

Elisabeth Simon, Eichstätt, Germany

Report about the voluntary work camp “The Forgotten”

Rome, Italy

03/09 - 13/09/09

The work camp dealt with the persecution of homosexuals and Roma people during the Third Reich and today. Because these groups were either less mentioned or even left out in the historiography, they're called the Forgotten and it is especially necessary to recall their history for different reasons. First of all, the preoccupation with that topic is important to keep the history from falling into oblivion, to not forget about the cruelty towards them. It is crucial to commemorate it to avoid that this would happen again. With presenting that topic to the majority population one could raise awareness about the discrimination and cruelty against those minority groups, that is based just on differences in sexuality or origin and led to a treatment in the most inhuman ways.

The final event of the work camp aimed at showing the persecution of those minority groups and at evaluating the situation of today during debates with adepts. Especially in the case of the Roma people, the organisation tried to bring their cultural habits and their living conditions with movies, typical food and music closer to the audience. In this way, one can give them an understanding of their situation and at best, they're respected in their own way, and their “otherness” will not just be recognized as different and alien.

The most interesting part for us was the study part during the week before the final event. We had the possibility to discuss lively with representatives of Roma organisations and also of an organisation that deals with homosexuals. We learnt a lot about the persecution and it was unbelievable to see how many problems they still face today. The representative of the organisation for homosexuals invited us to join a march to remind the most recent occurrences against homosexuals in Rome, which was very impressive. I always had the impression that homosexuality isn't a big problem anymore

especially in the major cities, but when I heard about the recent incidents I was quite shocked. Apart from that, whilst discussing that topic with the others and learning about their experiences, I came to the conclusion that it still is a big issue and that there's a need to make clear that having a different sexuality doesn't mean being different. It was surprising how much it obviously still matters for some people.

Concerning the Roma people, we had the chance to visit two Roma camps close to Rome. First, I went with my group to a camp near Ciampino where Roma and Sinti people live together. I learnt that most of the Roma came from former Yugoslavia, but don't have any valid documents due to the breakup and establishment of new states. Just a few hold valid Italian documents, either about residence or citizenship. So it's just for those few possible to make a life in Italy in a legal and recognized way. The major part of the Roma and Sinti living on those grounds near Ciampino lived in very basic conditions, in trailers or simple sheds. It was a bit dirty. As I remember it was one of those camps accepted by the government, but not exactly legal. Nevertheless, the people were very friendly, showed us around and answered all our questions. They were really open and wanted to present their situation and also the problems they were facing, for example that they do not get any governmental support and that really no one cares about them.

The second camp we visited was the biggest camp in Rome or even in Italy. It was unbelievable to go twenty minutes by bus and to arrive in a place like that, in a place like the Third World but in one of the major and most popular cities of Europe. I saw (broken-down) sheds and trailers, cars carrying scrap metal to make bit money out of it, a water-connection which should supply the whole camp by hoses but also led to muddy alleys, rubbish everywhere and kids playing. I heard yelling those kids and their mothers in a language different to mine, the sound of a woman washing some clothes in a bowl and the plashing water where cars drove through. I smelt first the stench dirt of litter, then the smoke of cigarettes and later the smell of someone's lunch, prepared on a fire. I somehow expected all of that, but to be there and see it was different.

700 Roma and Sinti are living in this camp, 20% of them are employed, 20% of the children older than 15 go to school and 40% hold some kind of document. They make their living out of selling metal, antiques or clothes; they collect trash to refurbish and to

sell at the markets. They don't feel ashamed, because it has never been different for them and overall they have no other possibility. But there are also a few people amongst them that get involved with an organisation that aims to improve the living conditions in the camp and to set up a dialog with the Italian society to change their situation and their recognition for the better. But still, it seems a long way to go. It appears like a vicious cycle: the Roma and Sinti are already separated from the majority population by living at those grounds. The majority does not have any documents and for that reason hardly the chance to find an employment. Most of the children do not go on with attending school hence they don't have good qualifications. [...]

To conclude, I would say that the project not only gave us the chance to learn about "the Forgotten", but also to see the topic from different perspectives. Our group discussions, the talks with representatives of the organisations, of the minorities and also with some cultural mediators led to different approaches. I know that not every Rom is willing to change his lifestyle but I'm sure the majority tries to ameliorate their situation. Therefore it is worth telling their stories to the people that still cling on to prejudices and it will hopefully open their view on it.