

The goodies in Cosmin's attic

Cosmin, my sixth grade deskmate abandoned school and got a job at a factory after the graduation of secondary school. We live in the same village and we have stood up for life from the same desk. Why our chances have been completely different?

I met Cosmin for the first time in the fifth grade, when he used to come to school dressed in a plain, black, grey-stripped, sport, costume, exactly the one that he wears in the album photo, at the end of the eighth grade, even though the zipper was worn out for some time. Lively and short, he used to run and punch the paneling wall of the class until his wounds were bleeding. My parents taught me to wrap my wounds in colored patches and to blow gently on them to relieve the pain. But Cosmin didn't feel like protecting himself this way. At first, I felt scared when I watched him getting out of his mind during a fight with his colleagues, but I realized that he is rather energetic and impulsive than dangerous. And since then, we started to get along.

Cosmin was born in Șura Mică village from Sibiu county, just like me. He grew up in a very poor and isolated Roma community from Rusciori village and I grew up in a middle-class Romanian community from Șura Mică. During the sixth grade, we shared the front lined desk from the window, because I wanted to be close to the teachers – I was a good and attentive student – while he was disturbing the courses and, for this reason, our form teacher changed his place from the back desk, next to me.

He was naughty and smiley. He was always wearing sport clothes and his favorite class was Physical Education. He used to come to school with a little, black schoolbag, in which he carried his salami sandwich for lunch and sometimes a pen and a notebook. About once a week, his father took him for a working day doing household jobs in the neighborhood. In those days, he came to school tired and he was looking languid out of the window. In the other days, he was dancing and singing joyfully; he was playing just like the other children or huffing and quarrelling with his mates. Most of the times, he used to get angry if someone was mentioning something about his family, especially about his mom, who had left home.

Because he was always distracting me during the courses, pinching me or laughing with our back colleagues, I tried to find something that would have kept him busy. I asked him to draw, so he began to design houses highly marked by myself. All the houses were the same, but his was different: this one had in the middle of the attic big, colorful sausage coils. He always asked me: "Do you have any sausages in your attic?", but I never understood the question. I used to go up in the attic once a year, when my mother and I, along with my brother, sorted old books and notebooks, letters and other unuseful stuff. So, I simply answered "No." and my attic remained empty in his drawings.

Today, Cosmin is 17, just like me. Even though, at the end of the eighth grade, he applied for a mechanic vocational school in Sibiu, he couldn't afford to pay the bus from Rusciori to Sibiu,

because it cost 180 lei (nearly 36 euros). He abandoned school in the first semester and he has got a job at a packing factory in Șura Mică, where his father works too. I wanted to find out why he had given up school and what had happened with his dream of becoming a mechanic, so I decided to pay him a visit.

According to a Save the Children Organization report from 2019, 21.5% of the Romanian children are living in severe material deprivation, the highest rate of EU, where the medium level is 5.9%.

It is a dull Saturday morning. I braid my hair in two, in order to look like the girl Cosmin used to know and I leave with my friend, Anca, to Rusciori village, which is situated eight kilometers far from Sibiu. I have been here before on different social occasions, but I have never walked through the village. On our way, we were both thinking how close to Rusciori the International Airport from Sibiu is: the planes take off every day leaving the village behind. There are very few buses which pass through Rusciori, so it is very difficult to get to Sibiu if you do not own a car.

Once we arrive in Rusciori, the phone signal gets weaker. Anca passes by a horse and cart which is on the narrow, country road. The air is pure and refreshing – the village is next to the forest – but the streets are full of dust and dogs.

Rusciori village had been populated by saxons until the Romanian Communism Revolution in 1989, when the inhabitants had left their houses and had gone to Germany, where their relatives were living. Some Roma families move to the abandoned houses and, therefore, three communities formed: the Romanians, the Saxons and the Romas.

The first local woman whom we come across is Mrs. Marichina. She is the only one to wear a facial mask in Rusciori during the pandemic. “I don’t want to be finned,” says she. Mrs. Marichina’s family is one of the few families which remained in Rusciori after the revolution. Most of the Saxons whom we meet in the village is related to her, so she is very glad to present us their beautiful and well-taken care households.

We are walking along the stylish houses on the Romanian street. Some of the Romanians have lived here even when Saxons were a majority, while others have moved here recently. In Rusciori, the three communities are living without too much interactions. There are no significant conflicts between them, but there are critical reciprocal looks. The only place where the children from these communities meet is Șura Mică Secondary School, where they learn together, and then they return to their own community.

We leave Mrs. Marichina behind and get to the street where Roma people live. The houses are old and small, many of them are shattered and painted in orange, green or red. Some of the houses have been recently renovated, but others are quite the opposite. The villagers hang around on the street, in front of their houses. They sit down on benches or even on the ground; they are smoking and talking. Some of them are following us and ask: “Who are you looking for? What are you doing here?”, as if our presence is unusual.

Nobody wears a facial mask here and people think that the Coronavirus has not reached their village. They are not informed about the virus, but they are scared when I ask them about the

protection methods, “No one is infected here.,” they all answer. The facial mask is compulsory only in the buses which take the workers to the factories. Life in Rusciori village is going on as if no pandemic would exist.

The children are playing football or other games in the middle of the roads and they ask, “Have you brought something for us?”. Anca runs into a former classmate, Delia, who is caring a baby in his arms. Delia abandoned school when she was 16 and “got married” a man from Rusciori with whom she had a baby boy. She asks Anca, “Haven’t you got married yet?”. Anca answers that she is still a student, but Delia does not understand and she looks puzzled and, finally, wishes us to find a man and settle down. The villagers guide us to Cosmin’s house and tell us about him that he is a hard-working teenager, because he works all day. His house is neat, recently painted in orange and the fence looks new. Cosmin’s stepmother and stepbrother are sitting on a bench, together with his grandmother, in front of the house. His father is wearing a big hat and an unbuttoned, orange shirt and he is sitting next to Cosmin’s grandfather and other neighbors on the side of the road. Darius, Cosmin’s stepbrother, a frisky, three-years-old boy, is dressed just in shorts and he is having a traditional cheese pie, offered by his mother. We present ourselves and the woman brings a branch from the yard and invite us to sit down.

His grandmother is short-haired and she wears a tight, brown blouse and a long, pink skirt. She tells us about the two children’ biological mother: Cosmin and his sister, Roxana. Their mother left them when they were little, Cosmin was eight and Roxana five. The woman followed a man in Sibiu and left the two children with their grandmother, who took care of them until their father brought home their stepmother, who gave birth to Darius. Cosmin’s aunt, who live next door, comes to meet us. Her hair is dyed blonde, she has polish nails and she is wearing colorful leggings. She tells us that her nephew works extra hours on Saturdays and, when he returns from the factory, he has to fetch grass for the horse. Roxana is 14-years-old and this year she “got married”, meaning that she moved with a 24-years-old man from the same village. Cosmin and his father have tried very hard to bring her home, but the girl is determined to stay there and to abandon school, even though she is only 14. I ask Cosmin’s grandmother:

“Wouldn’t she be sorry later?”

“That’s the way we are!” the woman answers firmly, wishing to put things right in my hair. Then, she lights herself a cigarette.

At the same age when I was dancing to pop music and I was writing in a violet diary, Roxana decided to leave home. At 14, I met my first boyfriend, in a summer camp. When I got back, my mother felt something different was happening to me, so we discussed about boys. She told me not to let myself distracted from school and not to be fooled by him. When school started, I stopped keeping in touch with the boy from the camp. I had a lot of homework and, in my free time, I went roller skating with my friends.

I have kept turning back to Rusciori, hoping to find Cosmin, but he has always been busy working at the factory or for people in the village: he mows grass for the horse or other household jobs. In Șura Mică, a working day is paid between 40 and 100 lei (around 8 to 20 euros), depending on the activity or the man for whom you work.

Finally, I find Cosmin at home on a Monday morning, after I have talked to him on Facebook and I have found out that he goes to work in the afternoon. It's for the first time I've seen him since the end of the eighth form. He wears a big, golden ring and he has dyed his hair with blonde highlights at the hairdresser's in the village. He wears blue jeans and a tight, black t-shirt. He has deep wounds on his arms made by the machine from the factory. Just like the old times, he doesn't take care of his wounds; he is just chasing away the flies which insistently return on them. In the yard, his playful dog is jumping on me and in the backyard, there is a horse and a shelter for the pigs. There is also a toilet and all kinds of stuff surround the house. The yard is shadowed by a thick vine and Cosmin's grandfather tells me that he can hardly wait to prepare homemade, grapes wine in autumn. He invites me in, and Cosmin's grandmother offers me a glass of cheap juice which she gets from the next room. Darius drinks juice directly from the bottle and eats chips. The kitchen is small and separates the other two rooms from the house, in which four people live. Grandparents live in an improvised room from the backyard cellar. Their house smells like fried food and Cosmin eats some leftovers from dinner: fried potatoes.

Cosmin plays football on Sundays with our former classmates: Iuli and Ovidiu. They meet on an improvised pitch and sometime they gather at one's place and drink beer. Cosmin's biggest dream is to get his driving license in order to drive to Sibiu whenever he wants to.

"Do you want to drive to your mother too?"

"No. Why doesn't she come around?" says Cosmin scratching angrily a dried wound on his hand and facing down.

He never talks about his mother, who left them when he was little. I remember the school years, when Cosmin was naughty and energetic. How could he hold his anger when nobody offered him support to control it? He punched the paneling wall of the class or set apathetically in his desk, two oscillating emotionally states he had to cope with.

According to the most recent data estimated by Eurostat, Romania remains the European state with the highest difference indicating poverty or social exclusion among children compared to the population number.

Marianne Herzog is a Swiss psychotherapist, specialized in trauma. She met the Rusciori community through the Erasmus+ project, where Șura Mică Secondary School was one of the participating partners. I was also part of this project in the seventh grade, when I was given the opportunity to visit Ceuta, Spain, alongside with the principal of the school, my form teacher and my friend Anca. I remember more about floundering in the sea, the songs I hummed with Anca and our polish friends, than I remember discussing trauma and what causes it.

I spoke with Marianne about the situation in the Rusciori community through e-mail, in English and a little bit of Romanian, a language Marianne wishes to learn. She is still in touch with the teachers from Șura Mică Secondary School. She says that poverty and abandonment prevent a child from having healthy relationships and causes him trauma. "Poor families are often underprivileged and socially deprived, which leads to family violence.," Marianne says. "There is a circuit of passing trauma from one generation to another."

“When I first arrived in Rusciori, I passed the village by car.,” Marianne relates. “It was a shock for me: the main road was unpaved, a woman was sitting on the edge of a cart, holding a child and breastfeeding another. The poverty and the social injustice deeply touched my soul. However, I took part in a school event which ended with a traditional Roma dance. The kids were wearing colorful costumes, dancing and singing, which really cheered me up and made me understand their culture and traditions.”

When the other partners of Erasmus+ came to Romania, they spent a day at the school in Rusciori. It ended with a performance of modern and traditional dances, Romanian and Roma too. The colorful costumes and the kids' energy got everyone on their feet, applauding: people from seven different countries ended up dancing together. The Roma children, that taught the adults how to dance, were happy to be appreciated and have something to be proud of.

A fly is drowned in my glass of juice, so his grandma pours it in the sink. While I am talking to Cosmin, his stepbrother is sitting with us in the kitchen. He is playing and dancing by himself on “manele” (their favorite type of music), from Cosmin's phone. I am happy to hear that he is going to attend nursery school in the fall. Cosmin treats him nicely and hugs him; the little boy is extremely happy that he often receives sweets and chips from Cosmin.

Cosmin wears a facial mask only at work. It doesn't bother him, but he takes it off as soon as he arrives in his village, where no one wears it. He tells me that he is not afraid of the virus, because he doesn't know anybody infected and there are no Coronavirus cases in their village.

“Why did you abandon school?” I ask Cosmin. “I know that you applied for a mechanic vocational school.”

“I was a fool!” he answered. “The buses were rare and the season ticket was expensive. How could I afford to pay 180 lei (around 36 euros) only for the shuttle? My father found me a job and it was more convenient to hire myself.”

“Do you like your job?”

“Yes, because working in a factory is much easier than doing daily jobs in the neighborhood. At the factory, I eat meatball soup every day and I don't have to pay for the shuttle. I work with my dad, who has been working here for a very long period of time.”

“How do you spend your salary?”

“Well, half of it goes to my father. I spend the other half as I like. Sometimes, I put some money aside in order to pay for my driving lessons. I buy myself clothes and some sweets for my little stepbrother.”

According to a Save the Children Organization report from 2019, over 125.000 students were commuters in 2015-2016 school year. There is no statistic regarding the number of children who abandoned school because they could not afford the seasonal ticket, like Cosmin.

According to a Romanian National Student Council report, in the 2017-2018 school year, 80% of commuters were given back less than half of the real commuting costs, while 13.2% of them were not given back anything from commuting costs.

Sometimes, I wonder how I would have felt if my father had told me that he could not afford to pay my seasonal ticket and I can not picture it. During the eighth grade, Cosmin was working occasionally in his neighborhood, while I was taking private Math lessons in order to get a high mark in the final exam, not worrying about money.

Since I am in the final study year at the “Octavian Goga” National College from Sibiu, I am constantly thinking what national university to choose and if my dream to become a psychologist would become true. Cosmin dreams to get his driving license and to build house with four rooms, where he would live with his wife and his three children. He has a girlfriend, but he does not want to “marry” her yet. He is sad about his sister, Roxana, because she left home at 14-years-old and moved to a mature man. His father and him tried to convince her to come back home, but she was determined to stay there. Unfortunately, the majority of the Roma girls from Rusciori “get married” (meaning that they move to a man’s house) before turning 18, some of them being 14 or 15. Cosmin puffed, “She would have had one more school year until the end of the secondary school. Then, she could have got a job. What would she do now?”.

I observe a glance of happiness on Cosmin’s face when he remembers his school years. There was a period in his childhood when he went to the so called “camp” from Rusciori. The Foundation for Eco-Social Education “Kinderbauernhof”, in partnership with Şura Mică Secondary School, hold an afterschool program where children are able to do their homework, to attend a variety of educational activities and to have lunch. Irisz, the photographer of this article, and I have visited the place, known in Rusciori as “the camp”. Mrs. Herminne Jinga-Roth is the head of this foundation. The activity is suspended during the quarantine, but, together with Mrs. Herminne and Mrs. Vetuța, the “camp” cooker, we have walked around the friendly yard, eating green apples and admiring the traditional Roma costumes. Besides other educational activities, children attend traditional Roma and Saxon dance courses. “I loved my former teacher and I loved to play.” says Cosmin with melancholy. He added, “Knowing to read, to write and to calculate helped me a lot at work.”

In Şura Mică Secondary School, Roma children are not discriminated. In the sixth grade, when Cosmin started to bother and distract me during courses, my mother did not allow me to complain about it. She teaches English and Romanian in the school from Şura Mică, therefore she was aware of Cosmin’s domestic problems. She always told me that I should try and help him. My father works in a factory from Şura Mică and he has Roma coworkers from Rusciori. My parents are not racialists and they have always educated me not to judge a person by his/her race.

94% of Rusciori Primary School are of Roma ethnicity and there is a 37% of Roma at Şura Mică Secondary School.

I talked to the school principal Elisabeta Răulea about the reasons for which Roma children abandon school. She has been the principal of this school for 20 years and she thinks that the main reason of early school leaving is the lack of parents’ education. Most of them did not finish primary

school, so their children education is not a priority for them. The more educated parents are, the higher the interest is in sending their children to school. Mrs. Răulea hopes that Roma students that finish secondary school will become more interested in sending their children to school than their parents. Moreover, the price of the seasonal ticket from Rusciori to Sibiu is another reason for which the majority of teenagers do not continue their studies.

In 2017-2018 school year, the national school abandonment rate was 1.7% (approximately 30.000 students). This statistic does not include the students who have not been registered in any school (the source: Save the Children Organization).

At the end of 2016-2017 school year, 2.5% of the high school students abandoned school, while 3.5% of the vocational school students also abandoned school (the source: National Institute of Statistics).

“When I took over my position, I confronted a special situation in Rusciori village, meaning that Roma students had a lot of absences and, finally, they abandoned school without finishing primary school.,” states Mrs. Răulea. “The children have a low self-esteem due to: discrimination, a violent behavior and an uncertain social-economical situation. We have initiated supportive partnerships for this community in order to bring children to school. We have collaborated constantly with parents, even though this involves visiting them at their home in Rusciori. When we organized the first school festival, the Roma children were included. We sent invitations to parents and they accepted and showed up well dressed. When their children started to dance, they stood up too. They danced together, felt good and left home satisfied.”

“Now, the early school leaving was eliminated up to the fourth grade.,” says Mrs. Răulea. “I remember that, at the beginning of my career, their houses looked poor and the children walked naked along the streets and nobody cared for them. The fact that now I can see in front of their houses building materials, gives me hope that they have started to think about the future; about something else besides what they will eat tomorrow.”

The teachers from Șura Mică Secondary School organize different extracurricular activities in order to reveal the community traditions, such as: dance contests, when they wear their Roma traditional costumes from “the camp”. I remember being in the fifth grade, when all of us learned a Roma traditional dance, including me, and Cosmin also.

Cosmin does not have plans for the future. “Generally, the children who lack safety and live their life in poverty become adults that lack social control.,” says Marianne Herzog. I have met him a couple of times, but he was always in a hurry: going to work or doing household jobs. I have realized that for Cosmin, it was more important to work than chat with me, especially since he is turning 18 soon and did not have the 1.600 lei (around 320 euros) he needed for paying his driving license. I am glad he is financially independent and I leave him at the bus station from where he is taking the bus for the factory, while the other villagers are waving at me in front of their gates.

Poverty and family situation stigmatized him to be a one of the “troubled students”. Marianne thinks that only through a beneficial cooperation between the educational system, the medical system and other authorities, the early leaving school rate and the number of children living in

severe poverty can be reduced. A lot of effort and patience is required in order to change a community where everybody thinks, “That’s the way we are!”.

Marianne says that poverty, social injustice and integration of other ethnic communities are difficult problems to solve, even in Switzerland. However, Switzerland faces particular cases, not the entire community of a village or city. Thus, teenagers have more chances to escape poverty. Marianne does not know how Switzerland would handle a village like Rusciori, so she admires the teachers and employees from “the camp”, that take care of the children and try to give them a better future than their parents' had.

I wish that Cosmin's attic would be full of toys and footballs and that he would think more about his future than what he is going to eat. Although we live only a few kilometers apart and we shared the lined front desk by the window, our lives will be completely different. I can not change the consequences that poverty and the lack of security in his family had on Cosmin's development, but what I can do, is understand why he has chosen to stay in the Rusciori community and to abandon school. I just hope that for Cosmin's children, the world would be wider than Rusciori village.

Photo Credit: Irisz Kovacs, Student

“Yestermorrow” Erasmus+ Project Platform