roma and Sinti.

Looking for new methods and strategies of solution, Nicolae was constantly engaged in discussions with Roma representatives from other countries. Up until 1990, Roma were not mentioned in documents of the OSCE. Therefore, Nicolae and other Roma representatives such as Rudko Kawczynski, Agnes Darocsi, and Aladar Horvath took part in the KSZE Conference on "Human Dimension" in Copenhagen in June 1991. The final document stated that the "specific problems" of the Roma and Sinti in relation to racism, xenophobia and discrimination were to be acknowledged

On the part of the OSCE states, the first step towards a discussion of Roma issues was thus taken and Roma problems began to draw wider public attention. For the first time, the term "Roma and Sinti" was introduced in an official, international document. The report on the KSZE meeting of experts on national minorities in Geneva in 1991 likewise dealt with Roma issues and the participating states declared their intentions of taking effective measures in order to be able to grant the Roma the same rights and possibilities as the rest of the population. Along with other like-minded fellow Roma, Nicolae took part in many further OSCE meetings in order to lobby for an improvement of their condition.

Despite his international endeavours, Nicolae never lost touch with his base. After the fall of Communism in Romania on December 27th, 1989, many Roma organisations and political parties developed. Along with the political change, however, tensions between the majority population and the Roma minority grew. The pogrom-like acts of violence against the Roma that saw their homes burned down has reached sad notoriety.

Between 1990 and 1995, 133 Roma houses were burned down, 300 more were destroyed by brute force. In light of these conflicts, Nicolae postponed his concepts for the cultural emancipation of the Roma and the founding of a European ethnic Roma Federation. Meanwhile, he actively helped with the reconstruction of houses and worked on solutions for the conflicts between *Gadže* and Roma. In 1993, Nicolae founded the **Roma Center for Social Intervention and Studies (Romani Criss)**. **Romani Criss** fights for a normalisation of the situation between Roma and *Gadže* and works at improving human rights for the Roma. Another central interest of **Romani Criss** is to encourage young Roma to stand up for their own people.

"It was then that I realised that one needed to work not only with non-Roma, but with the Roma community as well as I saw that there were cases when the guilt lay mostly with the Roma themselves. We followed this strategy in the work of our organisation, giving a chance to many young Roma boys and girls to advance their education as we financed their studies. In return they worked in our organisation on voluntary basis." (Kovacheva, 56)



Within a short amount of time, **Romani Criss** became known internationally. At the beginning, the organisation focused its activities on local projects (i.e. rebuilding Roma houses); later, more and more national and international projects were carried out.

The great commitment of the organisation showed success not only in realizing a variety of projects but by engaging young Roma in its work who came to accept their identity, strengthened their self-confidence and set out to work for their people.

At the beginning of the 1990s, the social and economic situation of the Roma in former Communist countries deteriorated. In 1994, the OSCE reacted by installing a **Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues** at the **Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights** in Warsaw. Additionally, in December 1998 it was decided to create the position of an "Advisor for Roma and Sinti Issues". From a group of 60 applicants, Nicolae was selected for this highly demanding task. He took up office on May 1st, 1999. The task of working for his people on an international level has been the highlight of Nicolae's career to date.

Hardly anybody would be better qualified for for this position than Nicolae, who is able to contribute significantly to an understanding between Roma and *Gadže* thanks to his profound academic training, his analytical way of thinking, his critical mind and his openness to new ideas or even utopias and visions. Anyone who knows him will never be able to forget the image of Nicolae incessantly recording any discussion on his laptop.

Sources

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