INTRODUCTION
Unexpected Beginnings

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Radost

The Roma neighbourhood is located on the outskirts of the town of Radost, close to an industrial sector. The division and separateness from the rest of the neighbourhoods in Radost are seen from the moment I draw close to the Roma quarter. Structurally, the Roma settlement is not autonomous, but there is a clear spatial delineation between the Roma and non-Roma parts of town. It is as if the main town has retreated to its site and the Roma have created their own site. While there are a few Roma living outside the Roma neighbourhood – mainly in the apartment blocks near the neighbourhood – the majority of Roma live here. There are approximately 1,300 people in the quarter. Doctors and nurses visit rarely, if at all. Teachers visit before enrolment time at the beginning of the school year to make sure they have the required quota of pupils. When social workers visit the neighbourhood, inhabitants are worried about their children being taken away into care. Police navigate only the main road, since going further into the neighbourhood is perceived as dangerous. The rubbish trucks come once a month and when prompted by a concerned Roma citizen. Ironically, all the rubbish bin collectors and the cleaners in Radost are Roma.

In the 1950s, there were only a handful of Roma families in the old Roma settlement of Radost. This is when the local administration decided to move them to a new area, close to the industrial part of town. The old Roma neighbourhood was next to the site on which a health facility was going to be built. First, it was called 'Newcomers', then 'New Road', and later it was renamed again after a local wood factory merged with the Roma neighbourhood. Everyone in Radost, including the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, refer to it as the *mahala*. In official documents, however, the name of the

neighbourhood is presented as either *tsiganski* (Gypsy), *romski* or 'New Road' neighbourhood.

Since the fall of communism in 1989, there has been little investment in the area, with poor infrastructure, no pavements and no streetlights. Apparently, the roads have names, but there are no street signs or labels; an outsider would not likely be able to reach their destination without asking the locals. It is no surprise that the roads are not signposted, as the neighbourhood's name, 'New Road', gives a clue – there is a perpetual newness to this Roma quarter and its 'newcomer' citizens, although the site has existed for over seventy years.

As I walk into the neighbourhood, I notice that the streets gradually become narrower. The rubbish tanks at the beginning of the neighbourhood are overflowing, and I wonder when the last collection took place. The effect is not only visual; I can smell it in the air along with burned wood and animal waste as I walk along the main street. I see houses, most of them unfinished but painted with bright colours. Here and there, I see trees, a reminder of better days gone by. There are no trees further down into the neighbourhood. Some of the houses have broken or missing windows covered with carpet or blankets; the gates are broken, and the roofs have holes in the metal or broken tiles. My eye catches a white building with a well-maintained façade, a painted fence and a cross on its roof. The Roma evangelical church is standing in contrast with the rest of the grey and unkempt buildings.

Further towards the central part of the neighbourhood, I see a space burgeoning with children and resembling a children's playground. This playground is next to one of the busiest roads in town, leading to the industrial site. Most children are here without their parents' permission because the playground is without a fence and has open access to the busy main road. Cars, lorries, horse carts and people pass by constantly. The children fight with each other over the one broken swing left and a metal piece resembling a spaceship. On both sides of the busy road, I see men waiting in the hope of being picked up by local businessmen for temporary daily work.

A short street takes me to the central part of the neighbourhood – a square space with a stone floor covered with cigarette butts and empty waffle and sweet packages. It is a space filled with adults and children – a beehive in this afternoon hour. I see a two-story building, in front of which is a café. The first floor is used as a *chitalishte* (a house of culture). This building was erected by Roma volunteers during communist times. There are many makeshift market stalls with second-hand clothes, fruit and vegetables. I hear negotiations between customers and traders. In the summer evenings, the square is filled with people who sit on the warm stones, drinking beer and eating sunflower seeds. Children chase around late into the night.

Beyond the central part of the neighbourhood, I see a labyrinth of narrow unpaved roads. Two small cars cannot pass by each other. These muddy roads are there to teach me that next time I will need better shoes. I can see why children have given up on wearing shoes; walking shoeless in the mud may be easier. I feel for the children who arrive at school covered in mud every morning. As I progress ahead on a narrow road, I go through different smells. Someone is cooking, and they are calling their children to come and eat. I hear all kinds of sounds – mostly the latest hit music. This neighbourhood is anything but silent. People are watching me. I am foreign here. I ask a stranger where Neli, the teacher, lives, and they show me. I stop in front of the house I was looking for, and Neli meets me. This place will be home for the next few months.

The introduction to the locals in Radost was important. My parents insisted on accompanying me on my first visit to Radost. I did not see their safety concerns as relevant, since I had just come back home from living on my own in London – surely, I was going to manage. However, I failed to remember that for an unmarried thirty-year-old Roma woman to live with a family that is not her kin was highly unusual. My parents knew this detail, and their presence in Radost had a purpose; they were there to protect their daughter's respectability. My parents were identified as Roma, and this gave me a good start. However, being identified as Roma was insufficient. I had to be presented as a respectable daughter. So, Neli's father and mother took on the responsibility of looking after me. By living with them, I was automatically recognised as a member of their family. In fact, I was later introduced as a distant relative.

I got to know Neli through my connection with a nongovernmental organisation based in another larger Roma neighbourhood in Bulgaria. Neli was employed as a teacher by the NGO that provided education support for Roma children in the region. Like me, Neli was in her thirties, unmarried and educated. Neli's family kindly offered me the role of a daughter, and this meant that I took part in almost every aspect of family life. I lived in a household of ten – Neli's parents, their two sons, two daughters-in-law, three grandchildren, Neli and myself. Neli's mother looked after the grandchildren, the men sold clothes in the local flea market, and the daughters-in-law went to work in the local sewing factory. I alternated between helping Neli with her education projects, childcare and doing chores in the house. The cooking, the cleaning, the childcare and the shopping were entirely women's domains. The men, on the other hand, went out to the market early in the morning and came back home at dusk. Neli's sisters-in-law competed with each other as to who would make the tastiest food dishes, mainly pastries and cakes, and Neli's mother would comment on their skills. Gradually, my cooking skills had to be tested as well. 'Iliana, you must learn to be

a good homemaker. People look for hard-working daughters-in-law.' So, I made *banitsa*, baklava, beans and potato soup, fruit compote and cooked with anything that the garden produced.

Being unmarried gave me the immediate position of a daughter, but since I was significantly older than the unmarried Roma girls in the neighbour-hood, I had a somewhat ambiguous position within the community. I mostly associated with the women in the family, and I had to abide by the estab-lished gender rules; however, as an unmarried woman everyone, both men and women, saw me as not mature enough, hence not entirely belonging to the gender categories established in the household and the community. I did not have children, who defined the most important role of a woman, and hence I was not entirely viewed as an accomplished person. My position was somewhere between a girl-child and a woman. Of course, this status had its advantages and disadvantages. Themes such as childcare, the fam-ily economy, education, health and discrimination were openly discussed with me by all. However, I was cut off from the area of sexuality, marriage and intimate relationships. For instance, one of the topics of the women's meetings in the local church concerned intimacy, the prevention of violence and HIV/AIDS. A colleague of Neli's working on this topic in the NGO was invited to give a talk to the women in the community. Neli gently warned me that this topic may not be so relevant for me and swiftly left the meeting. I, on the other hand, thought that my presence would not be noticed. In a few minutes, the pastor's wife whispered in my ear 'Iliana, it may be better if you are not part of this session. I am sure one day you will be able to participate.' My innocence and expected ignorance on the subject had to be protected along with my reputation.

People often wondered why I was in the neighbourhood. My Roma origin and past became the subject of many discussions. Whose daughter was I? Where did I come from? Why was I not married? Although in time both the researcher and my Roma-ness gained me entry into the corridors of state institutions and the homes of the Roma neighbourhood, being a Roma insider meant that my reputation was of utmost importance to deal with first. My childhood was spent in a Roma neighbourhood, leaving me intimately aware of the locals' worldview and social norms, and I was cred-ulously certain that this experience would give me quick and unproblem-atic access. Precisely because of this intimate involvement over a substantial portion of my life, I believed that there was an underlying shared experience that enabled me to appreciate the local contexts over and above mere under-standing (Okely and Callaway 1992). Ultimately, I was an insider, but soon I realised how naive my belief was. Living in Radost challenged my percep-tions and expectations because being accepted by the local community was more complex than I had imagined.

Writing a book was not a sufficient reason for a single Roma woman to leave her parents behind, so most people in the neighbourhood assumed that I was in Radost to help Neli with her education projects. Initially, Neli's family thought that I was running away from home because of something else, other than just writing a book. Neli's mother asked me quietly one day, 'Did you have something bad happen to you? My Neli went out with a Bulgarian boy and then they separated, and look at her now struggling to find a good man.' Neli's mother undertook the role of making sure that all her neighbours and hence the neighbourhood knew that I was a respectable girl by teaching me how to cook and look after the household, in addition to telling people that I would write a book and help with Neli's work.

Sastipe

Eight months into my life in Radost, I had to interrupt my research as both of my parents were going through major illnesses and needed care. I needed a longer period of study interruption, which meant that I lost my studentship bursary and needed to fund my research on my own. No matter how precise and 'scientific' my research plan was, its implementation was dependent on innumerable and unexpected contingencies. On my return, Neli had married, and she was living in another, larger city in Bulgaria. Neli's brothers and their wives had immigrated to the UK, and Neli's parents were preparing to join them to help with childcare. In fact, a large number of Roma in Radost had moved abroad, mainly to Italy, Germany and the UK. By this time, I was also married and had a baby. Without Neli's family, my return to Radost was impossible logistically. I needed different accommodation and childcare. However, what seemed impossible to me at the time was not impossible for Neli, who invited me to visit her in the city of Sastipe.

Sastipe is a large city in Bulgaria with a Roma population of approximately 3,000 people. The Roma neighbourhood is unofficially structured into different quarters or *mahalas*, as the locals call them – the Lower and the Upper sites. The inhabitants of the Lower mahala are both Roma and non-Roma, and the buildings there are tall and separated into family units. Most of the streets are paved and clean. Many of the Roma inhabitants of the Lower mahala refer to themselves as Turks and speak Turkish. The spatial separation of the two parts of the Sastipe Roma neighbourhood can be traced back to the formation of the first Roma neighbourhoods in Bulgaria during the Ottoman rule and is based on the differentiation of ethnic but mostly religiously homogeneous neighbourhoods (Asenov 2018: 89). Today the separation between Sastipe's Lower and Upper Roma neighbourhood is largely due to differences in economic access. Most of the residents of the

Upper mahala have Bulgarian names and moved to Sastipe from other parts of the country as opposed to the more established long-term residents of the Lower mahala, who refer to each other with Turkish names and are believed to have come to the neighbourhood with the Ottomans hundreds of years ago.

The physical difference between the two sides is visible. A significant share of the inhabitants of the Lower mahala work in Germany and the Netherlands, where they have established connections with Turkish communities as they can speak the Turkish language. Working abroad guarantees them a stable and higher income. The Lower mahala is well connected to the rest of the city, with closer access to schools, shops and amenities, as opposed to the Upper mahala, which is smaller in size and is located in the so-called 'unregulated part' of the city. This means that the buildings do not exist in the municipality register, hence electricity and water are not provided, and wherever there are amenities they are seen as part of temporary dwellings by the local authorities. The area and its people are associated with danger, dirt, violence and immorality. The Upper and the Lower sites intermix rarely in everyday life; however, marriages between the inhabitants of the two sites happen, and local churches consist of inhabitants from both sites.

I had relatives in Sastipe with whom I could stay and who could help me look after my baby, and this is how I embarked on the next phase of my research. Having become a mother when I continued my research in Sastipe gave me greater entry into the women's world. The presence of my baby daughter also generated much interest amongst my interlocutors, and it shaped the research process and its findings. Writing a book was not sufficient for Sastipe's Roma, and for them I had to be what anthropology calls 'an engaged anthropologist', whereby one conducts engaged research involving collaboration, advocacy and activism (Marcus 2012; Ortner 2019). When I joined Neli in Sastipe, she had established a mother's initiative that was part of the local evangelical church and consisted of attendants from both *mahalas*. They were mostly young mothers, who were my first informants in Sastipe. Gradually, I was invited to their homes and took part in everyday household tasks as well as in events such as weddings, funerals, child dedications and church services.

Structure of the Book

Influenced by a situational approach, the written materials presented here range from personal accounts to descriptions of locations and reproduced stories. Thus, I opened this book with an introduction to the locations of my research. Radost and Sastipe are different in size, composition and eco-

nomic access, although there are natural 'partial connections' (Strathern 2004) and remarkable similarities in narratives and identity signifiers.[1] So, in the chapters of this book I have attempted to capture life experiences, the meaning, the geo-symbolism and the place-making within these landscapes and beyond them. By introducing the two Roma neighbourhoods, I would like to recognise the role of space in the lifeworlds of my informants and to introduce the reader to marginal urban geographies, where the work, control and withdrawal of the state can be best captured (Fassin 2015).

The relationships between identification and my research sites interrelate in important ways. The themes are directly influenced by where my informants live, including the question of by whom are Roma histories controlled; how children are brought up and who influences their education; how economic and social transformation takes place; who becomes 'the Roma elite'; who looks after Roma children in state institutions; and how womanhood and adulthood begin and are negotiated. Distance, location and topography relate to all themes discussed in this book and just like the Roma neighbourhoods are always perceived as incomplete or in a perpetual state of newness, removal and reconstruction; the stories I present are also unfinished. On purpose, each chapter provides only an entrance into multiple worlds, hoping to direct attention to the story of the people concerned as individuals with agency, as humans, which is what the very word 'Roma' means – to be a person and a human. By presenting a singularity of individual trajectories, situatedness, voices and their specific circumstance, I explore Roma lives from unexpected standpoints. This unexpected and contradictory nature of the minutiae of everyday lives manifests across different arenas: from history and kinship to childhood and gender relationships.

Each chapter brings forward different spaces, stories, domains and contradictions in order to explore the processes through which they are made possible. Ultimately, identity politics arises as a result of representation in space, history and culture; therefore, it is not so much about 'who we are' or 'where we came from' as it is about 'who we might become' (Hall 1996a; 1996b). This latter aspect is considered in the stories that make up this work. Importantly, I aim at narrowing the gaze at a selection of undercurrent themes resonating in contemporary Romani studies but which I felt needed to be explored further.

The complex undercurrent theme that glues everything together and that runs throughout the book is identification and how it is impinged on by the role of the state and its various degrees of interaction with kinship. The presence of the state ranges from implementing explicit interventionist policies and prosaic micro control to what seems to be a withdrawal and retreat. In the first chapters of the book, the state features as the main player in decision-making, in historicising, educating and taking care of Roma

children, and in the later chapters the state's presence in communal kinship and gender is somewhat sporadic and withdrawn yet still there in the background through the norms it promotes. Each chapter provides examples of how kinship opposes the state to create alternative narratives and forms of morality, history, identity and belonging. The two of course are interconnected. Kinship and state politics go hand in hand (Thelen and Alber 2018). These spaces of state presence or absence, relationships inside and outside the community and the state, and ways and choices of identification, can present opportunities to learn. Herein lies the broader contribution of this book, namely its invitation to the reader to consider the unpredictability, the 'world of multiple orderings of reality' (Tambiah 1990: 84), the incommensurability and unexpectedness of the everyday that animates human lives by following Roma individual trajectories and their interconnectedness with a partial, non-unitary and embodied state, the one administered by teachers, social workers, activists, medical workers and others.

The book is structured in a way that follows the intensity of regimes of power, or as I call them 'moralities', in emic terms, and which I distinguish between in accordance with their corresponding domains and how they play out in individual lives. This work is not only about the 'inside' Roma world but also about the values, the affects, the persons, the contradictions and moral subjectivities of the state. I set the scene by introducing the history of my interlocutors and by exploring what being Roma may imply for children and adults who grew up on the edges of the community, or outside, specifically in care, and of Roma whose lives may be seen to contradict or challenge expectations of both Roma and non-Roma. These accounts present individuals and collective actors in interaction in everyday life, in the neighbourhood and in institutional and state settings, including educational settings, away from the Roma neighbourhood and under the influence of macro and micro politics of the state. I gradually build up the theme of kinship in each chapter to show its practicality and interrelationship with the work of the state. Towards the end of the book, I reflect on what are seen as the 'typical' internal markers of identification such as marriage, weddings and gender positionality and the enormous importance they carry as well as the challenges they pose inside and outside the communities of my research. These are classical themes in Romani ethnographies, but I have aimed to present them with a twist whereby they are no longer a window into the world of rules and tradition but into the possibilities and impossibilities of planning a future, creating or unmaking a community, of strategic kinship, individuality, agency, socioeconomic survival and striving to be.

Note

1. Radost and Sastipe are pseudonyms and throughout this work, for reasons of confidentiality, I utilise geospatial obfuscation or combine stories from both locations. I also refer to all inhabitants by names different from their own.