The Education of Roma and Gypsy people in Hungary
The Gandhi High School – an outstanding and controversial attempt of Romani education

“As the communist regime collapsed the East European educational elites declared they want to follow and emulate the ‘western patterns’.”

(http://www.iskolakultura.hu/iol/iol2007_1_47-53.pdf). This notion brought about many changes e.g.: the change of the political regime in 1989 with which Hungary became from a communist country to a democratic republic. However, those people who were in communist political parties remained in power, they just changed the name of their party. Nevertheless Hungary stepped on a road of change and development. On May 1st, 2004 Hungary became part of the European Union, starting from 2005 introduced a new secondary school leaving examination process, and in 2006 adopted the Bologna system for higher education (as an EU convention). Unfortunately despite the changes for a more democratic society there are several issues in education: the segregation of Roma people, students with disabilities, and students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. On paper several policies were created to help the situation: the Equal Opportunity Funding Policy for public education, and recently since 2007 a new admission system to higher education. Hungary offers extra points to under-represented social groups in the admission process: to those aged over 25, pregnant girls or young mothers, low-income family’s offsprings, orphans, students with disabilities – and other disadvantaged youth.
In this paper I would like to focus on the situation of Roma and Gypsy minority students in the educational system, on the secondary educational level to see how much chance they have to further their education and continue in college and what would their enrollment mean in terms of their personal future, the future of the reputation of their minority and generally the whole country. There is a need for a radical social change as the tension and gap are inversely proportionally growing between Hungarian non-gypsy and Roma/Gypsy while the whole country’s economy is being on the edge of a breakdown threatening all, but especially the lower-middle and poorest social classes to which the majority of Roma/Gypsy belong. I will describe the status of Roma teenagers in the Hungarian educational system and will show an example of an ethnic secondary institution, the Gandhi High School in Pecs, and their attempt to bring about positive social change for the Hungarian gypsies.

**The “Roma problem” in Hungary**

The issue of Roma integration is nothing new in Hungary. The sophisticated scholarly discourse of the integration of this ethnic minority has been going on since 1989 and is a never-ending debate. It is emphasized that an extensive social integration is needed and obviously education is one of the main tools to bring it about.

The current atmosphere in Hungary is miserable. The country is suffering from the consequences of the latest economic crisis; unemployment, financial instability etc. There is a huge national debt for which partly the previous government’s administration is blamed as they misused the EU funds, and partly- as it is usual in an unstable country- the poorest people are blamed who live off public subsidies. Among the poorest people are the Roma/gypsy people, who are approximately 8-10% of the total population of the country. As the public dissatisfaction is growing the nation has found its scapegoat: the Roma population. In the recent years negative
Stereotypes of Roma have strengthened and a new Hungarian national movement emerged into a nationalist political party the Jobbik (meaning: the right wing, and can also be interpreted as “the better ones”). Many declare that the integration failed. The government acts inconsistently about the issue holding very unproductive meetings on discussing to improve the status of the biggest minority while whenever there is an issue that they want to cover up (e.g.: the question of the not anymore free-press that has been criticized all over the world) they bring up the Roma issue fueling discrimination and public displeasure against them.

At the same time the EU urges Hungary (and other countries where Roma is a significant minority e.g.: Romania, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Check republic Italy, France) to do something about the “Roma problem”. There are several programs to address the issue:

- In the EU: in 2008 a Roma Platform was established by the European Commission

Although the international cooperation to promote Roma inclusion is laudable, the fact that they are considered as a “problem” is already a sign of oppression and the dehumanization of this group. How do we expect them to react when they are the subordinated group and they are told to be a problem in their village, in their school, in the healthcare system, and in the neighboring countries too? “Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building.” (Freire, p 65.) The radical nationalists say that the Roma people are lazy and stupid and just passively await to be saved, on the other hand those Roma people who try to make a living are not given support, are discriminated against, and usually fail (e.g.: a gypsy person is turned down at a job
interview with the excuse that the position has been filled while the next day there are still interviews and it is obvious that they are not wanted for the job because of the negative stereotypes of the gypsies work ethic)

I do not want to deny that there is a problem, but the problem should not be personalized and projected onto the Roma, because it was not created by them. And it does not only concern them, it is everybody’s concern. The sense of uselessness in society discourages them to even try to do better and it escalates the real problem: the social exclusion of Roma people.

**Historical context and the social-economic status of the roma/gypsy minority**

**History**

Gypsy people are present in our country’s history since the 14th century. They originally came from India, in form of several nomadic travelling tribes. They were more or less tolerated until the end of the 17th century among the other diverse ethnic groups who also spoke different dialects of the language e.g: Toth, Paloc, Szasz and Slavic tribes. In the 18th century Maria-Theresa Austro-Hungarian empress took “measures forcing the Roma to give up their ways of life…to do away with an ‘uncontrollable nuisance’ and to transform so called ‘unproductive’ parts of the population into ‘respectable, obedient and diligent people’.

(http://romani.uni-graz.at/rombase/cgi-bin/art.cgi?src=data/hist/modern/maria.en.xml)

The aggressive assimilation of gypsies meant that they were deprived of using their former means of transportation and this lead them to lose their jobs as travelling repairman/ tub-makers, or merchants selling their handmade goods, playing music and other typical gypsy jobs. Maria-Theresa thought she solved the issue by giving them a land and seeds but as gypsies were not used to the settled lifestyle and did not know how to work on the fields. Maria-Theresa
unwillingly created the first unemployed generation of gypsies and the greatest stereotype of gypsies making them seem useless and barbarian as they were forced to ‘civilize’ settle and fit in a society according based on extraneous values that they did not have in their culture. As Eisntein said: “…if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.” (http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/101458-everybody-is-a-genius-but-if-you-judge-a-fish) This is exactly what happened and what is happening to a whole nation. Unemployment has remained the greatest issue of the Roma/Gypsy ethnic groups and for our nation too ever since.

This stigma later on also led to the massacre of Roma people during the Second World War when they were deported along with the Jews to concentration camps. The Roma Holocaust is still not recognized by a lot of people and is also missing from our history books, or it is only mentioned in the footnotes. During the years of communism everybody had to work, so they were also employed, but mostly had seasonal jobs or low-paid factory jobs for which they did not need education. In the communist era one did not necessarily had to have a degree to work and they had no aspirations to educate themselves. Coming from their history and culture they did not need education. This gave ground to the stereotype that they are stupid. Their lack of education became a greater obstacle after the change of the political regime in 1989 when capitalism and the free market gave space for competition. Factories closed and layoffs mainly affected them. They became the unemployed unwanted strata again.

Rhetoric

In 1993 “Law on the Rights of National and Ethnic Minorities” was created and Gypsies were officially declared to be an ethnic minority, which is a significant step because it gave the legal basis for many private and civic/nonprofit organizations, lawyers and lobbyists to speak up
for them. They are an ethnic minority not a national one because they do not have their own country.

“All recognized minorities are entitled to establish Minority Self-Governments (MSGs), which provide wide cultural autonomy for minorities and primarily handle cultural and educational affairs. The president of each MSG also has the right to speak at and attend local government assemblies. The Act, which includes prohibitions against assimilation, discrimination and harassment, makes the provision of minority-language classes compulsory when demanded by more than eight children. The state is obliged to support cultural activities of minorities, and local bodies are instructed to make official documents and street names bilingual in areas of minority settlement. “. (www.minorityrights.org) In light of all this the reality is rankling. They have been considered Hungarian citizens since the 18th century. It was not polite to point out that someone is Roma or Gypsy. In some aspects they used to be or still are a taboo. It is just common knowledge that someone is a gypsy; you can see from their darker skin, the way they dress or talk, and other characteristics. They are called “You-know-who”, the ‘group C’, and have several other mock names that originate from the times of Maria-Theresa, such as: “new Hungarians” or “new farmers”. Not a lot of people know it Hungary that there are different groups of Gypsies; cigany/gypsy as the Beas call themselves(archaic Romanian gypsy tribe who speak the Beas language), the Olah group (known as thieves), and romani or romungro as Hungarian Roma. Around 1993 it became important to talk about them.

*Roma* in the official rhetoric was established as a politically correct name for them as the word ‘cigany’ or gypsy had got so many negative connotations overtime that it became a swearword, so they tried to use a not so well know, neutral word to be able to talk about them. The etymological origin or roma is *rom-* that means people in the romani language. Gypsy comes from the greek word “ατσιγανος” which means “untouchables” parallel to lowest social caste in India. (http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magyarorsz%C3%A1gi_cig%C3%A1nyok) I usually use Roma/Gypsy to talk about them, because the Beas group takes offence if they are called Roma and the other groups take offence if they are called cigany. Some of my gypsy friends say that it
does not matter for them which version is used; they can feel from a person’s tone how they mean the words.

We have to admit Roma and Gypsy as a phrase is not neutral in the common talk. This way it is still a taboo. Despite the fact that they are born to be Hungarian citizens and are recognized as an official minority, they do not feel safe to declare that they are Roma. To protect personality rights in the census it is optional to declare that you are Roma/Gypsy. People are afraid that they would be discriminated. It is a stigma at school and workplace as well. Thus it is hard to find statistics that show the Roma enrollment or dropout rate in schools as we can only approximately predict their number to be around 750,000. (Some educational date can be found that I will reference later.)

Nowadays apart from the politically correct language, the nationalist party proudly and deliberately uses the Roma/Gypsy as an attributive adjective:

“Hungarian Guard, a right-wing extremist group, which has made much news dressing up in paramilitary outfits recalling the Nazi era, ranting about “safeguarding national culture and traditions” and marching on a village against what it said was Romany crime there.”(http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/arts/design/06roma.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0)

Roma attitude to the educational system and the educational system`s attitude to the Roma

It is generally not a merit in the gypsy community if someone has a degree. First it was not needed for them in the when they did their own business and later. Secondly (because nowadays it is needed) it is a “Gadjo” (i.e.: non-Romani) thing, alien from their culture and against the philosophy of Romanipen (Romani spirit). In the gypsy culture they scorn the ones who advance in their education, bully and outcast them from their community. - Exceptions are the musician gypsies who pay a lot to get professional musical education.- Generally they have the assumption that educated people are mean and look down on them, so all in all getting educated and being a good student is not applauded in the gypsy community. They see vulpine
and wily to be their greatest value as they have a great tradition tricking people, and evade the law, but they do not need school for that. They tend have an issue with authority; teachers, officers, policemen etc. When it comes to rules they have their own unspoken rules that they inherently know or learn (sort of scamp-honor but they are only loyal to each other, rarely) which can overrule the other laws. One common stereotype of them is that they are not trustworthy.

If someone from the Gypsy community gets highly educated it usually results in his alienation from the community. Educated gypsies can successfully get to the higher levels of education deny their gypsy background to fit in the society and they break away or very often the community excludes them because they culturally become Gadjos. Either way, the connection is broken and they do not help each other. It is somewhat similar to the impact of colonizing education. Unfortunately this is an addition to the many factors that are already holding Roma/Gypsy children from school. Other reasons why Roma/Gypsy children fall behind according to the findings of the EUMAP (p.15-18), and Budapest Institue’s study on” School quality and segregation in Hungary” are:

- the family pulling the child back, no positive example from the parents side, no role model, no perspective or goals for the future
- lack of resources i.e.: no books or pens/pencils at home, visible signs of poverty such as dirty and smelly clothes
- lack of kindergarten socialization: getting into conflict with peers, wanting to play instead of studying, bad behavior –no manners, the school`s language is foreign to the children
- Bullying: is an issue for both sides. Gypsy children say that they are often discriminated by their peers, while non-gypsy students say that they are threatened, beaten or robbed by the gypsy children at school.
- Teachers are not prepared to deal with the disadvantages of Roma or they are also discriminating
- Segregation / homogenous environment
- Cultural difference in temperament, values, ways of communication that teachers and other non-Roma students are not prepared to face before going to school.

Although it is not easy to find educational data of the Roma population in Hungary there are a few charts that show interesting facts.

Table: Tendency of Roma people taking the school leaving exam vs. the total population
Here we can see that there is a general growing tendency of the Hungarians finishing 12 grades and closing it with a so called ‘Maturity exam’, the completion rates are very low for Roma people.

According to the Country Assessment of the “Roma Education Fund’s Strategic Directions” data of 2002/2003 it has shown that after primary education 8.1% of Roma students
do not continue school, 63.8% of them continue in short term vocational school and only 5.9% of students go to highs school. (“Advancing Education of Roma in Hungary” p. 41-43. 
http://www.romadecade.org/5044) In case of the Gandhi High School we will see an excerpt from those 5.9 %.

“Natural segregation”

“Segregation is officially illegal in Hungary; however, research indicates that the separation of Roma children into segregated schools and classes has been on the rise over the past 15 years. Roma are overrepresented in schools and classes for children with intellectual disabilities, and evidence suggests that this is largely due to flaws in assessment procedures; Roma children are also frequently placed in segregated classes at otherwise mixed schools, where they are likely to study a remedial or ‘catch-up’ curriculum.” (EUMAP p.15) 
Bad students (associated with the Roma) pull back good students (the non-Roma) and teachers cannot deal with the multiple disadvantages that come with Roma students. The growing number of Roma children has a negative influence on the school’s reputation and the enrollment rates drop. Non-gypsy parents take their children to other schools even if it is in another town. Good teachers leave do not want to teach at places like this. The school either becomes a factory producing functional analphabets with a the teachers only doing administrative paperwork.

“School segregation is tightly correlated with the geographical / housing segregation of ethnic and social groups. There are around a hundred (cca. 3%) settlements in Hungary which have irrevocably turned into poor-Gypsy ghettos and a further two hundred settlements are on a seemingly unstoppable course to becoming ghettos.” (Budapest Institut, p.4

Thus segregation is not only done institutionally by the government but it is more like a natural phenomenon, a migration of the middle class people, physically leaving the Gypsies behind.

**Program: Gandhi High School**

The Gandhi High School in Pécs, Hungary (in Romani language: Gandhi Mashkarutni Shkola ando Pech), was founded in1992 to be the first high school for Hungary`s largest ethnic
minority group, the Roma and Gypsy people. The school was named after the Mahatma Gandhi, to emphasize the Indian origin of Gypsy tribes and the values of tolerance and non-violence.

“Our goal is to educate young gypsies to be open-minded, eager to learn, to own a sense of belonging to their origins and mother tongue, furthermore to provide the same quality in education to gypsy students as their non-gypsy peers get, and to give them the possibility to learn in a safe environment of their own people just like other ethnic groups in Hungary” - states former principal Erika Csovcsics. (Translated from Hungarian http://gandhi.dravanet.hu/beiskolazas.php)

The idea to create a Romani school emerged in 1990 but after the change of the political regime the government was yet unable to provide solutions for bigger social problems, e.g. for the education of disadvantaged minority children. In 1991 a famous Hungarian millionaire’s fund, the Soros Foundation gave the first push to the project in the form of 1 million 400 thousand HUF (Hungarian forints ~ $6500) to the Gandhi Fundation’s pedagogy workshop that covered a full-time scholarship for 4 experts- Derdák Tibor, Bogdán János, Orsós Anna, Vörös István- to create the plan for a minority high school. In 1993 the Gandhi Foundation received further grants: 21.500.000 HUF (~ $100.000) financial support from the Soros Foundation and could start its first year in 1994. George Soros was generous in other ways too. In the beginning he hired extra teachers to “homeschool” and tutor Gandhi students during school breaks and holidays in order to prepare them for University- says Erika Csovcsics former principal of the Gandhi school in an interview. (http://www.ambedkar.hu/gandhi-gimnazium/) Despite the great support Gandhi received from foundations and the good reviews of scholars and a positive reassuring behavior of foreign experts, the city of Pecs did not embrace the Gandhi School for a long time, it is also shown by the fact that the school building is located in lower-middle class neighborhood in the outskirts of the town instead of being in the city center. One of the founders Janos Bogdan said: “A lot of people were watching what we do but very few supported.” (http://www.ambedkar.hu/gandhi-gimnazium/)
Things have surprisingly changed recently. According to the article of the independent Hungarian media, Index, in 2011 the Gandhi High School Public Benefit Nonprofit Organization was established. It is in 90% owned by the state of Hungary and in 10% by the local government of Pecs. Since 20th April 2012 the organization`s CEO is Bertalan Virag. This is a great achievement because it secures the financial status of the Gandhi High School as opposed to previous years when the school had to rely on occasional funds from the Hungarian government, the EU and individual donations. It is a little bit strange tough that the Hungarian government owns a nonprofit and runs a school through it. Nevertheless they hope for the best that they can continue to provide high quality education for Roma and Gypsy youth and help the (http://index.hu/belfold/2012/04/20/lemondott_a_pecsi_gandhi_gimnazium_igazgatoja/) Gandhi High School is different from other Hungarian schools in several aspects. First of all this is the first school in which Roma or Gypsy youth are welcomed and desired as it was especially designed for them to be able to learn in an environment where they really felt like home. It is visible on the pictures that the school building was decorated by the students’ drawings and vivid pictures of encouraging Beas or Lovari (romani language) quotations are painted on the wall. Students who are from villages are offered a place at a the school`s nearby dormitory where they get to live together with the others and make friendships for life. After the lessons are over life goes on in the Dorm: there are several extracurricular activities, clubs that the first students established and current students can join and maintain, so there is a sense of ownership of the place and respect for the activities done by everyone. As it is also seen in the youtube videos the favorite activity of students is to sing in the choir, or just jam, make music together with friends after school.
The school is also special in terms of methodology. Teachers work with more interactive methods, almost no banking education is used because they are committed to making a home-like atmosphere. Students are given personal attention. During classes they often sit in a circle or move around, and use a lot of non-formal and informal learning methods, group discussions etc. It is also unique that they learn a lot about Gypsy and Romani culture, which is very important because in Hungary 90% the Roma people do not speak their language anymore and do not know anything about their own cultural heritage. It often happens that they first hear about their history at school and they start learning the Romani language (either the Beas or the Lovari dialect) at the age of 14. To gain knowledge about their national traditions is essential for the community because they can discover and convey things that they are proud of, thus it contributes to a healthy ethnic identity.

The teachers who practice at Gandhi are there because they are truly devoted and compassionate about the students and their situation. Some teachers come from abroad e.g.: Glen and Clista Adlings from the United States to teach English. There are frequent school trips and guest speakers are also often invited to give a presentation e.g.: on the EU, or job opportunities, scholarships. Gandhi maintains good relationships with several other NGOs e.g.: the United World Colleges, and Camp Rising Sun, furthermore they have connections to some universities in the US (Northfield Mount Hermon School, MA or Deerfield Academy, MA) to which they occasionally send students to summer school programs or offer other exchange opportunities. In terms of achievements we can see in the videos some examples of graduate students who are now currently finishing university, or are studying abroad. “The first group of pupils who started in 1994 took their school-leaving exam in 2000 and of 18 pupils, 16 have applied to universities and 7 have been taken up. Less than 1% of Roma in Hungary are
university graduates. Although the school is open to all, currently only five non-Roma are enrolled.” (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gandhi_School)

Significance for social change

By providing education on the history and traditions of Beas Gypsy and Roma students can establish a healthier relationship with the community that is famous for pulling them back. Teachers also reach out to families and report that they are actually proud of their children. It may also lead to the establishment of a more positive national identity for Roma people in which they are not the oppressed ones, not the ”useless” and subordinate part of society. It is also essential for the recreation of trust in each other.

“The generosity of the oppressors is nourished by an unjust order, which must be maintained in order to justify that generosity. Our converts, on the other hand, truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust.” (Freire, p. 60)

This is exactly the case in Hungary, the discussions on Roma integration often turn to blaming or making excuses ahead to explain why the project will not work, and planning back-up strategies. These young people have the potential to can change people’s point of view on the Roma and abolish the mutual distrust between Gypsy and non-gypsy people and replace it with cooperation. (http://www.budapesttimes.hu/2011/02/22/hungarys-roma-the-case-for-affirmative-action/)

By performing well on the school-leaving maturity exam they have the chance to move to up on the ‘social class ladder’, get better jobs and provide a higher state of living to their families and better chances for their children’s education.
Finally, the Gandhi High School also inspired other schools, for example the Dr. Ambedkar Buddhist High Schools also offer similar educational opportunities in other parts of Hungary.

One can argue that the Gandhi School is actually segregated, but it does not exclude students with non-Roma backgrounds. It is true that it was designed for Roma and mainly provide for the Roma but it is actually more efficient than other mixed schools. It would be ideal if the integrated schools would work, but as they do not I believe Gandhi offers a great example and solution for Roma kids in Pecs. To sum it up, if everything remains like it is now, future we are facing does not seem very bright. There is a chance that Roma/Gypsy will outnumber the non-Roma Hungarians. Some people predict a civil war. Some say that it will be like in Guatemala and other southern American countries, Hungary will have a dictatorship and we as the minority can also keep the power over the majority. “The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.” (Freire p. 45.) Gypsies would get revenge and Hungarians might become the oppressed. This is why the establishment of peace and equal chances in education should be implemented in our education system.

Works cited:


http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/101458-everybody-is-a-genius-but-if-you-judge-a-fish


http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/06/arts/design/06roma.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0

8. EU Monitoring and Advocacy Program (EUMAP) of the Open Society Institute (OSI) :“Equal Access to Quality Education for Roma” p.15.


13. MTI/Index. “Lemondott a pécsi Gandhi Gimnázium igazgatója”


Other links:
http://www.romadecade.org

Videos worth watching of the Gandhi High School:

I am Roma- chapter 1. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pvZh2zXDvmA

I am Roma-chapter 4. Discrimination http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hAuxY2qmQEA

Working with the Roma people at the Gandhi School
http://www.youtube.com/watch?gl=GB&hl=en-GB&v=toubUCHLCUU