

Beáta Szabóné Balázs: Can we change?

Translated from the Hungarian by Sára Szakál and Eszter Tarsoly

Bea is a local contributor of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She joined our research team in 2022, when the earlier translanguaging project finished, and our participatory research moved “outside” the school environment to engage with the town’s public. Together with her husband, Bea runs an organic farm, where they grow, process, and sell apples and other fruit, as well as experimenting with other branches of organic animal and crop farming. They are also dedicated to folk dancing and are leading members of the local ensemble. As a volunteer, Bea provides extra-curricular activities to a local school in ornithology and environmental science. She lives in a farm house with land with her daughter and husband. Exceptionally among local entrepreneurs, Bea and her husband made a commitment to employing local Roma on their farm. A member of the team developing the project application for the ongoing linguistic citizenship project, she was part of Duj Džene – Two Together’s editorial team from the outset.

I don’t think my story is unique. There are way more interesting stories than mine. But I am proud to have taken these steps so far in my life.

For most of my life, I lumped Roma people together. As a child, I saw them as strangers who are dirty, and as people I should be afraid of. We all carry our upbringing and our family’s behaviour patterns, and for a long time we don’t think about these. As a teenager, I left home, lived in a student hall of residence, and later went to university. I would say that I built an imaginary wall, which made me feel safe. At that time, I had no contact with Roma people at all. I distanced and alienated myself from the Roma and from everything else that was not part of my everyday life.

Once I came to live in Tiszavasvári, and we moved into a new house with my husband, I left my job in the banking world behind and ended up in the agricultural sector. Becoming a mother was a turning point, and the catalyst for a change in my attitude. The Hungarian day labourers were all elderly, and in the years that followed it was difficult to find new employees for agricultural work and for working the land around our farm house. This was the point when we started looking for a solution and decided to hire Roma workers who were able and willing

to work. At the same time, I had to start learning to deal with everyday tasks and interactions involvement Roma, as well as managing the conflicts.

First, I connected mostly with women. But it was difficult to connect because I had been taught to keep my distance from them, as contact was considered dangerous. Once I became a mother and everything changed, I let myself get closer to them, and that's when the conflicts arose. For example, while asking for money someone entered my personal space, which I wasn't comfortable with, but I didn't want to send them away either. Then more people came, and I got scared. They weren't offensive, but I found them overwhelmingly affectionate. Then, after a few incidents, we managed to find a common ground. This meant a huge relief for my soul. The preconceived images and characteristics I had once formed about the Roma softened at this point. As I started seeing them through a different lens, a more colourful picture emerged. For me, mutual respect resolved the conflicts within me.

One of the Roma day labourers was very distracted and couldn't concentrate on his work. His son was even more like that. The son would lie on the ground picking peas, putting a pea in his mouth and another one in the basket. You can imagine! After his initial surprise, my husband laughed and then firmly called the father and son to order. He repeated this several times. We knew that the father and son encountered the world of work for the first time. Hiring such people was not good for the business, so my husband and I were forced to establish rules in this regard. My husband set the boundaries, and this allowed us to develop a better working relationship. This is not yet the "happy end", but it is a result. In our town, I know of several good examples related to agricultural work, which I consider important because they encourage us to move forward in our daily lives and not to be afraid to ask, to receive, and to give mutual respect to each other, whether in agriculture or in the street.

Since 2022, I have been regularly attending the editorial meetings of the *Duj Džséné – Ketten* journal. This research project aims to improve communication among university students, teachers, Roma, and Hungarians. For me, it helps developing our understanding of each other. This research provides takeaways for everyday life and, just like this article, aims to enrich our perspective. The stories described here in my writing span several years, but they are only a stage in my life. As a spiritual process, this meant to me that I got to know better the people living here, including the Roma. This period was about "getting to know each other", giving each other a chance, and connecting with each other.