

## **What the future holds. Erika Lévai Kerekesné's interview with members of a Roma girls' club**

Translated from the Hungarian by Amaryllis Sasvari

*Erika Kerekesné Lévai is the local lead participant of our project. For a decade, she served as headteacher of the primary school where Roma children from the bilingual Roma neighbourhood go. She was headteacher of a school attached to a different Roma neighbourhood before. Pedagogically and institutionally, she was the main supporter of the translanguaging project we implemented in Tiszavasvári (2016–2022), on which the volume edited by Heltai and Tarsoly (Heltai, J. and Tarsoly, E. (eds.). 2023. Translanguaging for Equal Opportunities. Speaking Romani at School. Berlin: De Gruyter.) is based. She has contributed to countless conferences, professional training courses, and academic chapters and papers while being, first and foremost, a community organiser in Tiszavasvári.*

### **Introduction by Erika Kerekesné Lévai**

Since October 2022, eleven Roma girls with my guidance have been running a club which encourages girls to continue their education and prepare for a prosperous life together. The club of Roma girls operates on a relatively regular basis. They meet every two weeks, but definitely at least once a month. On these occasions, they discuss various topics of interest and concern to the Roma minority. In addition, club members organise excursions and cinema visits, mainly to get out and see places they have never been to. One of the meeting topics was where they would like to live when they grow up and how they see their future. I formulated the questions the girls answered. Of the eleven girls present, sitting in a circle and talking, 14-year-old Jucika started to speak.

*Where do you think you will live? Where do you want to live?*

We definitely need to leave [the Roma neighbourhood] because we often see bad things there, and it's not good for us.

*What do you mean by this?*

There are many good examples and many bad examples. At the same time, we also feel that some people see us as a bad example.

*Did I hear that right? Are you a bad example?*

Yes, because people ask us what we are studying for. It's mainly because we are girls, but for girls, it's not that common to study. Some older women do not accept that as girls, we are not already considering starting a family. Instead, we'd study and would get ahead in life; most people need help understanding this. Some say "you will leave education anyway". There are people in this community who have different values from us. If you are not doing physical work and if you are not doing something that pays a lot of money, it has no value. For many people living here, wealth means a good car. For me, for us, this is not necessarily what wealth is.

*How realistic is it for you to create a life outside the Roma neighbourhood?*

For me, personally, it is undoubtedly realistic. As long as I'm still studying, I always want to have a summer job. After graduation, I want to go to university, and in the meantime, I want to work and also study to get a scholarship. I want to study law enforcement but I am also very interested in psychology. After that, I will rent a flat, but I want to save my salary for a big house with a garden. I want to show that I can keep it nice and tidy.

*Who do you think you will marry? A Roma or a Hungarian man?*

I definitely want a Roma man because he knows what we are like. Hungarians might look down on me.

*What will happen if a Hungarian boy wants to date you and you fall in love with him?*

It would be strange. I think his family would look down on us. They are not open to us. You can't tell I'm a Gypsy from my looks, but when something stirs my Gypsy blood, I'll act Gypsy. I am lucky, though, that I can control myself. At such times, I think about how Hungarians feel about me, and I don't want them to believe that I can't behave properly. I would very much like my husband to be a Gypsy, but it is just as crucial that he should be a man of God. He must be a believer with all his heart.

*Are you members of any congregations?*

Yes, we go to Pastor Dezső. There is no conflict between churches. In our church, they say that it depends on where the Lord has called you, where you go.

*Will walking your path take a lot of effort?*

There are families where everything falls into the children's laps. We will work hard to make a good living. We also see at school that so many Hungarian girls have so much more than us, things that we don't have, but their parents just give these things to them. We create our own fortune and well-being. We learn to fight for it from an early age.

*Will you come back to visit the people here in the Roma neighbourhood?*

Of course. I would support them financially because we know what poverty is. We would also return home to show others that it was worth studying, and in order to encourage them to follow our example.

*Do you want to live in Tiszavasvári?*

Most of us do, but not in the Roma neighbourhood. (Antónia, another club members responded:) My family and I will move to Fehértói út because we would like to ensure that my little brother doesn't see alcoholics.

*But there are mainly Roma people living there, too. Why will it be better there?*

(Antonia:) Because it is more quiet than the fully Roma neighbourhood.

*So far, almost only Jucika has spoken. What do the others think about these issues?*

(someone else): The same.

(Jucika:) Yes, when I speak, I speak for the other girls, too. I'm not just thinking of myself.

*If you become successful, will that change you?*

Yes, we will change. We will then be proud of ourselves but won't let our family down.

(Réka:) My father always "trained" me to study and not give up. I think my parents would like me if I changed.