

INTERVIEWS WITH RROMA TO "ASSESS" THEIR IDENTITY AND ETHNICITY

Rroma Foundation

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I. BACKGROUND

In recent months, the Bundesamt für Flüchtlinge (BFF) has conducted interviews with various Rroma refugees from the Kosovo to assess their identity and ethnicity as well as to secure that these people are effectively from the region they claim to come.

These interviews are conducted by phone, sometimes in a booth where the subject is seen by the "expert", who remains unseen. In addition no information is provided on either the qualifications of the provenance of the expert prior to the interview.

This kind of interviews has been conducted by the BFF in various cases, most recently (prior to the case of the Rroma) for Kosovo Albanians. They are meant to filter wrong claims, i.e. people who are claiming what they are not, especially in cases where a group of refugees has been granted a stay in Switzerland.

II. CASE STUDY

1. The Cases and Interviews

This report is based on several such interviews conducted by the BFF with Rroma from the Kosovo that were attended by a representative of the Rroma Foundation. These interviews were conducted over the last six months, the most recent, a week ago. Each of the persons that were interviewed were known to the foundation.

Each of the interviews lasted for a varying period of time, usually around one hour. In several cases, the Foundation representative tried to ascertain whether the "expert" was a Rrom or whether he or she was an Albanian. The latter case could prove to be worrisome as we know of several cases where Albanians denounced Rroma families to the various militias in Kosovo, sometimes with deadly result (though, to our knowledge, not in Switzerland). The BFF employees did not respond to this question.

In spite of the fact that the "expert" knew some Rromanes, the interviews were conducted in Albanian for the most part. In one case, the "expert" even refused to speak in Rromanes although we knew that he had conducted another interview prior to the one we attended in Rromanes.

2. Interview Questions

By and large, one can only qualify the questions are being foolish at best, mostly irrelevant and sometimes borderline conspicuous or even worrisome.

a. General Questions

- The person is asked his/her identity, age and provenance
- Questions about his/her house, how to get there etc. are asked
- Questions about monuments, locations, markets, how to get there etc. were asked. In some cases at hand, the "expert" had obviously only a superficial knowledge of the town that was discussed.
- They were asked whether they were Rroma
- Questions about why they left, where through, how etc. are also asked. In one case, we could ascertain that the "expert" had access and prior knowledge to the dossier as the questions he asked were only contained in the full dossier of the person interviewed.
- Questions about where they worked prior to leaving, how to get there etc. Most of those questions had also dates associated to them.

b. Questions on Rroma and Rromanes

The set of questions asked to establish the Rroma identity of the interviewed person were the following. Note that only few of those questions were asked or answered in Rromanes. At most a few words were used.

In some cases, where the Rroma did not speak Rromanes, the interviews glossed on the Rromanes and concentrated instead on the traditions.

- **Basic Rromanes Vocabulary:** Simple questions on how to say bread, meat, good evening, sun, rain, wind were asked. In one case, the person was asked to count till a hundred in Rromanes. In two cases, discussion arose due to the different Rromanes dialect of the "expert". In the cases at hand, the interviewed persons were Arlii while the expert was obviously a Gurbet. The discussions arose on the days of the week (that, with the exception of Friday and Sunday are all loan words in Rromanes), on several interjections and toasts etc. In one case, a hefty discussion ensued about the various Rromanes dialects found in the region.

- **Songs:** In two cases the interviewed persons had to sing a few songs in Romanes: Usually the Rroma anthem as well as one of the most popular Rroma songs.
- **Feasts:** Questions about the Rroma feasts were asked. Which feasts are Rromane, what are the special traditions associated to them etc. Here, the fact that in most cases we encountered, the "expert" was a Gurbet became clear from the fact that he/she asked about feasts that are only found among Gurbeti and not among the majority of the Rroma in Kosovo.
- **Traditions:** The same fact arose in questions (this time to a woman) about the bride's price, a tradition only found among Vlax Rroma of which the Gurbeti are a subgroup and a tradition which most other Rroma deem horrible. In general very few questions apart from these ones were asked during the interviews.
- **Typical dishes and foods** had to be described. Once again, the Gurbeti nature of the "expert" came to light as some of the dishes he asked for are typical of this group only.
- **Rroma Groups:** Questions about which Rroma groups are found in Kosovo were asked. In the cases at hand, the expert had obviously only a very limited knowledge on that subject.

c. Specific Questions about Rroma Contacts

- In nearly all the interviews we attended, the "expert" asked which Rroma in Switzerland the person knew. He/she even went further and asked their address.
- In addition, in several cases, the "expert" asked about membership in the association "Nevo Dive"¹, why the interviewed person was not a member. Questions about other associations were also usually asked.

3. Concerns

These interviews raised several concerns.

- **Group Appurtenance:** The fact that Rroma are divided in several distinct groups with a differing dialect and different traditions raises concerns that the "expert" may not know or recognise other Rroma as such and thus may deem a Rrom not to be one. This was

¹ An organisation of Rroma (Gurbeti) in Switzerland

especially flagrant in two of the interviews where the "expert", obviously a Gurbet, was biased and had little knowledge on Arlii. One has to know that Gurbeti (who call themselves only "Rrom"), often have a depreciating attitude towards other Rroma, sometimes even saying that Arlii are not Rroma².

- **Membership in Associations:** We all found it worrisome that the "experts" asked about one and only one Rroma association in Switzerland. In our view, this constitutes a bias on the part of the "experts" and could lead the Rroma to believe that, should they be members of that association, nothing would happen to them. This is akin to proselytism and should not be part of any such interview.
- **Questions about Rroma in Switzerland:** The entire set of questions as to which Rroma one knows is Switzerland, where they live etc. goes beyond the scope of such an interview and is potentially dangerous, should the "expert" be an Albanian. We are fairly convinced that in one case (Rroma who do not speak Rromanes), the "expert" was an Albanian.

4. "Experts" Qualifications

In view of the questions asked and the general conduct of the interviews, one can be sure that the "experts" are generally not qualified.

- They lacked a detailed knowledge of the conduct of a cross-examination.
- In several cases, they lacked, a detailed knowledge of the place that was to be discussed (knew little about the town etc., in fact had little other than a "tourist" knowledge of the place).
- When they spoke Rromanes, their Rromanes as poor and mixed with Serbo-Croatians, betraying their origins.
- The same applies to traditions. Their knowledge was limited on that subject to one group of Rroma only.

² They are Rroma. But as a Gurbeti qualifying somebody as a Rrom means he is a Gurbet, which the Arlii are not. Hence, this statement that Arlii are not Rrom meaning in fact, Arlii are not Gurbeti. Note that this is a common fact among Vlax Rroma.

One can safely say that, in the cases we encountered, the "experts" were no more qualified than any person of the community asked to play that role.

III. CONCLUSIONS

In view of these facts, we strongly recommend the following actions concerning these interviews:

- One needs to request the Curriculum of the "expert". We, so far have not had the chance to assess the "expert" qualifications.
- As soon as the interview has been conducted, tapes of the interview should be requested, should the "expert" decide against the interviewed person.