

Sára Szakál: Parallel life paths. A university student in Tiszavasvári

Translated from the Hungarian by the author

The author is a student at Károli University of the Reformed Church in Budapest, where our participatory project is based. She was born in the West of Hungary – the other end of the country compared to Tiszavasvári. She has been a member of the research group since 2022 and has contributed substantially to participatory research activities and funding applications, as well as presenting her own research on student conference about decolonisation and linguistic citizenship.

When I tell my family about our work in Tiszavasvári, they always ask me how I, a Hungarian-English teacher trainee, benefit from this programme. I often struggle to answer this question. Mainly because I still don't know how to describe what I experience here. There are situations when I don't want to explain myself as it is of no use; I know I would be opposed. Yet I want to speak for myself, without the pressure to conform. This piece is, thus, an attempt to strengthen my voice.

I was brought up in another part of Hungary, far from Tiszavasvári, in Vas County, in a village where very few Roma live. I had hardly any contact with Roma as a child. We usually went shopping in the neighbouring town. In the town, there are several Mediterranean-type houses, but as you drive further along the road you can also spot blocks of flats in poorer condition in the vicinity of modern family houses. Quite a few times on a car or bus ride, I heard people say how loud the music was blaring again, or how run-down the area in front of their block looked. Later I found out that the block was inhabited by Roma. For a long time, I did not question the validity of the stereotypes about them.

At the age of fourteen, I was accepted to a secondary school in a distant town, where I met a girl with whom I regularly travelled to school. When our friendship grew and we regularly appeared together at the train station or walking around in the neighbourhood, I was told by acquaintances that I should better be careful with the girl, because she was a Roma, or at least 'half-Roma'. Although I was not concerned that my friend was a Roma girl, I did stand up for her. I rather shaped my point of view to suit the majority opinion, even though I disagreed. I never talked to the girl either about her Roma identity or the cautionary remarks because I was afraid of bringing the subject up.

Nearly two years ago, as a university student, I became a member of the Tiszavasvári research team. For a long time, I had doubts about my position in the project, mainly because I did not see how I could be a contributing member without having found my own voice. As I spent more and more time in Tiszavasvári, I got to know the local conditions and, through learning with local and university colleagues, I realised how many parallels I could draw with my own journey. I owe a lot already to this collaboration. Through our work together, I have observed how many of the participants have thoughts that are not yet articulated linguistically but are still lurking below the surface. These not-yet-articulated thoughts are similar to those that emerge from my personal stories, too. Situations when I preferred to remain silent, afraid to speak out because I didn't know what kind of resistance I might face.

I would like to view our workshops as a way of strengthening our own voices. As a space where we can express our opinion openly, without conformity. To make this happen it takes both patience and effort. Like myself, the participants need to believe that everyone's individual opinion matters. By daring to speak up and being able to listen to a discourse that is very different from our own, we can create a dialogue that will move us forward not only as individuals but also as a community.