

Sára Zsanu Lakatos: Why is it important if we go to work?

Translated from the Hungarian by Hayley Anderson

Zsanu is one of the long-term Roma contributors of our participatory research projects in Tiszavasvári. She lives in a dense and busy area of the Roma neighbourhood with her mother-in-law, children, and grandchildren. She works on casualised contracts either in the public works scheme or in the meat industry; previously she was also employed at the Magiszter Primary School where Roma children from the bilingual Roma neighbourhood study. Zsanu participated in writing a Romani storybook, translating and authoring texts in local Romani, and in the preparatory workshops and video commentaries for the 2023 volume Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities: Speaking Romani at School (Berlin: De Gruyter). She has been a member of Duj Dzséne – Two Together’s editorial team from the outset.

Now, it is very important in our lives, because we see that our lives are easier, even for the children it is different; they are showing off, they are braver, and it is really noticeable that all the people are able to work now. There are some people who work in the public work scheme, some who are day labourers, who go to Hajdúvid, Pest, Miskolc, anywhere they can find. Or they ask each other: “do you know if there’s any work going?”. Then they come by car and discuss when to go, where they need to be and for how many hours. But it was not like this when I was 13 or 14. Very few people worked, people were very poor. I remember, and I will never forget, in 2014 when I asked for work. I was hired in mid-September to work in the public work’s scheme, sponsored by the council, and my brother was the foreman. I knew that my co-workers would all be Gypsies, people I knew, so I was not scared. It lasted two years. After that I did not get an extension.

Then my mother-in-law was hired by the Magister School, and I did not go with her that day. My mother-in-law told me in the morning: “come, let’s go to the mayor’s office and see if we can get a job”. I said “no, I’m not going, they won’t hire us anyway”. She went and came back delighted: she was hired at the school. Then Melinda, who worked at the school, told Erika, the headteacher: “There is another woman, a young woman, who wants to come to work here”. The headteacher said: “she should bring in her documents in the

morning”. My mother-in-law was so happy when she told me that I could start the following day. When I heard this, I was surprised. What will it be like? Because at the school, there were Hungarians and Roma. Melinda, a Roma friend, had a partner to work with, my mother-in-law also had a partner, and I was paired with a Hungarian woman who was alone. The girls told me not to be afraid, “you will make friends with her”. And I did. I really liked her, we got along well. Then I got pregnant.

I had a little boy called Zsombor because that was the name of my Hungarian colleague’s son. After that I was on maternity leave for 3 years. I did not work. It was very bad. All 8 children to support, with schooling, buying clothes, especially tough in winter. And it is true, if we did not have money for wood, we would go to the forest with the women to fetch wood, so the children would not be cold. There was no work, neither for me nor my partner, and it was very unpleasant to have to live in such a situation. But now, thanks to the good Lord, it is possible to find work.

There are many people who do not accept Gypsies, so, only public work is available for them. But there are also people who work as waiters in the mall in Nyíregyháza. Medical cleaning in doctors’ surgeries, or working in factories, there are many Roma for whom this has become possible in their lives.

My favourite job was the one in Nyírtelek. I loved the lady who was the head of my shift there. When I got there, there was a mixture of Gypsies and Hungarians, and the work I had to do on my first day was cherry picking. I will never forget when the lady who was the head of my shift said: “those who do not climb up the ladder cannot come to work here”. Well, I was scared because I do not like climbing ladders, but I had to. Inside me, I said to myself, “if I don’t go up, I can’t go to work”. And this was my only chance for a job. By that time I had some of my grandchildren born, and I had to work even harder to buy nappies for them and clothes. The kids were so happy to see me. They asked me: “Mum, how is your work there?”. I said: “it’s very good” – especially when we had to plant in a temperature of 37 or 38 degrees centigrade. Still, I did not give up, because I had to work. If there is no work, there is no life either. I thank the head of my shift in Nyírtelek for all the work, because she taught me a lot. Especially planting and picking peppers. It was very hard, but we managed. Stretching the rope, covering with foil, picking it up, rolling it. It was a lot of work. And this woman, who was about 68 at the time, worked with us, all the same.

She is very good hearted. She gave me a bracelet, a tiny heart, made of gingerbread. She brought it to me from Máriapócs, a pilgrims' village. I was her favourite.