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IN SEARCH OF A CONTEMPORARY ROMA IDENTITY: IN MEMORIAM - NICOLAE GHEORGHE

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CHALLENGING DISCRIMINATION PROMOTING EQUALITY

Roma or Țigan: The Romani Identity – Between Victimisation and Emancipation

NICOLAE GHEORGHE IN DIALOGUE WITH IULIUS ROSTAȘ¹

Iulius Rostaș: Out of my private conversations with different Roma activists about the beginnings of the Roma movement after 1989, you were for sure the main character involved in all episodes, dealing with their experiences. There were some surreal moments, even funny ones.

Nicolae Gheorghe: When I established the Ethnic Federation of Roma (FER), in May 1990, I was still an expert of the National Minorities Committee, for the Temporary Council of the CPUN.² At the meeting to establish the FER, there were: Onoriu and Gabi Luncă, Boldor from Baia Mare, also a Pentecostal believer, I think there was also a leader from Oradea, Augustin Balog, and Ivan Răducanu and some others. I felt quite drawn to the Evangelist believers, because I attended the Pentecostal meetings before 1990. When we were supposed to eat something brought from home by one of the participants, first there was a prayer said by our pastors, with God, a blessing... And the Ethnic Federation was established and... we were at the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Ex-Romanian Communist Party, I was in my office as an expert for the Roma in the CPUN.

I.R.: Yes, it would have been an unbelievable situation just a few months earlier: the *Țigani*,³ inside the Central Committee, saying prayers and establishing an organisation.

N.G.: Yes, what an irony of fate!

I.R.: There were different stories, like a mixture, a real puzzle. Looking back to what happened to different Roma actors,

there were some unknown elements, the missing pieces of the puzzle. Where had this strategy of the NGOs come from, why was there no political mobilisation for the elections?

N.G.: Because I had this idea in my head: organising as many civic associations as possible (back then we didn't use the NGO word). Costel Bercuș asked me once: "Nicolae, please tell me what you want?" And I answered: I would like to have about 1,000 civic associations", meaning for some a real betrayal - other activists were discussing unity, about just one ethnic formation for the elections, in order to get a parliamentary group, back then in 1990, with the Democrat Union of the Roma, from Romania (becoming later on the Party of the Roma), and I was the heretic saying: "That's not possible. It is not that I don't want it, but it is not a realistic solution". My alternative was that out of the 1000 civic associations to gradually have a Federation on the basis of some clearly defined interests, maybe on a contract between these associations, making clear through a platform the content, the substance, the political interests of the ethnic identification as Roma, as citizens of the State, as a national minority... That was the intention for the Ethnic Federation of Roma...

I.R.: That is why you were suspected of treason, that you were the Trojan horse infiltrating the Roma, in order to dismantle the organisational efforts.

N.G.: Let's say that I had a 'vision': while intuiting a phenomenon, knowing its dynamics, its becoming...

1 These conversations happened between June 27 and July 2, 2011, in Salerno, Italy. The dialogue was generated by a text written by Nicolae Gheorghe, for the project *The Price of Roma Integration*. Other texts in this possible publication are written by András Biró (Hungary), Martin Kovats (UK), and Christian Petry (Germany). A debate/seminar about these texts, hand-written, took place in Bucharest-Snagov, on September 23-24, 2011. Iulius Rostaș was among the participants at this seminar. A report of the debate was edited by Will Guy (UK). These texts, including the seminar debates formed the book *From Victimhood to Citizenship: the Path of Roma Integration – a Debate* edited by Will Guy, András Biró, Nicolae Gheorghe and others, and published by Pakiv European Roma Fund and Kossuth Kiado in 2013. The interview was conducted in Romanian.

2 CPUN (Consiliul Provizoriu de Uniune Natională – Provisional Council of National Unity) was the leading authority in Romania from 9 February 1990 until the first election on 20 May 1990. It was comprised of representatives of all political forces at the time, including representatives of national minorities.

3 I decided to keep the term *Țigan* in the original language of the interview to underline the negative meaning associated with it. *Țigani* used to be slaves in Romania until the mid-XIX century. This term kept its meaning of a person with lower social status but also all other pejorative adjectives: dirty, uncivilised, uneducated, thieves, lazy. These characteristics continue to be associated in the Romanian public imagination with the term *Țigan*. The English translation "Gypsy" does not have the same pejorative connotation and, moreover, some groups in the UK prefer to be called Gypsies as they fought to keep their ethnic distinctiveness, including their ethnic denomination as Gypsies.

I.R.: That would be a much too banal explanation; it was more than obvious that I was missing something out of these recollections; for example, the identity factor. Regarding the identity I said it many times, in different circles and a bit in our discussion: I think that you always had an identity complex, the experience with the Communist Party included. This aspect I could discern in the text⁴ you had prepared here and where you had said that you didn't feel "Roma enough", in order to lead the Roma movement.

N.G.: Regarding the ethnic-identity aspect of representation, meaning Roma as a national minority, taking into account the ethnic politics, as long as we have discussed that in Romania, since 1990...

I.R.: Yes, about your identity as a Roma. And I remember when we shared our personal experiences of early socialisation, how we internalised the issue about the Roma and the Gypsies, all these identity aspects included. When I was just arriving in Bucharest, I was put in a context where people questioned my identity as a Roma.

N.G.: How did you approach this issue? As coming from me or from my group? How did you live it? Or what did you consider as intriguing, unfair, improper and ridiculous?

I.R.: I found it ridiculous that for all the others, my colleagues in Cluj included, those with whom I have discussed this issue, they didn't have such questions regarding the fact that I was assuming my identity as a Roma – it was accepted as a fact, the questions coming more out of certain curiosities. Here, in Bucharest, people say to me: "No, it is not very obvious that you are a Roma!" And it was strange: how come me, having come from the "gypsyhood" (*țigănie*), from a family where this issue was openly discussed and my early socialisation was as a Roma?

N.G.: And do you still worry about this issue?

I.R.: No. I relaxed afterwards.

N.G.: I still worry about it.

I.R.: I relaxed the moment I succeeded in establishing some relationships with those from Bucharest, on different degrees of intensity and cooperation.

N.G.: I, in my relationship with myself and those around me, I perceive the Roma identity issue in a more complicated, in a more "philosophical" way, if you wish. The provoking issue for those around me was: "What kind of a Roma are you? Why are you a Roma?" I took as a starting point my readings as an ex-student in philosophy, from Immanuel Kant, following his questions about: "How is it possible?" - meaning for Kant, how is knowledge possible, how are space and time possible as cognitive categories... Eventually, the philosopher's question being: how it is possible to build on the thinking level, of epistemology... How can you establish logically something through the "signals" out of our senses, so, through the knowledge predicaments? That is how the whole debate from the very beginning of critical thinking in modern philosophy could be summarised, when the issue is to rebuild the world, under the conceptual aspect, and not only to live it. By comparison, the question for me, for us is: "How is it possible to be Roma?" By the way, reading about the surroundings of Salerno, I have discovered that some of the Greek philosophers we are referring to, the Eleates, had lived around here, where we are now: *Elea* (later on *Velia*, during the Roman Empire) was a settlement, a 'colony' in *Magna Greece*, located around here in the Centre and the South of Italy.

An anecdote – which I heard from my academic professors - that I have told many times, is the *batulnic* argument (the stick argument): the master explains to his students the theory of some philosophers from Ancient Greece, that from the logical point of view motion is not possible. That is why "Achilles the swift-footed can't reach the tortoise", or "an arrow shot from a bow doesn't move at all"... meaning the logical paradoxes structured with the intention to astonish you - to confuse, to perplex. All this in order to awaken your intellect to move from the obvious to the level of senses, to the thinking mood: how come a runner like Achilles can't reach the tortoise? And when the master explains to his disciples, a pupil stands up and starts walking. The philosopher was just arguing that motion was not possible... And the disciple stands up and says: "Look, I can walk!" Then the master takes a stick and hits his pupil hard saying: "The issue is not to practice the motion, but a philosophical one; to *think* the motion". That is why it is called the stick argument... As you can see I, now, here in Salerno, I walk leaning on a stick: so, beware!

4 See footnote 1 above.

I.R.: And what has this anecdote to do with our talk about the naming of *Țigan* or Roma?

N.G.: Going back to our concern about the words, the names, the identities of *Țigan*, of Roma... I have lived this bewilderment, sometimes as shocking, as confusing... and I am going to tell you about a personal experience... The matter consists of rebuilding through knowledge, dialogue (as Zeno of Elea, Socrates or Plato were doing...) and not as we “feel” the Roma identity, not as we live spontaneously, naturally: we are *Țigan* and that’s all. That is why we are Roma now! We have lived and are still living with names, with labels given from outside, names given/repeated by our own family members: We are *Țigan* that is why we are *Țigan*... I don’t know who is a *Țigan*... or that she is not a *Țigan*... that this is *Țigan* music, etc.

Now as activists, you or I, brought up under this name of *Țigan*, we could consider ourselves as Roma or we can be Roma, because we feel it, like the disciple from the anecdote I just told, the one about starting to walk, which was used as an argument to falsify the master’s logic.

My question then when you came from Cluj to Bucharest was intended to provoke you, to upset you to put both you and myself in a certain position, in order to think why we would like to redefine the label of *Țigan*, in naming ethnically Roma as persons consciously assuming a certain identity in public life, in ethno-politics...

I.R.: Yes, but even the *Țigani* were different kinds.

N.G.: My mother wouldn’t allow me to mingle with the wandering *Țigani* (the tent-dwellers) telling me that they were dirty and dangerous. The first fright regarding the *Țigani* came from my mother who inoculated me quite deeply, and I still live with it. In a certain way I am still in the world of paradoxes of Elea: between me and the wandering *Țigan*, I suppose that there should be continuity, a communion, but I feel a void, a gap that either doesn’t exist (the Ancient Greeks imagined the Cosmos as the opposite of Chaos, being full, compact, with no fissure); or, if the void does exist, there should also be a bridge at least a small one, that I can’t cross. So under the aspect of a lived experience, there is no spontaneous or immediate continuity, between the *Țigan* identity, a more social one, imposed from outside, as long as *Roma* is assumed consciously, in a process of knowing the history,

the language and the culture of the people we are claiming as persons, active in public and political life, inside multi-ethnic communities and so on.

Of course I can juggle, as you say, meaning I have learnt the Romani language, I have competed for a position as an adviser for the Roma (when I was selected for OSCE, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti, in Warsaw, in 1999), but somewhere inside me, a rupture remained, an anxiety, a complex, as you were saying. And then the fundamental question remained – *Why am I a Țigan?* – meaning how could we reconstruct, conceptually, our identity, and not how we live it. Identity is not a naturally given fact; we are not Roma or *Țigan* just because of the colour of our skin, this being our “feeling”, on the first view, when we are identified or self-identified as *Țigan*, as Roma. If you say that you are a *Țigan* or a Roma (as you were telling your colleagues in Cluj) then you believe you are and they weren’t asking you: “Why?” People are taking your statement as such. Regarding the colour of the skin, the issue is more complicated.

I.R.: In a summer camp, organised by Vasile Ionescu the slogan was “Turn black and you’ll be free!”...

N.G.: Yes... and no. For example, the colour of the skin here in Italy makes this statement irrelevant. In Campania, there are people as dark as or even darker than we are. The immediate question is: should we label them as *Țigan* according to our representations, our Romanian stereotypes? I say that, no matter the skin pigment and our feelings concerning this element of our identity, the question remains: Who are the *Țigani*? Or the Roma? That was the crisis that I wished to provoke in each and every discussion, the dialogue with you included, when I provoked you by asking: “Why are you a *Țigan*?” and “How is it possible” to be a *Țigan* or a Roma? The fact that we are labelled and we were labelled historically as *Țigan*, comes from classification, inside a category consisting of a system of definitions, in different historical periods: a socio-juridical category, during the *Țigani* slavery; a racial one, during the 1930s and, especially, during the deportation to Transnistria, etc. These definitions generated and imposed in particular historical periods have been internalised, taken over and even displayed by our families, by the communities we are part of. But I must repeat myself, there is a torturing question: do these socio-historical classifications, even cultural, such as *Țigan*, make us automatically Roma? I would say NO!

I.R.: For me my identity has no ontological significance or not only an ontological one.

N.G.: This is a subjective matter too. But not only that... In our case, it is not regarded as only a subjective matter.

I.R.: It is a subjective matter too. I am always giving this example. Why, when I see two people, do I feel closer to the one who I identified, or they themselves have identified, as Roma, out of instinct?

N.G.: I sometimes have a reverse reaction, I avoid them. I label them and then I avoid them.

I.R.: Instinctively I feel much closer to the Roma one, although sometimes I might realise afterwards that I have more common interests with the other, a common language with the non-Roma.

N.G.: I can see somebody in the street... and it quickly pops into my head that they are *Tigan*... and sometimes I withdraw. For my own safety I choose not to interact. At other times, I go and try to establish a connection, but it is a rational decision to establish this connection, it is not by affinity.

I.R.: But I feel it... and in your case there is a schism ... that is why I couldn't understand the internal mechanism of some of your decisions before...

N.G.: But that is not enough, in my opinion.

I.R.: No, it isn't.

N.G.: One can't decide all by oneself. I can feel Italian, because it is what I want, but I need some landmarks, in order to be recognised as such by others in my identity as an Italian, or Sicilian, Venetian, etc...

I.R.: Apart from a self-declaration, there is the need to be recognised by others. But there is another issue too: we also have a Romanian identity. On the other hand, there are contexts when the institutional affiliation has a more powerful character than other affiliations, loyalties, identities.

N.G.: Yes, this can be a relevant feature. It comes out of the phenomenology language, the Ego and the Self, their presentation and what is significantly relevant for me. Starting from this very moment, I think or I say that this aspect became relevant for us, for the others.

I.R.: I can't say, for example, that I am an American. I can say that I am a Romanian, in addition to being Roma, because I identify myself more or less with the Romanian culture.

N.G.: You have the language, the culture and especially the citizenship. That is why you are not an American, you may know and read the whole of American literature, but as long as you are not an American citizen you are not American. To be American means a citizenship. It is not a feeling, it is not just a way of living.

I.R.: On the other hand, I have the experience of living in Hungary...

N.G.: Your family and your friends are there. For a certain period of time... But that doesn't make you a Hungarian. You may establish relationships with other people, based on a certain criterion. You have common memories about Budapest or feelings connected to Budapest, but this is not an ethnic identity.

I.R.: It is about how I have internalised different aspects. Similarly ethnic identity is about the way we have internalised different aspects. These important elements of ethnic identity can be found on the levels of discourse and perception.

N.G.: Identity, *ethnos*, communion/community with others... these all have to do with birth, *ethnos* having as a fundament a "natural classification"; through birth, there is a blood bond. Then there is a church, where other bonds of religious beliefs and specific, church rituals are established: community events, of life in a community... there are the weddings, the christenings, rituals, religious holidays and so on and so forth. There are school elements when one says: I go and study in a certain language. This subjective feeling becomes relevant (for myself, for you... and for others) and it is connected to certain exterior landmarks, I can't call them objective, but exterior, according to which one establishes some of the ways of sociability, on certain criteria, these being elaborated and coming to life through social existence. One can create ways of sociability with others, on the basis of a certain criterion. Yes, we are here, in Salerno, in a kind of sociability, in the idea of something common, significant, important for both of us, that made you travel here: ethno-political identity.

We have this talk, supposing that together we have something in common, not necessarily out of tradition, but as I was saying before, you lived something in your childhood

that I also lived during my childhood, due to family histories. Now we may have a common project, an ethno-political project that we wish to build, and which has to do with *ethnos*, meaning origin, birth, forefathers, etc. Or, from my point of view, this is still something which has not been clarified, that has to be created through conceptualisation and public debate. Ancient Greek philosophy, for example, has its roots in the debates about the city-states, *polis*, democracy in Athens, for example, or the colonies established by the Greeks such as the city colonies in *Elea*, *Paestum*, here in the area of the city of Salerno, where we are right now, or in *Tomis* and *Histria*, on the shores of the Black Sea, where you organised the “Turn black and you’ll be free!” camp when you darkened your skin, in order to clarify your ethnic identity!

I.R.: So, we go from the Ancient Greek polis to the name of Athinganoi,⁵ from medieval Byzantium, and now to the polemic regarding our ethnic name in Romania?

N.G.: In the case of Roma, the issues about Roma, about the ethnic name and other issues - a huge void was created, a quite vast institutional-political space that should be filled with something through thinking and action, through methods based on ideas, on *ideology*.

I.R.: I see identity as a fluid feature for the following reasons; there is a strong, a subjective side referring to the way you internalise certain feelings, connected to the social and political system; then there are relationships with others defining and making relevant certain aspects of ethnic identities; then the relationships with the others become an important factor in the way you internalise your own identity and how you communicate it.

N.G.: Well, maybe you are more like Heraclitus the philosopher and the world imagined by him: “everything flows” - everything changes, a world opposite to the one logically reconstructed by the Eleates. In the case of certain persons or groups, ethnic identity is total and totalising. It “imposes” and manages a lot out of the existence of the individual and relationships with those both inside and outside the group, with the world beyond the cultural “frontiers” (following Fredrik Barth’s anthropological meaning) and

so on. Identity is in this case, an ‘ethnic uniform’ that one always wears... Thus the group or the identity outlines/foreshadows/predetermines almost everything or a lot of the individual’s life. In Wallachia and Moldavia, until the middle of the 19th century, Roma were slaves, collectively and hereditarily: you were born a *Țigan*, you were a slave by birth, and you had no choice other than maybe to escape by running away. During the deportation years 1942 - 1944, the Roma belonging to a clan (such as the coppersmiths or the sieve-makers) were classified as “wandering” and were deported *en masse*, as a group, not selectively, individually. They were denounced as *Țigani*, some of the house Roma, home Roma, or the so-called Romanised *Țigani*. Until recently, even to this day, some Roma sub-groups function as sort of artisans guilds, carrying on from generation to generation: if you are born into a wood-worker’s family or a goldwasher’s (*Bayash*) one, your profession is pre-determined, working with wood; if you were born into a silversmith’s family, it meant working with precious metals, a coppersmith made buckets, etc.

Nowadays, this is the case for Roma living in extended families, in kinship groups, ‘clan-like’, (in an ethnographical sense, anthropologically, as peoples or *descendants*⁶ of Roma); some of them preferring to identify themselves now - during our recent talks - as ‘traditional Roma’ in order to differentiate themselves from us, the linguistically assimilated. But also to differentiate themselves, by way of life, from the ones they call *kashtalii* (from the word *keast*, meaning wood in Romanes). A clear example is that of the women from these groups: not only the way they dress (the most visible aspect), but their entire way of life; once reaching the age of pre-puberty their destiny is predetermined by the rules of the group: rules for marriage, their specific roles and cultural interdictions, in relationships with older men and women, the image of their body as a ‘tool’ of biological reproduction, or/but also as a ‘pollution’ source, in a symbolic sense, etc.

Our case is different: yours, mine (especially because we are male); others like us, women and men, educated, being defined through their occupational roles, in global society (or the mainstream), being on different levels of linguistic, cultural assimilation, as you were already mentioning. In

5 The Roma arrival in Europe was documented in Greece under the name “athinganoi” or “athinganos” from which the terms tigan, cygan, cigan, etc. are derived. See Angus Fraser, *The Gypsies* (UK: Blackwell, 1992).

6 The concept of descendants used here and throughout the text corresponds to the word “*neam*”, signifying a group or sub-group of Roma united by common descendants, believed or imagined, and a specific occupation of the members of that group.

our case, the ethnic identity of Roma or *Țigan* is just one of our roles, among many others through which we shape and show our personality. This is one criterion in establishing relationships. It is relevant in some situations, but in others it is completely irrelevant, you simply forget it. We decide when we give more space to this role; our parents, during their time, and us, we have a much higher social mobility than the clan or traditional Roma mentioned above; the ethnic role is just one of our possible roles.

I.R.: And how did you choose, how do you choose now?

N.G.: I have chosen to introduce myself as Roma. Otherwise I would have been free to go on with my evolution as a Romanian (from the point of view of the ethnic identity) - let's call it a masked Romanian, or a Romanian in disguise. I didn't experience any drawbacks, within Romanian society, as a Romanian. Well, of course, there are stereotypes, preconceived ideas... yes, but no major obstacle. So, it was my choice to introduce myself as a *Țigan* or as a Roma, at a certain stage of my life.

But there are cases and groups, also particular situations in day-to-day life, when you can't choose, you don't have this freedom as it is written in national and/or international laws. You are born with this 'ethnic uniform' and you are dominated by the group and its relationships with the surrounding world. Your entire life is shaped by the group, according to certain cultural models, which can look like interdictions and preferences, 'traditional' we call them, in order to sugarcoat the bitter pill of this way of dominating the individual, of limiting their rights to choose and to 'play' with an ethnic identity role, or roles. Social inclusion (as we now call *Țigani* integration or Roma inclusion) and personal development are their very dream. The Roma identity is a *choice*, an option, a *freedom exercise*, in public life, in societies organised according to democratic principles, as the ancient Greeks had started, in their polis, in their colonies.

The idea is – and this is something new, in the last decades – that in public and political speeches about ethnic, national minorities, about ethnic identity or 'national' identity, *it*

is not a compulsory point of view imposed by a smaller or a larger group, a minority or a majority one, not only in number but also in position, in the power hierarchies of society as a whole. Inside this institutional vision and practice, with regard to private and public life, ethnic identity is included in human rights, because it is a right that you choose and exercise, in a lawful system. You are not forced to have an ethnic national identity, as it is called, defined, classified by a dominant group or by the political elite of a socio-cultural group, representing a majority or a minority, in a given society, in a certain moment, after certain cultural models (stereotypes and ethnic preconceived ideas included).

I.R.: Well, but these same cultural models influence us at a certain point.

N.G.: I can't say that my life was influenced by the Roma identity, as the lives of, let's say, in comparison, Ion Pițu Cioabă,⁷ Luminița,⁸ or Florin Cioabă,⁹ and those in the family and group of the coppersmith Roma were influenced.

I.R.: Of course not, but have you been influenced?

N.G.: Why? In the early and mid-1970s, I met Pițu Cioabă, and we travelled together around the country, I admitted I was Roma, but when I had to choose my life partner, in 1977, on top of other random elements and hazards, I said to myself: Am I forced to act as a *Țigan*, in this case? No, this is my right as an individual. And I chose as I wished to. And you can see the consequence, now I can say whatever I want. I was free, I said to myself, of this ethnic oppression as a *Țigan*, an historic fact that came to me as a preconceived idea, as a stigma.

Ethnic identity generated through group relationships and social inter-groups also has its advantages: it can foreshadow your destiny, it can 'pre-judge' you, it can spare you as an individual from the thinking burden and from judging permanently, at each and every step. As in your case of identifying yourself as a *Țigan* or a Roma, in your family or among colleagues in Cluj: spontaneous, non-problematic, visible and obvious, easy, I would say, convenient, as any form of non-critical thinking, and 'preconceived idea' is.

7 Ion Cioaba, alias Pitu, was a Roma leader in Romania, coming from a Kalderash Roma family deported during World War II. Various rumours circulated about his influence during the Communist period. After the fall of Communism he declared himself the international King of the Roma. Luminita Cioaba is his daughter and a Roma poet.

8 Luminita Cioaba is Ion Cioaba's daughter and a Roma poet and writer.

9 Florin Cioaba was Ion Cioaba's son and he took over the title following his father death in 1997. Florin Cioaba was a strong voice in Roma activism and became the President of the International Romani Union. He died on August 18, 2013.

On the other hand, ethnic identity, as an option, as an opportunity to choose, it gives you room for freedom. But for many, this option still doesn't exist, it is not possible.

I.R.: That makes me think again of the summer camp organised by Vasile Ionescu: "Turn black and you'll be free!" When you get partially free of constraints, you have a larger area of freedom.

N.G.: Look at another case: the Roma living here, in Italy, in *campi nomadi* (camps for nomads). Their life is greatly controlled by the ethnic group affiliation. In some regions of Italy, there are laws for the nomads: if you come from countries of the ex-Yugoslavia or Romania, Bulgaria and you say you are a *Țigan* (*zingaro*, *zingara*) or a Roma, by default you are labelled as a nomad and you are sent, you and your family, to a camp of nomads, to live there, in an authorised camp sometimes, but more frequently in a non-authorised one, in a 'tolerated' or 'abusive' one. In these cases you may say that the identity of *zingari/nomadi* is imposed, it is a preconceived idea, through popular stereotypes, as well as through administrative laws.

From another point of view, these people and their families have a certain degree of freedom: "I wish to live there and to have such a life." It's your right! You have chosen to live like that, but the nomad identification becomes your option too. You can't say that everything is imposed, that you are forced to live like that, that you are constrained through laws and administrative pressures, from the outside, being completely dominated. No, I say; there is a component of personal choice, of freedom and of personal responsibility, for the way you are labelled and treated in day-to-day life.

I.R.: This is not a completely external pressure, but they internalise it, as a constraint.

N.G.: But in this example, I repeat, there is also the exercising of freedom and of personal responsibility. People are leaving Romania, in the context of European and national laws regarding the free movement of persons for citizens of EU member states. In Romania you are labelled as a *Țigan*; or you and your family, you prefer to self-identify as Roma. In Romania, the Roma are recognised as a national minority, on the institutional and political levels, in their great majority superficially, without any radical change in day-to-day life. Once in Italy, looking for a source of revenue, for a better life, you settle in a camp (authorised or, more likely, non-authorised) and

you are by default classified as *zingari* and *nomadi*, from the point of view of administrative treatment and generally, in public perception. In Italy, the Roma and Sinti are not recognised as a linguistic and cultural minority, like other minorities are, like the Germans, the Albanians, the Croats, etc. who are considered historical minorities, grouped in certain regions, out of which the modern state of Italy emerged as we know it today.

I.R.: From this point of view I say we immediately need an emancipation project, based on ethnic mobilisation, a kind of ethnic politics included, up to organising an ethnic Party of the Roma.

N.G.: Yes, but out of which of these labels and ethnic (self)-identifications - nomad, European migrant, Romanian citizen of Roma origin - on which could you start an emancipation project, in the public sphere or in the political one? The political project you are talking about should include, I would say, the effort of creating knowledge, of the new step, from the preconceived idea to just the idea, as an act of thinking, of logical ideas or of ideologies.

How can we build a social ontology (taking into account all criticism of a social ontology approach, for example, that all that is social is constructed) - becoming aware, through learning, through documentation, that at a certain historical moment, ethnic identification had been a choice, an option, just for some, and not 'natural data', such as the mountain and the sea here in Salerno? In the example I have just chosen, the adults, the parents decide to come to Italy, leaving Serbia, Romania etc., but their children - born and brought up in public squares, camps for nomads, in barracks or in caravans - learn from a very young age that they are nomads. Will they stay and be nomads for the rest of their life? Do these children and youngsters - future adults with the right to vote - do they keep any connection to the national minority of the Roma in Romania? Would they wish to become Italian citizens? Would they choose a dual citizenship, Romanian and Italian, according to the laws in both countries? Do we have a possible answer in the concept of European citizen? Are we interested in making our own contribution to the political project of the European Union, a distinctive contribution as Roma and not only as Romanian or Italian citizens, etc.? I think that this issue should be thought about, from Kant's question perspective: How is it possible to be Roma and what is the public significance, the political one, in the self-identification?

I.R.: How would you answer these questions?

N.G.: These are questions which are difficult to answer by oneself. But you are right. Maybe thanks to my philosophical, sociological approach I should have found an answer to at least some of these questions, by this stage of my life. I should have been able to get my point of view into a book or something, so as to give you, to convey to you something for you, Iulius, to think about, to take action, to build up your own critical speech, so as to establish something in our interpersonal relationships, something that would become maybe the very fundament of the social ontology, of an ethno-political entity or simply a political one, for the Roma.

I.R.: Why didn't you do that then, in the 1990s, at the beginning of the Roma Movement? Why did the recognition of the Roma, as a national minority, stay just on a superficial level, as you call it now? Where is your responsibility, that of Nicolae Gheorghe, regarding the direction taken or not taken by the Roma Movement in Romania during these years?

N.G.: In my opinion, the promotion of Roma emancipation as an ethno-political entity was not possible within the political space created in Romania, by the policies with and for national minorities, by the conceptual meaning and by the practice of the electoral representation of the national minorities, as it was established and now exists within this kind of politics in Romania, since 1990. If you and others from your generation could rightly reproach me for something, it is my critical opinion regarding the almost 'automatic' representation of national minorities in the Romanian Parliament. That is why I have my doubts that Roma associations with an electoral purpose (the Roma Party¹⁰ of today, but not only) could politically rally the Roma, just by calling upon the 'ethnic vote' of Roma voters in order to get the reserved seat in the Chamber of Deputies. More promising is Roma participation in the elections for local councils; for that I contributed, through the FER, for example, during the local election in 1992 or 1996.

I.R.: Here some of our points of view are shared, but most not. Present-day states, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, Romania included, are states where real political power is held by a dominant ethnic majority: the

Hungarians in Hungary, the ethnic Romanians in Romania, the Serbians in Serbia, etc. That is why the promotion of Roma interests can only be done by taking part in the competition for the distribution of political power in such states and societies; including by establishing an ethnic party of the Roma where they constitute a numerically significant national minority in these countries; so they have or could have significant election potential, they could share political power, including over state budget decisions and also local ones.

N.G.: In my opinion the political and electoral mobilising of Roma will become efficient, able to contribute to solving the specific issues of Roma (the so-called social one included) when there is also a simultaneous change of Article One of the Romanian Constitution, which defines the state as a national one. By way of compensation at present, through Article 62 national minorities benefit from the minority representation system in the Chamber of Deputies.¹¹

The political practice of the representation of national minorities is an advantage for the Hungarian minority, represented by the UDMR;¹² it might be useful for other, less numerous ethnic groups, in Romania. But for the Roma, taking into account their specific history and the social situation in Romania and in Europe, ethno-politics based on the classical concept of national minority – as was the case in Romania after 1990 – hasn't worked, at least not until now. We will wait and see if 20 more years or several decades will be needed, until there is a new public and political will in Romania, among all citizens, Roma included, to change the Constitution and the electoral laws (as mentioned before). Thus, I think, we will be able to produce an efficient Roma ethno-politics in a coherent democratic state, and not in a collection of ethnocracies, more numerous for the Romanian majority, more restrained, geographically and numerically (local ethnocracies) or mini-ethnocracies of an elected elite of Roma, justified in ethnic terms.

I.R.: Then I will repeat the question from the beginning of our discussion: how did you decide to act then at the beginning of the Roma movement? What role did your personal experience, your way of thinking and identifying yourself as a Roma, play when taking these decisions?

10 *Partida Romilor* or 'the Roma Party' in English is registered as an NGO. The Romanian electoral law allows certain NGOs belonging to national minorities to compete in elections. *Partida* has a double meaning in Romanian, and can signify either a political party or a card game.

11 See article 62 of the Constitution of Romania, 2010.

12 The Democratic Union of Hungarians in Romania.

N.G.: Regarding that, I said that in the 1990s I preferred the civic option: I wanted to associate with people promoting an ethnic aspect, as citizens in a coherent democratic state – as the ancient Greek polis would pretend to be, the one we mentioned again and again, during this talk; but of course in the historical and social terms of today. That would be, I repeat, the fundamental intention in constituting the FER and, three years later, Romani CRISS – (the Romani Centre for Social Intervention and Studies) – I was using words such as: *Țigan, Roma, Romani, Kris Romano*, but there was a moral will for an ethnic construction within the civic space and within the legal framework, in a rule of law state, in Romania, as we imagined at that time, immediately after 1990. We do not start from the ethnic classification, as Roma specifically, as a fact given naturally by birth; neither do we start from an ethno-nationalist representation of Romanians, inherited by some followers of the ‘Romanian spirit’ of modern and contemporary history, as a myth about Romanians and Romania.

I am critical regarding the very concept of national minority, as a collateral effect of the formation of nation-states in the 19th century, and especially after the First World War. I think that this is the current representation of national majorities and minorities, in politics after 1990, as you say, while referring to states in Central and Eastern Europe.

I.R.: It seems to me that you are avoiding answering my question about your role and responsibility as a person, about the influence you had in the decisions of that time.

N.G.: From this point of view, I repeat that I could not represent the Roma national minority as long I do not live according to Roma tradition. I can’t speak Romanes as a mother tongue and I do not follow Roma laws. I refer to clan law – in the sense given by cultural anthropologists, as a larger family, a social organisation, based on kinship, because we didn’t have any other institutional reality created in real life, in social history. Now in the year 2000-and-something, you may say: yes I am Roma because I am part of the association, the party or a group more or less outlined, after being launched by those representing my generation of activists, during the 1990s. What would be my role and my responsibility? Going on in the same terms as before, I think that in Romania the distinction between the civic direction and the ethnic-electoral direction of the

public and political mobilisation of the Roma or at least the older or the younger Roma who are active in public life, in institutions, in public debates, etc. is better, more clearly articulated.

I.R.: Is this distinction valid only for the Roma in Romania when discussing this dynamic?

N.G.: From my personal experience regarding the circulation of Roma through Europe, I don’t know... I think that these options, communication and political mobilisation, (as Karl Deutsch¹³ called them) are mixed and more confused than in other European countries where Roma and Sinti are more visible in public life. Except, maybe, Macedonia, where there is a much greater number of Roma, men and women, well-educated, speaking Romanes and active in public life. Roma are recognised by the Constitution, among the constitutive peoples of the state, they have ethnic political parties, but are also quite skilful in making election coalitions in the Parliament and more recently in the government of Macedonia, etc...

In Romania, by comparison, it seemed to me the political mobilisation of Roma on the ethnic criterion is more or less blocked, due to the reserved seat in the Chamber of Deputies. From my perspective, of course a subjective and biased one, the civic mobilisation of the Roma seems to be a little bit better if we measure performance by the number of civic organisations and foundations, by a better ability to self-finance, without depending completely on central budget subsidies (as it was and still is the case for the Roma Party). Roma civic associations (NGOs, as we call them now) from Romania are among the very few in the EU having the capacity and the courage to take risks, especially financial ones, to access significant European funds, to elaborate and manage projects relating to concrete actions, in local Roma communities, in the field of human resources, training, etc.

In the 1990s and after Roma political organisations, especially the Roma Party, didn’t agree with the civic associations’ projects. Now, since 2007, when Romania joined the EU and gained access to funds from the EU budget for 2007 - 2013, all of a sudden the Roma Party remembers that it is an NGO. They started to have their own projects on European money, learning that partnership between

13 Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationality* (Boston, MIT Press, 1966).

civil society and authorities (central, local) is an extremely productive tool (in the sense Erich Fromm¹⁴ uses this term) for the local Roma communities. Of course, Roma civil society in Romania is still fragile, having some vulnerabilities, but you wrote about that, Iulius, in the analysis you have already published.¹⁵

As for me, now (over the last years), I wished to free myself from my 'shadow' of the 1990s. Now I say that I am not a member of staff of any Roma association. That is in order to feel completely free, not just of constraints, but also of the crutches of managing any administrative relationships in the process of building an Ego, including the ethnic component, the ethnic role, as mentioned before.

I.R.: The emancipator project... is something strictly personal, not including the *ethnos* as a group or as a collection of different cultural groups, the Roma population in Romania, and in the world is built by history, isn't it?

N.G.: I have included *ethnos* for a certain phase, but my personal emancipation goes further. I am over this phase. *Ethnos* is one of the roles I have, being one part of a combination of roles I am expressing and manifesting now, helping to provoke those around us when we introduce ourselves by affirming: "We are Roma politicians". In different contexts here, in Italy, too, I express and activate my ethno-political identity, as a Roma. I do that, so to say, deliberately, with a certain aim, having behind me certain experience. But each and every one of us, we have different roles to play.

I.R.: And how did you feel about this combination of roles all through your life?

N.G.: Let me tell you a story. In 1965, I was a student in military school. Everything happened during the first holiday from the infantry officers' school in 1964, in Sibiu, after graduating from military high school, at Câmpulung Moldovenesc. I went to visit a classmate and friend, a military student from a village near Târgu Neamț. We were friends since military high school, and he invited me to his house. He was from a poor family, but the three children were well-educated. He had a brother who became a professor of physics at the University in Iași. My ex-colleague had a brilliant career in the military and he was also a poet,

a writer, a journalist with a very interesting career. We decided to go on a trip to the monasteries, by bicycle. We cycled from his village in order to visit the monasteries of Neamț, Agapia, etc. One morning, we arrived in Târgu Neamț to go to Neamț Monastery, we passed by a market, it was market day... a townsman came out from a pub, all red... we were next to our bicycles, and he stopped just in front of me, and he asked: "Hey you! Why are you a *Țigan*?" Just like that, out of the blue! I was perplexed, because I had never discussed this with my friend. He didn't know I was a *Țigan*. For many years, I didn't broach this issue, hiding my ethnic origin, or else it was simply not relevant for me in my relationship with him or other classmates at the military school.

I.R.: Did you hide it or was it not relevant?

N.G.: Both, so I had an inferiority complex, I hid, but at the same time it was irrelevant, because I wished to build something else: a military career in the Romanian Army, the 'universal man' I read about in books at that time; the label of *Țigan* stayed there, somewhere in my subconscious, at the back of my mind, in my childhood, something associated with my family in Roșiorii de Vede, and later on in Bucharest. I left home more or less, I left for the army in order to cut any relationship with my family, where my father (a driver) was known by the nickname Anghel the *Țigan*. On our street they knew we were *Țigani*, in school I was already labelled as *Țigan* when I was just 14. It was extremely painful, the way I experienced it. So I was puzzled then in Târgu Neamț. My colleague was delicate enough not to comment. I suffered horribly during that moment, and for the whole day. Then I relaxed, I left for the monastery. I was obsessed with this incident - it was in 1965. It was only in 1973-1974 that I started to try and answer that question: "Hey you! Why are you a *Țigan*?" Why am I a *Țigan*? I still wonder and go on answering that townsman...

In another context, let's say you are a friend of somebody and all of a sudden he says to you: "What the heck, you are a *Țigan*! Go to Hell you *Țigan* scum!" You are equal to the guy you are talking to, or at least you think that you are. But he wishes to label you, and he can. But why that guy, how did he feel, what were the reference points, how could he identify me as a *Țigan* in this context? This is the mystery

14 Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1941).

15 Iulius Rostas, "The Romani Movement in Romania: Institutionalization and (De)mobilization", in *Romani Politics in Contemporary Europe Poverty, Ethnic Mobilization, and the Neo-liberal Order*, eds. Nidhi Trehan and Nando Sigona (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

of stereotypes, of preconceived ideas... My big problem was and still is: I am a *Țigan*... because somebody from outside identified me as such, with or against my will? Or because I also wanted it, but only after I had already internalised his perception? The first person who decided that I am a *Țigan* was somebody else. Not me. So my choice is more or less secondary. This is a reaction not ontologically (or phenomenologically?) primary, or a primordial fact. So I was, I am... I identified myself as a *Țigan*, as Gypsy, Rom, Roma, all these issues stayed in me, growing like the layers of an onion, but in my deepest person this puzzling question stayed: why are you a *Țigan*? I still don't know why...

By chance, in spring 2008, I went again to Târgu Neamț, also on a visit, this time together with my small family of today. I was just by coincidence in the same market, the same place, without wishing it. And I ask myself: did I get an answer for this red-haired drunk? Since 1965... and we are now in 2011? I go on answering this guy, trying to answer his question. Frequently I avoid the question, not being able to give it an answer sometimes, saying to myself that I have an answer... as I do now, while talking to you. Sometimes I feel convincing, when I define myself as Roma, other times not. Sometimes I play, juggling myself and my identities, quite joyfully.

Other times I start to feel exposed in the void between these different identities – as if I am somewhere in the space between atoms, difficult to imagine for the Eleats, from Ancient Greece – I am lost, depressed, completely worthless, because I am in the void between identities... I am either a Romanian, or a *Țigan*, a Roma or a European, a cosmopolitan, I am either X or Y... and sometimes I feel in-between... In a sort of limbo... Lost in the void, in a chaos opposite to the Cosmos, from the Greek thinking, remaining with myself, and then I have no landmark for an ontological identity. My ethnic identity, the primordial, total and totalising, imposed by the group and not chosen, this is one way to fill this void, for safety, in order not to torture yourself with such questions. It is something sure, a given fact, something inherited, something defining you, that something or somebody (the group) controls you and is often one of those illusions that diminishes our anxieties. But if we kept asking this question: “Who am I...? Where I am going...?”... It would be terrible!

I.R.: Looking for the very essence...

N.G.: From my point of view, ethnic identity is one of the possible answers, but it is not a liberating answer, it is an answer that I partially feel as being narrow, too tight, stifling me, it doesn't satisfy at all. But this unrest or 'lack of ethnic fulfilment' is a *price to pay for my liberty*, if I am to use it in my interpretation, the title and the substance of Mateo Maximoff's book.¹⁶

I.R.: If I am to paraphrase a well-known local character, the fundamental question remains: “Why are Roma *Țigani*?” This question has a deep logic for many Roma who internalised so powerfully the imposed identity, the *Țigan* one, a sort of a label because of which they develop some complexes that they can't emancipate from. Even if in the meantime they become activists, they talk in the name of the Roma, they introduced themselves as Roma; but they stay *Țigani* because they internalised the label and the identity so much. So for them the fact of being a *Țigan* is oppressive. From my point of view, talking about and being a Roma represents an emancipative speech, an emancipative force regarding the complexes associated with being a *Țigan*, meaning trying to be proud of yourself, trying to be proud of you, as a person, of what you are, and what you represent.

N.G.: From the other point of view, the fact that you are married to a woman of another ethnic group could make them say: “You are not Roma, you are just pretending! You may be a *Țigan*, but you are not Roma”.

I.R.: On the contrary, I am Roma! Maybe I am not so much of a *Țigan*.

N.G.: It is something that I still contest, as long as you do not live according to certain rules, considered as defining; of course there are customary laws, *muro romano*, or 'folk' laws, not institutionalised ones. Yes, but as long as you are in a clan, the Roma identity is relatively clear for you and for others, it is a group identity. It is a social fact, but not an institutionalised identity, by right, or at least it is not yet such an institution. We are trying to capacitate, to reconstruct such a public identity, institutionalised, through practices associated with politics, for national minorities, by teaching Romanes in some schools, by getting reserved quotas for Roma, at high school or college level, etc. This process could take some 10 to 20 years or more ... It may or may not succeed. It is clear for me that the Roma identity was kept by the clan, according to a certain kind

¹⁶ Mateo Maximoff, *The Price of Freedom* (1955).

of marriage, following certain rules that can be of kinship, exchanges between families, etc. But you can't just be Roma because you wish to be.

I.R.: But identity changes, it changes completely. You can't stay secluded in a secular identity definition, because social relationships change.

N.G.: Why are we, you Iulius and I, Roma and not simply civic activists or sociologists, political scientists, analysts? What is the difference between X, who reads, writes about Roma, why are you more Roma than this X, who is 'an expert on Roma', either in public administration or in the academic world?

I.R.: Beyond assuming a certain social role, with its pluses and minuses, it is also about the experiences we are living through...

N.G.: They can have the same experiences as you had.

I.R.: Not at all. I internalise my experiences in a certain way and somebody else lives them totally differently. From this point of view, to be Roma is a personal experience... Of course, we have relationships with others, sometimes conflicting, competitive relationships, because that is life, you compete with others. But our roles are different not only in how we assume them.

N.G.: Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein¹⁷ said in one of their books (I paraphrase): "Identities are some constructions of the elites, in order to have a more advantageous position in competing for resources: either inside the nation state or inside the world economic system". Yes, you can make ethnic business, in order to win. Ethnic affiliation becomes a competitive resource that you can use, you can trade it. It is a tool transforming the tradition, into a trademark, an exchangeable one, on a trademark market, meaning the ethnic, ethno-political, ethno-national one...

I.R.: Exactly. There are different types of resources, not only material, but symbolic too.

N.G.: Here your theory conflicts with some of the Roma. Let's say... *Tigan* musicians. For example X... he or she is a *Tigan* musician, they do not need to emancipate themselves from this label - for them to be *Tigan* is an occupational

trademark. So 'Roma musician'... that doesn't mean a thing for them (for the audience, for the agents) but as *Tigan* musicians, they are somebody. They are living from trading their entity, their profession, their ethnic identity.

I.R.: Ok, it is a branding issue.

N.G.: But do they need to emancipate themselves from their *Tigan* identity?

I.R.: I think they do.

N.G.: I don't. For example, the Spanish Gitanos – flamenco dancers, do they need to emancipate from their Gitanos identity, that we the Roma activists consider pejorative? The Gitanos from Andalusia are trying to do that and they have partially succeeded: they are accepted in Andalusia and in Spain, as a state, through specific public policies, as Gitanos, not as Roma. Roma are just in the international language. So some of the Roma do not need to emancipate themselves from their *Tigan* identity or Gitanos, *Zingari*, Sinti or Gypsies or Travellers, *Nomadi* as they are here in Italy... That is why I want to say: why are some Roma *Tigan*? Because they chose to be, because they wish to be!

I.R.: Then I think that, from my point of view, some groups need an emancipation project, because there are some practices associated with their group which they do not agree with. Of course, there is a competition between the groups we call Roma. Whoever wins this competition to impose a certain identity trademark will also define the content and impose that identity in the end.

N.G.: It remains a competition issue, but that is why I prefer an answer to the question. "Why are certain Roma *Tigan*?" Because they want to be *Tigani*, it is a freedom exercise, in the sense we just mentioned. Not only because they are forced to be *Tigani*; there is a dynamic in here, a certain dialectic (as a cognitive process), a negotiation, a social practice.

I.R.: Yes, but there are some practices which contrast with dominant social values... early marriages, is it acceptable? If we believe not, then we have to debate the issue. That is why we need an emancipation project, an identity one, from my point of view.

¹⁷ Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (New York: Verso, 1991).

N.G.: What does emancipating mean in this case?

I.R.: Some practices must be changed. Emancipating in the sense of rebranding, rethinking the role of Roma in society as well as of some social practices associated with the group.

N.G.: But who could do this emancipating and rebranding? Can we do it, the assimilated Roma, in the name of the traditional Roma who are practicing early marriages? Or can traditional Roma do it?

I.R.: This is where assuming is needed. Yes, these assimilated Roma are the people who should do it. If we look to all ethno-national emancipation movements, they have been done by these kinds of people. The emancipation movement leaders were those who left the group at a certain moment and got another kind of socialisation, coming back later to lead the emancipation project. They led!

N.G.: This is exactly my case or maybe yours, but can it be for others too?

I.R.: The issue is whether we could assume such a responsibility or not?

N.G.: The answer is that we assumed this responsibility, when, for example, the Democratic Union of the Roma between 1990-1994, and later on the Roma Party assumed this responsibility, when at the beginning Răducanu,¹⁸ and now for 12 years already through Păun,¹⁹ the Roma are represented in the Parliament of Romania as a national minority, as members of the national minorities group in the Chamber of Deputies, as members in the National Minority Council (subsidised by the State), etc. On the other hand, others among us, we also assumed since 1990 the role, the responsibility to act for Roma, with Roma, through civic associations, foundations, as enterprises and/or as partners for specific projects and in strategic social policies, in the long term, etc.

I.R.: And is that enough?

N.G.: From my point of view, there isn't any problem for some of us to assume political and civic responsibility. The issue is that after assuming such a responsibility, on an identity criterion, after taking new steps in our

ethno-political assertion, after winning points, we stayed somewhere suspended in thin air, not having anywhere or anyone to go back to. We do not have a coherent and durable audience built (for example through periodical subscription fees, not only through project benefits. We do not have a political community to come back to with an emancipation discourse). Yes, we have *Țigan*, house *Țigani* with a similar experience to ours, the integrated ones, those integrated only fragmentarily, accessing the formal economy or public administration through education programmes, or insertion programmes.

Yes, for them we are trying to have an emancipation discourse, to help the emancipation according to certain ways or variants, or models of being Roma, in order for them to decide... if they are Roma or not ... but as an individual practice and a voluntary association, a willing one in this sense.

I.R.: Exactly! On the symbolic and collective level the power to define belongs to these kinds of people, who had another type of socialisation, having the strength to redefine themselves. On the individual level, they have that project of individual salvation. Each and every one of them feels and acts in the way that he or she can, as they believe it is better and more profitable for them. There is, of course, an oppressive side because as long as you, on the symbolic level, you go and say: "No, you are not necessarily what you wish to be, in this case a *Țigan* or what you were told you are, but you are simply Roma", then he or she could ask me: "Why?". An answer like "Because I say so" has an oppressive aspect. At the same time, I think that the advantage for Roma is that there are no institutions to put into practice this oppressive aspect. Let me give you an example: the nation-state - the fact that the Roma have no state with a bureaucratic system, or an army or an education system to reproduce the ethnic identity of the Roma, which is then eventually sanctified so the state becomes sacred too; this is a fact that I consider positive.

N.G.: The lack of a state, of a national state, is perceived as a weakness: that is why the Roma are not recognised as a national minority in Hungary, but just as an ethnic minority. That is why in Italy they are not treated as a linguistic minority, equal to other minorities. Even in Romania, the Roma are represented in the Parliament as a national minority, but

¹⁸ Gheorghe Raducanu, Roma activist, was the first Roma to be elected to the Romanian Parliament to represent Roma as a national minority.

¹⁹ Nicolae Paun is the President of *Partida Romilor* and an MP since 2000 representing the Roma minority in the Romanian Parliament.

they are perceived rather as a social problem. The Romanian state is interested in the rights of Romanians in Hungary, just as the Hungarian state is concerned with the rights of Hungarians in Romania. So what can we do? Some say we should build ourselves as much as possible according to the historic national minorities model, even if we do not have and we do not claim our own nation state.

I say something else: Roma can advocate de-ethnicising the state through the separation of the nation from the state; just as religion through the Church separated from the modern state, after ferocious religious wars (still going on nowadays, in some regions or countries more or less near us). In states with no ethnic components, coherently civic, it is easier, I think, to guarantee fundamental civil rights and through a cultural association, in the civic space, to promote your own language, ethnic-national symbols, as partially private rights, but expressed in the public space. It may seem a politically naïve project, a utopia, what I am saying now, but I will go back to the beginning of the 1990s and try to tell you my reasons for choosing this 'Civic Charter' in a Roma political rally. Răducănu and his political friends preferred the election representation with the Charter of the Roma as a national minority and they chose the ace of clubs as an election symbol, a sign kept by the Party of the Roma until now. Was it or was it not a winner, this ace of clubs, in the electoral politics of the Roma, their politics of recognition as a national minority? This remains to be debated and evaluated!

I.R.: In the case of Roma, it is possible to contest the leader's speech, without affecting the nation-state, because it doesn't exist. You may say: "Well, man, I don't want to be Roma, I am a *Țigan*" and then I would be given the possibility to say: "Ok, you may stay a *Țigan*, it's your business, but on the level of public discourse, whether you like it or not, you will still be Roma". On the level of public discourse the term used will be Roma.

N.G.: Ok, I exaggerate, I simplify, but for me the experience of the reactions to the initiative of Deputy Prigoana²⁰ (autumn 2010 - spring 2011) was a test: the denomination as such and what is associated with the word Roma is not a mobilising force. It could become one in the future, but at that time (autumn 2010 - spring 2011) there wasn't the required context, there was a lack of a combination of favourable factors; public mobilisation didn't work. In another context, it succeeded (in 1995 and later on),²¹ and maybe it will succeed again, in the future. But at that moment it didn't because it couldn't generate a vast social movement, a civic and politic rally, going to the roots, to particular groups and local communities of Roma.

We didn't succeed in giving the word, the denomination of Roma an associated political programme, a clear one, or in helping to mobilise, as was the case with the word Afro-American and the movement for civil rights in the USA. It is totally different to be called the 'n-word' and something else to be 'black' and something else to be an 'Afro-American'.²²

We haven't succeeded yet in elaborating a political programme associated with the term Roma, a resounding programme, a real echo for everybody. Yes, we enjoyed resounding success in Brussels, in Strasbourg, at the OSCE, at the Council of the Europe, at OSI... on this level we succeeded in having an interlocutor and a certain influence, but on the level of the social masses... And I am not talking about, let's say, the woodworker and goldwasher Roma, but about the mass of activists trained in the dynamics of the last 20 years! Or maybe we took the success as it appeared in the public, and in national and international documents for granted. The denomination of *Țigan* or Nomads or Travellers should be replaced by that of Roma; it was so obvious that in political-institutional discourse we are Roma, so there was no more need to mobilise on this issue.

I.R.: They were not conscious of this dimension - "Why is the Roma a *Țigan*"!

20 In autumn 2010 Romanian MP Silviu Prigoana proposed a bill to use the denomination *Țigan* instead of Roma with reference to the ethnic group as a way to avoid possible confusions between Romanians and Roma among foreigners.

21 In 1995 the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a memorandum asking all public authorities in Romania to use the denomination *Țigan* with reference to Roma as a way to avoid confusion between Romanians and Roma. Its adoption mobilised Roma groups to protest against this practice and to push for specific policies. It took four years for the Romanian Government to withdraw that memorandum in 1999. See Iulius Rostas, "The Responses of Romanian Authorities to Roma Migration" (Presented at the conference *Romani Mobilities in Europe: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, University of Oxford, 10-14 January 2010).

22 An essay on this issue was presented by Mihaela Murdure, a professor at Babeș-Bolyai University, during the seminar *Roma versus Țigan*, organised by ISPMN, Cluj Napoca, on 17 January 2011. See also: Mihaela Murdure, "From the Gypsies to Afro-Americans" in *The Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* (2003/4).

N.G.: I don't think we have a crisis of conscience yet, as Kant and other philosophers from the beginnings of the modern era had, when it was about the fundamentals of knowledge, especially of verifiable or scientific knowledge. We are not yet in a critical phase, we are not yet in a phase of establishing from the epistemological point of view a political action. That means in our epistemology discourse: through thinking, through analysis, through reflection, through dialogue and through a contradictory discussion, through a political practice, even ethno-political, so as to establish the basis of such knowledge, an ideology, a political platform for Roma, but also for society as a whole...

I.R.: We have to create something and to brand it, in such a way as to have some resonance among the 'ordinary people', to evaluate and re-evaluate where we really are. That is what I wanted to say - what we should do in a critical manner, in a debate.

N.G.: We are Roma 'by profession', Roma as an international brand. How do we deal with: "Well you are not a genuine *Țigan*, if you do not feel Roma, then automatically, you are not recognised as Roma by others"? That is what I wished to say: to provoke, to stimulate this 'pain' in order to wake us up from the dogmatic sleep of spontaneous ethnic identification, without proper thinking and without praxis based on a specific thinking, an ideology.

I.R.: How could we move from Roma 'by profession' to simply Roma?

N.G.: Could you be Roma, just spontaneously, from Mother Nature? No, I would say no, me, Nicolae Gheorghe, in order to provoke you and others who are curious (in the philosophical sense). Yes, I tried and I am still trying, I imitated, I juggled, I "bewitched" (as Max Weber said) the world around. So, essentially, my solution in this very moment of my life is: either I am a human or a *Țigan*.

I.R.: So, the *Țigan* is not a human?

N.G.: The *Țigan* can't be Roma. Human, maybe yes, but tolerated as a species, as sort of sub-human, that - yes, it is possible.

I.R.: That would mean preconceived ideas towards Roma; there is even a saying: the willow is not a tree, as a *Țigan* is not a human.²³

N.G.: Yes, of course, he is not human! Conversely Roma, those from the *descendants* (or from the clans which we already mentioned), they say that the *gadjo*/the non-Roma is subhuman. So you may do whatever you want with him - trick him, that is the best solution, isn't it? And even maybe kill him, just as the *gadjo* could kill you because you are Roma (in the traditional sense) and/or a *Țigan* in the social sense. Meaning you may make fun of this guy, because anyhow he is impure, he is not human... according to simplistic ontology there are two completely exclusive realities, the *gadjo* and the Roma, products of social history especially in Europe, and seen as being traditional. This establishes parallel societies, where an explosion may happen, the 'dynamite' which appears when the *gadjo* and Roma try to be together, when they decide to build a society together, an inclusive society as we call it nowadays. For that, somebody should try and justify this new social form, to establish it in a Kantian approach, through knowledge, and then to build, as Kant was also saying, in a more general sense, an "eternal peace", or a "perpetual peace" - *Zum Ewigen Frieden*, as a philosophical, cosmo-political project, published in 1795.²⁴

I.R.: Then this category of Roma was invented, a category that should be defined not only as a name, etymologically speaking, but also as an historic subject, as a political actor, the bearer of a political platform.

N.G.: It is for us to invent it, if we do succeed in inventing it, to build it through our experience. Otherwise, in order to go on, with our discussion about the Roma in Macedonia, they made progress in building Roma as a national minority, in the classic Eastern European sense. There are two generations of Romani intellectuals who published grammars and dictionaries in Romanes. They write literature and journalism in Romanes, they teach the language, in a bilingual school in Šuto Orizari.²⁵ They are following the example of the Roma in Serbia, and more recently, in Croatia and Kosovo. Their problem is that today Macedonia is a sort of 'little Yugoslavia' with the vulnerabilities of ethnic-nationalism that provoked

23 The saying in Romanian is: "Nici salcia nu e pom, nici tiganul nu e om". This tendency to dehumanise the Roma is a constant of anti-Gypsyism, expressed in other popular sayings, such as "Tiganul nu e om nici in ziua de Paste" (The *Țigan* is not a human being even on Easter day).

24 Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch - Zum ewigen Frieden. Ein philosophischer Entwurf* (1795).

25 Šuto Orizari is a neighbourhood of the Macedonian capital Skopje, with a majority of Roma inhabitants, which became a separate municipality.

the fall of the 'greater Yugoslavia' of Tito's time, through wars, inspired by national ideologies, religious ones, out of an ethnic nationalism. During the conflicts and the wars generated by such ethnic nationalism, competing within the same state entity, on the same territory, the 'very primitive' Roma (not necessarily just their elites) are always losers, remaining in the middle and rejected by each and every nationalism, as happened in Bosnia and even more obviously in the conflict in Kosovo. That is why I think that the eternal peace or at least the 100-year peace between the Roma and the non-Roma isn't possible on the basis of nation-state ideologies and national minorities, as some of these political realities and ideologies in the modern, contemporary history of the nation state developed, as we know them now. The historical opportunity of such a Roma peace has been provided by the recent practice of human rights, of civil rights (in the USA), of the fundamental rights of the European Union.

I.R.: We have established up to now that on the one hand the *Tigan* can't be human, but if we are talking about human rights, can the *pakivalo*²⁶ Roma be a human rights activist?

N.G.: You can't be a human rights activist – in the sense of the social ontology and ethics of universality, of Judeo-Christian values, taken in full, and at the same time be Roma, according to the rules of the Roma descendants – the values and rules of some communities which, in order to survive and to protect themselves (in the cultural sense, but also in the personal and group security sense) avoided the world around them, placing themselves at the edge of this world. Historical practice in those 'traditional' communities is based on a relationship of exploitation with the world around; the world around exploiting them and they exploiting the world around. This is not an equal relationship, but an asymmetrical hierarchical one, one of the hegemony of the outside world. If we accept this premise, then you can't be a *pakivalo Roma*, according to the Roma descendants and also a human rights activist.

Human rights are valid, meaning they can function in a society based on equality before the law, where there are lawful, neutral institutions, where men, women, any individual has to or is supposed to *trust* (*pakiv*) the already-mentioned institutions, because (ideally) there are political and judicial guarantees for practicing this trust. The world of traditional Roma from the different descendants (coppersmiths, Lovari, Sinti and other Roma guilds) is organised internally

on a hierarchical basis, and on *distrust*, on a fundamentally suspicious attitude between Roma and *gadje*, between the community of the descendants or the clan (which follows a hierarchical order, but is also protective of the individual) and the *gadje* society, which is fundamentally threatening.

I.R.: The Roma world operates according to a hierarchical order and many try to change it through democratic means. This is another paradox.

N.G.: There is no equality between people constructed in the Roma world (those from descendants, the clan Roma or *nija* world based on family relationships): between men and women, between old and young, between children on one side and married adults, between men and women, between rich or poor, between 'clean' people, (in the symbolic sense, meaning behaviour) and 'impure' ones, *Mabrime*, so as far as I see it, in my opinion, the world of the 'traditional' Roma is a coherent hierarchical organised world. So how could you believe in a dialogue between these worlds based on conflicting values if we accept, I repeat, that European society or the Western world has as a fundament the value of equality before the law, and towards the institutions governing human rights?

I.R.: It is not just hierarchy, because somebody could come and say: "Do you mean that the non-Roma world is not based on hierarchy?" But from a certain point on, it is about certain practices and values.

N.G.: Yes, it is about the values the hierarchy is based on, the *gadje*/non-Roma and the Romani/Roma are according to the already-mentioned analysis mutually exclusive. And then here comes the question inspired by Kant: is it possible to be a civic activist and Roma, at the same time, according to the traditional sense of the words? My answer is no. My personal experience tells me that between these two worlds, these identities, there is an irremediable conflict that tore my life apart for 30 years.

I.R.: So what would the solution be, a possible answer to my question about *pakiv* and your speech about human rights, about civil society and so on?

N.G.: An 'inclusive' society, eternal peace between non-Roma and Roma, would be possible if and when the dominant hierarchy would change (could we change then?). Starting with the oppressive approach, the exclusivist and exploiting

²⁶ Trustworthy, honourable, someone that is trusted and respected by the community.

hierarchies (especially) in this society, being both in the past and at present, a *gadje* society, for the fundamentally exclusionary (socially, according to rank or social layer and more frequently, in the ethnic and cultural sense). Through the same practice or a comprehensive social process, based on *reciprocity* (expressing the “equality of chances” as we call it in our talks), hierarchies must be changed in the Roma world, ‘traditional’ or not, because they are also oppressive. But because they are practiced on a smaller social ladder we accept them as part of tradition like in the case, for example, of the relationships between men and women, or in the case of compulsory marriages, mentioned above, etc.

I.R.: Can somebody be a *Rom pakivalo* and an intellectual Roma too?

N.G.: An intellectual like me, but I can’t generalise... They can’t be *Rom pakivalo* up to the end; somewhere there is a split, a fracture. If I am an intellectual, in the end I give up in front of a solid argument, a value or a right considered to be generally accepted, so I can’t follow the tribe’s law, because I ask questions, I discuss it and then I am eliminated; in the best case scenario I can be accepted as a *Țigan* by a *Rom pakivalo*. I don’t know... Some of the worst opinions about the ‘house *Țigan*’ (as I am) I’ve heard from the *Rom pakivale*, in the sense of traditional Roma. And of course from some non-Roma, but you expect that because a non-Roma is an adversary and not a *manush* (a nice guy); in the vocabulary and the Roma mentality, a non-Roma is something frightful, a terror, a menace, it is one against the other, the non-Roma against the Roma. In the end, the social game is a question of life and death between the two of them; between the Roma and the non-Roma, one will win and one will lose in the end. It is a relationship based on conflict. But I want to remind you that I also heard awful opinions from my own mother, a house *Țigan*, about the wandering *Țigani*, ex-*tent Țigani* living in the Cotorga slums in the suburbs of the little town of Roșiorii de Vede.

I.R.: So, the relationship Roma versus non-Roma is a Manichaeism-based one, an exclusivist one.

N.G.: Both groups (identities), *gadje* and traditional Roma, can tolerate the *Țigani* as subhuman: according to ontolo-

gies of both the non-Roma and the Roma. My problem/ worry, and yours... is that we are trying as ‘*Țigan*’ (as we were labelled in our childhood) to become ‘human,’ combining a humanist concept, about man, a universal one, with a particular fundamental concept of the Roma (the clan Roma). This seems to me quite impossible... I haven’t found a solution on the personal level, at least not yet. But the problem, the dilemma, is similar for Romanians, Hungarians, and Italians, and usually for all people trying to find an answer to such questions...

I.R.: One of the paradoxes?

N.G.: Yes, if Achilles the swift-footed can’t reach the tortoise it seems that (please forgive my reference!) neither can I, born as a *Țigan*, a civil activist for Roma rights, be a Roma, from the ethnic-cultural point of view. I could be a good activist. I was, maybe, a ‘successful Roma’ in the non-Roma world; but in the ‘real’ Roma world I am culturally disqualified. I can’t exist in both worlds simultaneously, as if I had reached eternal peace on the subjective level with myself (as long as I am still alive!).

I can’t accept either on the intimate relations level, the personal, the family, Roma behaviour in its tribal approach. If you are Roma, fully Roma, you have firstly to respect your kind, your extended family first. On the level of basic values, and also of daily practice, there is no place for somebody outside the descendants, outside the tribe. The first loyalty is to your own kind, the others don’t count - everything is allowed; or my humanistic conception (well, it is my self-labelling) disqualifies me. So from this point of view, I am rather a *gadjo*/non-Roma, also in the sense that I am a danger to some of the traditional Roma who would like to get public affirmation. That is why, for example, I was ‘kidnapped’²⁷ around 1992, I think. In this sense, the traditional Roma – X, Y, Z, they got the idea that I could be somebody dangerous.

I.R.: In the non-Roma world, thus, non-Roma could justify their collaboration with you as a representative of Roma.

N.G.: So, I’ll go on; some of the traditional Roma, willing to be a presence in public and political life (many were then leaders of political parties, according to the old law of the parties),²⁸ they got the right idea, that I was a ‘danger’ who

27 In 1992 Nicolae Gheorghe was kidnapped by a group of Roma after accusations that he acquired large sums for Roma projects and was not accountable to anyone for this. Details can be found in Isabel Fonseca, *Bury me Standing: The Gypsies and Their Journey*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1995).

28 In early 1990 several Roma political parties were registered in Romania as the law required 251 members to register a political party. Most of these parties were registered in order to receive the state subsidy for the 1990 electoral campaign which was a fixed amount.

should be somehow eliminated. They wished for, let's call it, a symbolic elimination, not a physical one. This was followed by my self-elimination when leaving for Warsaw in 2007, and after, because of depression; and then, for the last two years, my illness... the personal salvation solution is to become human again, without being Roma but simply a man, as a person deeply and painfully internalising the label, the complex of the *Țigan*. I tried during my school years, and then in the 1970s and the 1980s to free myself as a man from the new man the socialist, communist one. I tried in the 1990s, and until recently, to save myself as Roma. But I didn't succeed.

I.R.: Why didn't you succeed as a new man, the socialist kind? You were a member of the Communist Party, weren't you? Why so many paradoxes in your life?

N.G.: I partially succeeded. I was an outstanding pupil and student according to the parameters of that time - my activism inside the Communist Students Union included, during my university years - but then I refused the nationalist discourse, a point of view expounded during the nationalist era of Ceaușescu. That was during the second part of the 1970s and then the 1980s, when I lived through the invention of a Romanian ethnic nationalism, created in order to justify the communist institution. Regarding the origin of this nationalism, it was (a paradox again as you say!) the great victory of Ceaușescu: it was his protest, in the name of the Romanian state, during the summer of 1968, after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the USSR and the armies of the Warsaw Pact countries (the communist equivalent of NATO, at that time). This protest, supported by the masses during the summer of 1968, had a huge influence upon me and maybe upon my generation (ex-high school classmates were just finishing officers' military school). Then, step by step, the public situation got worse and maybe I felt the threat earlier than others, because I couldn't be 'one hundred per cent Romanian'. I knew that I was a *Țigan* inside, even though I knew (or I just imagined?) that I was behaving 'like a Romanian', in daily public life. I never had problems with my mother tongue, my public language, with Romanian...

I.R.: Didn't you discuss publicly or among close friends, not necessarily *Țigan*, but these different identity problems?

N.G.: During my university years almost never. My classmates never called me *Țigan*, and I never talked about me as a *Țigan*.

I.R.: But later on, at the institute?

N.G.: At the sociology institute, step by step, starting with the second half of the 1970s... Maybe some of my colleagues presumed, but they never said anything disrespectful to me. I took the "*Țigan* problem" as a subject for my research. I needed several years, I told you that it was easier for me to say it in English: "I am a Gypsy" than to say it in Romanian: "*Sunt țigan*". I needed some time to be able to say that. So, in order to say it in Romanian, to a Romanian interlocutor, I needed about 10 years. Even now I don't feel completely safe emotionally while talking in Romanian with a Romanian, to say that I am a *Țigan*. Even now, when I am talking to you in Romanian too. This word is so full of pain. I didn't heal myself. It was easier for me to say it in English: "Gypsy" or in French *tsigane*... It was simpler, because they weren't lived languages, but trade languages (as I mentioned before), they were in exchange, a way to communicate. It was and it is easier for me to say in Romanian that I am Roma.

I.R.: When did you start using the Roma word in public life, as you are doing now?

N.G.: It was during the second half of the 1990s when the Minister of Foreign Affairs proposed a memorandum²⁹ to the Romanian Government, which recommended that state institutions use the word *Țigan* and not Roma. I then protested regarding the denomination of *Țigan*. A word imposed through on administrative act...

In my consciousness a vivid reaction took place and, then together with Vasile Ionescu, and other friends, much younger activists, we rallied the others. People perceived it as something artificial, the very name of Roma that I claimed, as a protest against the attempt to be labelled as *Țigan* through an administrative act, coming from a government institution, so with a dominant position in society. I think that through our action then, we succeeded in promoting the designation as Roma in public communication, especially in Romania but also for example in the CoE. But critics started to say that these activists (meaning us), we were not real Roma: or that one should spell Roma with a double r.³⁰

29 This is Memorandum MAE nr. H03/169 January 31st, 1995.

30 See the article Nicolae Gheorghe, Ian Hancock, and Marcel Courthiade, "Rroms ou tsiganes? Quelques commentaries sur l'ethnonyme du peuple rromani", *Etudes tsiganes* Number 5 (1995).

I.R.: And this made you more relaxed regarding your doubts about ethnic identification?

N.G.: I tried to rehabilitate as Roma, especially through public action, because I never, even now, I never felt safe from the emotional point of view to say in Romanian that I am a *Țigan*. On the other hand, I discovered at a certain moment (during recent years) that it is alienating to mystify myself as Roma, as long as I do not live according to Roma law; that is, a cultural law, a law of some specific social forms. I say again: there are rules of marriage, rules of behaviour, rules of symbolic cleanliness, a moral approach in Roma law, in the descendants' law, only constituted in social forms, in history, as institutions in a sociological sense.

I.R.: But what would be the implication of your (non)clarifications for the other, for Roma politics, that you discussed in your texts, including in your talks with András Biró, regarding the project on the book that you wish to publish?

N.G.: What we discuss and try to do relates to the abstract Roma, the political Roma, Roma as citizen in a state of law, Roma as a European citizen, Roma as a constitutive people of the European Union... all these are still works in progress, open structures, perceived by many Roma and non-Roma as artificial forms. But let's not forget that the European Union of 'political peoples' and not only of nation-states is still a work in progress.

I.R.: But there are already a lot of mutations among the traditional Roma too - changes of customs and practices among the traditional Roma.

N.G.: Of course there are. Similarly, in the globalisation context, a lot of partial, local identities are under threat and 'obvious' identities, like for example the Romanian identity, may change or even disappear. These identities, even some national identities, feel threatened, no matter the nation state, the language, the institutionalised culture... Here, in Italy, some inhabitants and politicians from Northern Italy are claiming a distinct identity as *padani*; and a speaker of the daily language of Napoli is not always accepted, let's say, in Milan, as a 'real Italian.'

When I go for medical treatment, if I tell the other patients or the sanitary staff in Salerno that I am from Romania,

using, with my Romanian accent, the bit of Italian that I know... many don't believe me, and say that I am an Arab. What I want to say is that language is not sufficient for an ethno-political identification, in the sense of the 19th and 20th century idea of "a language, a territory, a nation-state". In this new context of 21st century postmodern globalisation this concept might explode at a certain moment, due to its internal contradictions, because it is an artificial construct. The word, the ethnonym *Rumanian*, yes because the *Rumanian* had a social history, a certain connotation in local communities, and it is said as such in the main European languages such as: *les Roumaines*... The Rumanian, ...*gli Rumeni*, *die Rumanien*, *Rumun* in the Slavic languages... or *o Vlabo*, *o Rumuntzō*, in Romani...

The word Romanian is an artificial creation, an invention of a philologist, Dimitrie Philippide³¹ around the end of the 18th century. It is similar to what Mr Prigoană says about us, that the word, the saying, *Roma* is artificial, being just an invention of Roma activists after 1990. Returning to our discussion... if I am constantly in a dialogue with death, I would like to die as a *human* or as a *Țigan*, but I couldn't die as a *Roma*. Meaning that I am not, I can't qualify as a Roma and I feel more complete and more comfortable as a *Țigan* in the Romanian vernacular of the term: whether I want it or not, because of the way I was brought up, this word is closer to me, like the saying: "the shirt is nearer to the skin."³²

I.R.: Although you refused it all your life...

N.G.: I refused it explicitly, but I deeply internalised it, and now in my old age, when all censorship comes back, like parents, while dreaming, the word *Țigan* is more comfortable, nearer to my skin than the word *Roma* which for me has a civic identity. In our case, in your case, in my case, there is no ethnic identity from 'nature' and birth as there is for the traditional Roma, from the descendants, the guilds or the clans which we talked about. We started, in our conversation, to talk about how to build ourselves and maybe how to participate in the building of Roma as a *political people*; that is, as people with a civic identity, an ethno-political one inside the space of the human rights of citizenship, with rights and obligations established through laws and through the institutions of political democracy, both in national politics and within the EU, etc. This is the beginning of the manifesto that I would propose to some

31 Dimitrie Philippide, a historian and philologist, published a History of Romania in 1800 and a Geography of Romania in 1816 in Leipzig.

32 The Romanian saying is "cămașa e mai aproape de piele".

interested people who would be capable of elaborating it better through debates and public actions. Others may say no! But they can't resist this idea.

I.R.: What would be the counterarguments?

N.G.: Because through the discussions about civil space, human rights, the liberty to be Roma (in the sense we are discussing it), some Roma and non-Roma, they simply feel the civil and political as being on the one hand artificial and on the other hand quite 'dangerous': it is like a threat to the group control that the traditional Roma have over the members of their group, for example men's control over women and children; or it could be a threat to the ethnic-electoral monopoly, as it is practiced through the present mechanism regarding national minority representation, on the level of democratic institutions in Romania; or, for others, it is as if we were organising a new political entity, not only as a political party, but also under forms of a sort of political radicalism... It can also even be a state at a certain moment - not a classic state, with territory and frontiers, but a state according to the postmodern era, with no territory, a virtual political entity, in a very changed world made possible by electronic communication and new ways to rally political support, different from the 19th, 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century... In this field there is room for a political utopia, for you and your generation of activists, for the next generation, consisting of better prepared youngsters, who will travel more, are more unsatisfied with this world, the world which is organised in a way familiar to us.

I.R.: Ok, ok...there is a problem: how do you build something with a meaning for people in the community, not for academics and the over-qualified, educated at fantastic schools, while keeping the humanist values?

N.G.: Because we have used the word *Țigan* another more subtle specification is needed: until 1995, we the activists, we didn't have a problem identifying as *Țigan* because we called those we had contact with *Țigan*. We called ourselves both *Țigan* and Roma. The designation of the ethnic group wasn't a priority although the great majority of associations established by us at the beginning of the 1990s had the phrase "of the Roma" in their names. But we succeeded in implementing our basic programme; for example, in the case of FER we reconstructed houses in several places where violent conflicts had taken place, and there was a programme

of sanitary education for people from the towns of Mihail Kogălniceanu and Vălenii Lăpușului, in Maramureș, and even Hădăreni, where we started something.

In these activities we can find the origins, for example, of the sanitary mediator programmes and those of the school mediator, or the origins of 'the project' as a series of actions at the local level (and not mainly as an administrative-financial act). We always wished to bring something to the people in the field. These conflicts, which brought attention to local tensions, gave us the chance; I instrumentalised them, using them from the ethno-political point of view, I said they look like pogroms, and some didn't agree at that time, they stepped back, frighten by my language at the time...but I brought something to the people in the field.

I.R.: You have been perceived as an agitator.

N.G.: Perceived as an agitator. I was a traitor, of the Roma and of the Romanians, because I was talking about a *pogrom*, in Romania, at the very beginning of the 1990s.

I.R.: Of Romania for sure.

N.G.: Yes, but not only... That is why they kidnapped me the so-called: Bobu Nicolae - Stoica Octavian... maybe with the discreet involvement of Cioabă, the old one. I said to myself: "Oh, my God, this guy is a spy. Firstly he is not a real Roma, and not even a real *Țigan*. He is a spy, a *gadjo* dyed... etc."

I.R.: There were other conflicts or disputes between Roma activists, the most recent one being between Păun and Florin Cioabă, when Păun asked Cioabă to justify how his family got all their gold. How could such disputes be explained through traditional values like *pakiv* and *pakivale*?

N.G.: None of us, civic activists like me or you, and not even Păun, the politician, would obey such rules. The rule of the *pakivale Roma* is a descendants' rule, of the Roma tribe (in an anthropological and a sociological sense it is an alternative to the state organisation). *Pakiv* and *pakivale* are found only in descendants, and *vișă*/guild Roma, social organisations based on kin relationships. Your first loyalty is towards your descendants, towards the clan. Outside it the word *pakivale* and the moral-behavioural values associated, do not exist, they have no sense. One of the opposite concepts to *pakiv* is *shyness* as a behavioural guide and role model which is well spread both in Romania and in Balkan societies, or sometimes even in Italy.

Then the question arises: “can you build civic and political identity on *shyness* or *pakin*?” - meaning answering a question similar to Kant’s: is a politics only for the Roma possible in the civic sense and is it possible for you as a civic activist to be a *pakivalo*? My quick answer is: no, or not yet!

I.R.: How can we build or rebuild the Roma identity?

N.G.: This is the Kantian question; a crisis of conscience needs to be started: how is it possible to be Roma? We have to reconstruct the Roma identity through thinking similarly to the identity-building for Roma in the political and legal fields and so on. From here on the questions I annoy you with in our discussion: in order to wake up from this dogmatic sleep, ethnic naturalist when we say: “I am a *Roma* because I have that pigment through which I am classified by others as being a *Tigan*”. That is what we have to refuse. Out of the need to assert, you internalise the classification made by others, with the whole history of this classification: exclusion, oppression, racism and so on. And not, alternatively, by questioning the historical and social mechanisms which classified Roma thus, and so unfairly and painfully. As long as others classify us, *name* us, it is to our disadvantage, it is an act of racism. Similarly, when we try to categorise others, for example the *gadjo*/the non-Roma, we apply the system that otherwise we reject: we are exclusivist, intolerant, even racist. The paradox is that to some Roma activists the exclusivist element starts to dominate. See the recent dispute when X and Y³³ think that all Romanians are racists. They say that X, Y being victims, this gives them the right to say anything. These attitudes are also consequences of non-critical thinking, as are all preconceived ideas.

I.R.: From this perspective I see the intellectual project with Roma as emancipatory in the sense of being able to overcome this victim-like, victimised discourse when saying: “Look, I am so proud of this and this and this...”.

N.G.: This is for sure a personal attitude, but how could you elaborate it further, within those discussions which occupy the primary position in civic activism nowadays? How should you interpret slavery? How should you interpret deportation? How should you interpret the Holocaust? How should you interpret the sedentary period or the communist one? How should you interpret the situation in post-communist countries? How should you interpret the symbols of the cultural

nation of Roma, as they were launched at the congress in London, in 1971: the International Roma Day, the flag of the Roma? How should you interpret the Roma coming here, to Italy? The migration from the East to the West?

I noticed that during the talk tonight, quite ironically, automatically, I said that I am guilty, because I contributed to the idea that all Roma are mainly victims: of racism, of poverty and so on. I’ve understood that better since being here, in Italy: this discourse justifies the practice of philanthropic associations, assistance: we have to help the nomads because they are poor, etc. This discourse and this practice does not help to elaborate the Roma emancipation platform in the sense that you are talking about. Of course some of the Roma coming here are willing to be helped, to be perceived as victims. I stop there, and I do not want to simplify the issue because it is more complex. I will go back to your question: on what can you build trust in yourself, in order to trust later on in others? In order to generate a relationship based on trust you need to trust yourself. And you will go back to the words *pakin*, *pakivalo*... to the values, the rules, the preferences and interdictions culturally constructed as some of the cultural practices of the descendants of Roma. Is a translation of some of the values and the cultural practices in the language of civic activism possible?

I.R.: Exactly, the change and the emancipation will come from inside.

N.G.: If you rely on self-hatred and self-victimisation you can’t make any progress. In our conversation or when talking with others you have to remain stuck in the status of a victim, to invent yourself continuously as a victim, to project yourself in this way, to make out of a victim a political paradigm, or from victims a unit of measurement, with which one can analyse contemporary issues. One of the messages that I wished to convey, through my text for the project *The Price of Roma Integration* is that in order to assert as a Roma you don’t need to reinvent yourself as a victim, a victim of racism and preconceived ideas. You may be Roma without being a victim. You may be Roma and assume the history of Roma, the personal history of Roma, without seeing just past suffering. In the end, being Roma is also a victory, of surviving in history, so it should be celebrated. Of course, that doesn’t mean denying the periods and episodes of oppression, of individual or collective persecution, or putting

³³ The mentioned debate took place on an e-group. Since the persons involved were not asked to give us permission to use their names, we preferred to keep their anonymity and use letters.

them into brackets; you have to place them in a specific historic context, measure them, according to other means of oppression, domination, exploitation...

I.R.: There is still a moral landmark in the way we approach the Holocaust, the deportation, what happened then should stay as a moral landmark.

N.G.: It stays as a moral landmark, as something that should be well-documented. Many people talk about the Holocaust, without knowing what really happened, meaning the Roma deportation, without knowing how they were deported. Who were the deported? What was the dynamic, the mechanism, the policy, the deportation administration? Otherwise everything becomes a slogan. Let me give an example, regarding the interpretation of another moment in the life of the Roma. In August 2007, I think, I was invited to a reunion of the Adventist Roma, *Gabori*; I was in a panel. An activist for the human rights of Roma gave a presentation about slavery. My colleague was intrigued that the audience, *Gabori* Roma near Târgu Mureş, wasn't interested in our speech, us being educated in Bucharest.

Then we talked among ourselves, the protagonists of the meeting: how can we talk to some *Gabor* Roma from Transylvania, about historical experiences, of life, of slavery, which was the legal and social status of the Roma in Valahia and Moldavia? Many of the *Gabor* Roma always succeeded in maintaining an economic autonomy based on entrepreneurship, because they found a niche for handicraft and/or trade; in a way they consider themselves aristocrats (by way of wealth and dignity) in contrast with other Roma; their fortune was made with dignity and has nothing to do with *Țigan* oppression or their *Țigan* complex, as in the other two principalities.³⁴

I.R.: They succeeded even during the socialist economy, the centralised one...

N.G.: Yes, but I go back to my example from local histories. They are very proud to be "*Gabor* with hats". In some interpretations of the young and educated, they consider it a privilege received, inherited from Gabor Bethlen, Prince of Transylvania.³⁵ They were permitted to wear hats made

out of cloth while others, such as Romanian peasants from Transylvania, were only allowed to wear mouton fur caps. They had cloth hats during the Middle Ages, when everything was codified, hierarchical; the clothes were a privilege they got, as their leaders say, from the Prince, because they were making cauldrons and weapons. They are people who in their personality didn't internalise preconceived ideas or stereotypes, not even discrimination, as I had internalised it, being born in a family of house *Țigan*, descendants of *Țigan* slaves from Câmpia Valahă.

So to talk to them about slavery and to say that Roma in general, including them, the *Gabor* Roma, had been slaves, didn't make sense to them. We are trying to build a history, generalising or totalising the experience of slavery for the whole Roma population, ignoring the fact that the contemporary Romanian state was built out of various provinces or states – Wallachia, the country of Făgăraş, Székely Land, etc – with different economic and social histories. A totalising history is a first step to totalitarianism, and this applies in the case of Roma too.

I.R.: Could we say the same about the Holocaust?

N.G.: How do we treat the issue of the Holocaust? How can we internalise in our memory, build a memory, an identity – in which persecution and suffering are important moments - without victimising ourselves for eternity? Before 1990 I had the privilege of discussing this issue with people who had been deported, during those years when there was no chance of compensation. Some of them wished to underline how they 'managed' even then and how they survived while others died. I quote from memory: "We had a good life then. We didn't die - it was quite OK because we discovered a food store... We used others, we took their gold"... It was an oral history... how should I put it? It was an oral history. .. It wasn't built ideologically as we are doing today; there was no documentation or serious discussion about complicated and sensitive historical moments.

These random opinions collected by me don't minimise the gravity of the genocide politics practiced by the authorities between 1942 and 1944, towards Roma, especially

34 Until the mid-19th century there were Principalities of Moldova, Țara Românească (Valachia) and Transylvania. Moldova and Valachia were under Ottoman dominance while Transylvania was part of the Habsburg Empire, the late Austro-Hungarian empire. In 1859 Moldova and Valachia united under the name Romania. Romania became an independent state in 1877. Following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire at the end of World War I, in 1918 Transylvania united with the other principalities.

35 Gábor Bethlen, 1580-1629, was a Calvinist prince of Transylvania and, for a short period, King of Hungary (August 1620 to December 1621).

'nomads'. But listening to these opinions, I think I got it... I mean the roots of the stereotypes that many Roma groups have towards other groups who lived the same traumatic experience of deportation; and/or the very differences between Roma 'ex-nomads' who were deported *en masse*, and the house Roma or Romanised, persecuted only in part because of their ethnicity and mostly on an individual basis within the ethnic group.

My mother barely escaped from the danger of deportation (this happened in Roşiorii de Vede, during the September 8th Fair) and that was while my father was a soldier in the Romanian army, for the whole war; he came back home at the end of the war, in spring 1945. There are some delicate aspects, we can't easily talk about them, simplifying this historic moment. I would like to say that if we could study this subject more and analyse it, we could better understand why different groups of Roma, from different areas of the country, respond so differently to the appeals to ethnic unity, to self-declare as Roma.

The memory that the families have suffered and survived deportation was conveyed to the next generations, up to this day, under certain representations of, as meanings of the identities of *Țigan* or "Roma from a certain group", through shared feelings of a group psychology, of which we, as Roma activists do not have enough knowledge. From my point of view, a large part of Roma activism is still interested in globalising victimisation of the Roma. How can you work with that? How can it be transformed into something else? How much of our life represents the experience of preconceived ideas, frustrations, pains, humiliation, emotions... and then how do you turn them into something else, connected to the emancipation idea, as you say?

I.R. An ex-professor and good friend of mine whose way of thinking deeply influenced me asked me this question: in the history of the Roma there are many experiences which give a certain cohesion to the group, there is a certain solidarity against the enemy, but which are the positive aspects of this cohesion? My answer was based on an historical argument: in a hostile surrounding Roma succeeded in surviving for centuries, while other peoples disappeared. Without having a state, or a church, with no institutions

to protect them, the Roma succeeded in surviving up to now. This is a significant historic element, it is positive for Roma, a source of pride.

N.G.: And who succeeded in the end: the Roma or the *Țigan*?

I.R.: I think that we introduce ourselves as Roma and not as *Țigan*, because the emancipation project is for Roma and not *Țigani*.

N.G.: Whose emancipation project? Who is the political actor presenting this project?

I.R.: The Roma activists.

N.G.: They are *Țigani*. The majority are from *Țigan* families and not from traditional Roma descendants.

I.R.: They define themselves as Roma, they rebrand themselves as Roma.

N.G.: Yes, but they are not necessary recognised as legitimate Roma.

I.R.: It is not a question of legitimacy. When you rebrand something, it is not a question of legitimacy. It is more a question of public relations, of manipulation. Public relations in the communist period meant propaganda.

N.G.: By the way, this is not what I meant with the question: Who succeeded? I consider, and this is my obsession, that part of the Roma elite, meaning us, representing the political electorate of Roma, and influencing public discourse, and the symbols of individualisation and representation, we are in a deep crisis, because we are also manipulators, even sly. Our success in the world of the non-Roma disconnected us from the Roma world. We don't have a common language with them, with the Roma descendants, from the local communities. More and more people notice this, and that is why they reinvented the traditional leaders: *bulibașă*,³⁶ *crisinitori*,³⁷ *vaida*³⁸ etc.

I.R.: One of the factors explaining the inefficiency of Roma activists in controlling or self-controlling the community

36 A traditional Roma leader in a community, especially in regions which were formerly in the Ottoman Empire.

37 Roma that were highly regarded by the community and entrusted by them to judge certain cases or disputes inside Roma communities.

38 Traditional Roma leaders in communities in regions which were formerly part of the Habsburg Empire.

is connected to the paradoxical situation that you wish to change a profoundly non-democratic society, a community, through democratic means.

N.G.: As András Biró says in his text, the ethnic community based on blood relations is pre-modern, hierarchical and patriarchal. We can't be democratic in a medieval society. Us, András, me... we believe that through civic associations we can create the premises of a democratic behaviour, a democratic literacy.

I.R.: You are right. You can create some reflexes and customs which are transferable to the political world.

N.G. Even in those communities which do not have such a practice and which are oppressed?

I.R.: Unfortunately, I realise that Roma organisations are far from being able to fulfil this function.

N.G.: Our lack of success or our failure is due to a success we had. We had a quicker and surer, a stimulating success, in the world of the non-Roma: in governmental institutions, in political parties, in foundations, in international organisations and so on. Our energy was oriented to the easiest direction and enjoyed immediate success. Me as a person, I have a responsibility because I illustrated this as a role model for example: through my activity of lobbying within inter-governmental organisations. But we didn't succeed in getting our ideas, our victories, on the international level to the local level; some of us disconnected from the Roma communities, which continue to be dominated by non-democratic authoritarian leaders, sometimes even outside the law. We, as successful activists, we can't communicate with such leaders.

I.R.: As Roma activists we enjoyed the situation, living in an illusory world: "Oh, my God, we are so important that these non-Roma institutions are accepting us".

N.G.: That comes from the fact that we were more easily acknowledged as Roma by the audience and less so in the community, especially because you can't legitimise yourself as a Roma in a Roma community. There are some criteria that we don't fulfil. That is why we run to the world where we knew success and were accepted as Roma. No questions asked, like: "Why are you Roma?" "We are Roma because we wish to be". "If you wish to... You are Mister Rom, you are Madame Romi, you are Signor Nomado,

I notice you, but I used you. I use you because you are a Roma, and I can be as well."

I.R.: That actually happened.

N.G.: That is what I want to tell you. We do not have a clear criterion for affiliation or exclusion. Anybody can become Roma.

I.R.: We have also been used because they (non-Roma and non-Roma institutions) need to legitimise, to justify. They used us and we also used them.

N.G.: If you can access resources by playing the Roma card then it is considered acceptable, because at a certain moment we are all Roma! Maybe we'll manage better during the next step of the emancipation process for Roma, during the setting up of the ethno-political structure, the self-determination of the Roma as a political people. We haven't yet succeeded in having 1,000 Roma civic associations or their federation based on a shared interest, clearly defined and accepted through a common platform, through a social contract in an explicit formula, through a peace treaty between us, firstly, but also with European society, Romania included.

We have in Romania, now, at least 1,000 people working daily in associations, in electoral organisations (with their pluses and minuses) in public administration, in schools, etc. The issue of the denomination Roma versus *Țigani* could come up again "as a matter for consideration" in the near future. This controversy isn't over yet just because of the rejection of Mr Prigoană's initiative, (due only to technical reasons, because of an interpretation of parliamentary procedure).

After this, the conversation will start again. Then I try to imagine a protest by 1,000 Roma activists and active citizens from other segments and layers of society, of the lawful state of Romania: majorities and minorities from different ethnic groups, intellectuals and clerks from the public administration, activists from Romanian civil society and why not from other countries too. Besides the protests (already routine) expressed through press conferences, seminars and debates, messages on the Internet, we could imagine a civic rally, with the slogan: "Revolt and you will be free!" Imagine such a moment! Dreaming on I would say: Yes, "*et in Arcadia ego*"... I am Roma too, I became Roma!