

Responsibility



DUJ DŽSÉNE ONLINE

What more could I have done?

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I was born in Tiszavasvári, and except for two years, I have lived, studied, and worked here. Now, at the age of 69, I still live here. This is where my heritage, my past, and my present are. I love my town—its history, its natural beauty, its buildings, its narrow, potholed streets, and the diversity of the people who live here. I never longed to leave and when I wasn't living here I always longed to return.

Did I do anything for this town?

Only as much as anyone else who lives and works here. There were things I would have liked to change, but I did not feel qualified to do so. I did not have the connections that would have allowed me to voice my opinions on issues and developments affecting the city. I did not participate in public hearings, nor did I join any of the social, cultural, or heritage groups active in the town. Or actually, for a few years, I was a member of the Tiszavasvári Folk Music Ensemble, which saw some success at the time. I regret that after it broke up, it disappeared almost completely from the town's cultural history. Could I have done something to prevent this from happening? I don't know. I lived like an average person in town, kept up with the changes, followed the rules, avoided conflicts, and kept my opinions to myself. Is that indifference? Anyone familiar with my family's history can understand that this behaviour is simply a defense mechanism. It is hard to come to terms with the fact that the deeds of my ancestors, who once served the

town and contributed to its development, have almost completely vanished or they have been rendered insignificant.

Why did I not do anything about it? I don't know.

Did I do anything to promote Roma-Hungarian coexistence? I would rephrase the question in this way: What did I do, and what did I not do, to that end?

When I started working as a preschool teacher in 1975, the “Roma issue” had not yet touched me. Even when I served as a child welfare officer and was confronted with the living conditions of the Roma on Széles Street, I still failed to see the human stories behind the visible destitution. When the first “Roma group” was formed at the kindergarten, I was able to observe the work there almost as if on a field trip. I could not see (or did not want to see) what was going on behind the scenes: the complete exclusion of parents from the institution, the daily bathing, the lice treatment, the “kindergarten uniform,” the isolation from other kindergarten groups, the scarce material resources, and the work of the staff which was expected but unrecognized. Later, with more knowledge and far more experience under my belt, when I had the opportunity to work at a preschool that served only Roma children, I already sensed something of that prejudiced, exclusionary social reality which becomes increasingly dominant towards our town's Roma population. At that time, together with the staff in the nursery – nannies and preschool teachers – we tried to participate in programmes and events in town alongside the city's other preschools. Together, we convinced the parents to let their children meet the town's non-Roma children and participate in sports or cultural gatherings with them.

What was my role in all this? It was not different from the other staff members'. We did everything together; we fought for our achievements together, side by side with the parents and the nursery administration. Where was the town in all this? They could have seen our children, the children of that ethnic group which is stigmatized for no good reason. They could have seen how they behave, how they are just as happy and enthusiastic as any other child, and if they had paid closer attention, they could have seen the sparkle in their eyes and the love radiating from them. But they did not see it. All that remained were the suspicious glances, the distancing, and the

prejudice. At the time, I did not feel I could do anything about it; I just felt that I, too, was being treated as second-class, pitied by my fellow preschool teachers and acquaintances. I had the opportunity to change, so I went to work for another nursery. Did I feel any pangs of conscience for running away from the difficulties? Not at the time when I made my decision. But then, something happened that I will never forget. I was standing at the bus stop when a Roma father saw me, jumped off his bike, and came over to me. "Miss, why did you leave? The kids miss you! Could you not come back?" he asked.

His question caught me off guard. There was such sincerity in his eyes, that in my confusion all I could say was that I had been called back to my old nursery, and they were counting on me there.

"It was great while you were in our nursery. You took the kids everywhere. They got to play soccer. That competition in the gym was so much fun! Tell me, please, you did not leave just because we are Roma, did you?" He looked me in the eye, and I was unable to say a word. I could tell he felt hurt.

"You shouldn't think I want to hurt you," he continued, "but, you know, you let us down." He did not say goodbye; he just hopped on his bike and rode off.

I just stood there and felt that he was right. I was weak, and I did not have the courage to stand up for them. I chose the easier path, the one where there is no prejudice, and where, as a preschool teacher, I was treated as an equal with other teachers who work with non-Roma kids. That incident struck a chord with me. When I changed jobs again a few years later, I had the opportunity to go back and make amends for what that father held against me back then. What followed were very difficult, yet wonderful years! Small achievements, small successes, but also recognition... and perhaps the seeds of acceptance began to sprout in the town, although only toward the children of Roma families. I could list my achievements, or rather our achievements, in that nursery building which is over a hundred years old. State-of-the-art education took place within its adobe or mud-brick walls. During our time there, visitors came to see us not only from the surrounding area but also from far away parts of the country to learn about our preschool and spread the word that an institution in Tiszavasvári educating

Roma children implemented exemplary pedagogical practices. Those who attended our open house events often said, “You’ve worked a miracle”.

Now, as I write this, I see the children’s sparkling eyes, their genuine, child-like sense of wonder as they take in their surroundings, and the fairy tales, and reality. I see our boys fighting with heart and soul on the football pitch and the joy of our dancers after receiving recognition. I see the parents’ smiles; I feel their trust deep in my soul. As I walk down the street, often a former preschooler runs up to me and smiles at me. A grandmother who used to take her grandchildren to preschool wishes me good health. A former dad comes up to me and says, “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you, let’s stop and catch up a bit”. I see the high school students, the Roma children participating in the town’s events; I hear them reciting poems and telling stories. And I would say right now that this is the miracle to which I, or we, have contributed something.

But I walk down the street and see people rummaging through bins; I hear the insults hurled at them, and I say nothing. I hear passersby making sneering remarks about public works employees, and I say nothing. I hear shop assistants speak condescendingly to Roma customers, and I say nothing. I hear elementary school children being called “prisoners,” and I don’t say a word. I hear acquaintances and strangers speaking judgmentally about the Roma, and I don’t say a word. I am afraid of how non-Roma will react. I am afraid because their opinions are the ones that are heard, even when they unjustly generalize and their generalisations affect those who do not deserve it. I am not afraid of the Roma’s reaction. I understand them. Why? Because I still carry within me the sense of otherness felt by that once-excluded preschool teacher that I was—a feeling I still cannot come to terms with even after all these years. Their exclusion and stigmatization go back way further and run much deeper. Why, then, do we still think that only they need to change?