

Sonja Licht

Chair of the Roma Programs Advisory Board of the Open Society Foundations

It is a great honour and privilege to speak in front of you tonight at the 2021 TAJSA Roma Cultural Heritage Prize ceremony here at the National Theatre in Belgrade. To me, this is one of the most exciting moments in decades of observing and participating in the efforts of the Roma community to fight for equality in societies where its members are growing up, fighting for survival and better living for themselves, their children and their communities; learning and creating; with many of them contributing to the overall culture and development of these societies through their artistic creation. And indeed, creativity was the sustaining force for the Roma and their identities through centuries of hard life, persecution and oppression in Europe, where hundreds of thousands of them were victims of the most horrible crime in modern history, the Holocaust.

I experienced the full impact of joy and pride of creativity at the Conference of Serbian Roma Cultural Achievements in Aleksinac 1979, an event launched in 1974 in Niš by one of the most prominent Roma activists in Serbia and the Balkans, Sait Balić. Opposite to all the apparent joy, the discussion about the position of the Roma was permeated with the participants' fears to speak out about their problems and their apprehensions to touch upon the issue of lingering racism in our society. Precisely those feelings of distress and fear spurred me on to dedicate myself to researching the position of the Roma in Yugoslavia and - primarily - the violations of their fundamental human rights. As a Jew born after WWII whose almost entire family and relatives perished in the Holocaust between Belgrade and Przemyśl, I could not and cannot acquiesce to this day that anyone in my country, or the Balkans and Europe for that matter, should be exposed to the evils of racism, xenophobia and nationalism.

It has to be said that a lot has changed in the lives of Roma men and women over the previous four decades. On the one hand, unemployment rose tremendously after the fall of the Berlin wall, especially in former socialist countries. The Roma paid a high price that the political and economic elites embraced the model of neo-liberal capitalism. Roma spearheaded the list of 'victims of transition'. On the other hand, an increasing number of Roma boys and girls graduated from high schools and universities, and a generation of those successful in their professions and dedicated to the emancipation of their community emerged over the previous two decades. This turnaround was largely supported by the European Commission and other European institutions, as well as numerous government- and private sector donors. I am truly proud to highlight the personal role of George Soros and of his foundation in initiating a, in cooperation with the World Bank, the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 – 2015, and supporting the Roma Education Fund, the Roma Entrepreneurship Development Initiative and many other institutions and initiatives dedicated to the inclusion of Roma as active builders of their societies' future and a Europe of peace and equity.

A joint initiative of the Council of Europe, the Open Society Foundation and the Roma Leaders' Initiative, the European Institute for Arts and Culture (ERiac) was opened in Berlin in June 2017 with support from the German Federal Foreign Office. In May 2021 its first chapter, supported by the Government of the Republic of Serbia, started operating in Belgrade. The Institute was founded to increase the self-esteem of Roma and decrease negative prejudices of the majority population towards the Roma by means of arts, culture, history, and the media. ERiac functions as an international creative hub to support the exchange of creative ideas across borders, cultural domains and Romani identities. ERiac

Serbia places special emphasis on exchanging creative ideas and energies within our Balkan territories.

The European Roma Institute of Arts and Culture established the TAJSA Roma Culture Heritage Prize in 2019. I had the exceptional pleasure of attending the unforgettable ceremony at the Gorki Theatre in Berlin in December 2019. The Prize was, of course, established on the same founding principles as ERIAC and the implementors of those principles are the artists embodying the spirit of Roma culture through their creative energies, talent and love of humanity. That was the unique spirit that lifted everyone in the fabled Gorky Theatre, that is the gift for all of us here today in the National Theatre. Some moments ago, you were introduced to all of the five finalists and I am truly honored to deliver this laudatio to the winner of the TAJSA Roma Cultural Heritage Prize 2021, Zita Moldovan!

Zita is a theatre and film actress, a television host, the founder of a theatre, a fashion designer - truly a renaissance woman. I am paraphrasing the title of what is probably the finest book by famous Hungarian philosopher Agnes Heller, Renaissance Man. Zita graduated from the Faculty of Theatre and Television in Cluj and in 2006 began collaborating with the Ion Dacian Opera House in Bucharest in the show Broadway Bucharest. In 2014 she co-founded the Giuvlipen Theatre Company with other Roma actresses, a 'revolutionary theatre' according to Reuters. They play a feminist repertoire and deal with the topics of early marriages, antigypsyism, hate speech and hypersexualisation to provoke debate and critical thinking. She was part of the Romanian-French coproduction Uprooted, presented in Paris within the 2019 Romania-France cultural season. The most recent film Zita played in was 2 lei 60 by Camelia Popa. As a fashion designer she is influenced by traditional Romanian Roma women's clothes. Throughout her 15-year career, Zita has been actively involved in the feminist and anti-racist movements, putting together theatre workshops in Roma communities, and taking part in various Roma men and women's rights campaigns.

I believe that the TAJSA Prize, apart from representing due recognition of Zita Moldovan, will be an incentive for Roma artists who are only starting down the thorny and thrilling path of creation, enriching the Romani and global cultural heritage.