

New to Slovakia, Parks takes long view
in addressing centuries-old

Roma struggle

By Greg Warner



CBF field personnel Jon and Tanya Parks minister among the Roma in Košice, Slovakia.

When staring at a problem that was centuries in the making, it is wise not to look for a quick fix. That's why Jon and Tanya Parks are investing their lives in the future of the Roma people, the ethnic group derisively called "Gypsies," who are marginalized virtually everywhere they live.

Their investment has meant moving 5,000 miles away from their home in Virginia to Slovakia, learning two new languages and cultures, raising their children in a foreign land and cultivating deep, long-term relationships with people who are quite different from them.

Jon and Tanya, from Kenbridge, Va., are Cooperative Baptist Fellowship field personnel, commissioned in 2011 to minister among the Roma in Košice (KO-sheet-say), a large industrial city in eastern Slovakia.

Each week, the Parkses travel two hours to the city of Kežmarok to volunteer as assistant English instructors in a recently opened *gymnázium* (a kind of college-prep school) for the Romany, who are routinely excluded from traditional public schools. Jon and Tanya assist the English teachers and provide other opportunities for the students to improve their English — a vital skill for advancing to a university.

"The Roma *gymnázium* here in Košice is closed for this school year," Jon

explained. "They had many financial challenges and, with the recent worsening of conditions among the Roma here in Košice, many of the students left Slovakia with their families to seek better working and living conditions."

With the closing of the Košice school, there are only two Roma *gymnázia* left operating in Slovakia. The schools are crucial for giving Romany teenagers a chance of getting into college to pursue non-menial careers. Only a fraction of the students — perhaps less than a tenth — will ever make it into college. Even if they overcome the anti-Roma prejudice in entrance practices, they usually lack the money for college, Jon said.

Education is a significant source of social conflict between the Roma and Slovaks — and a crucial opportunity for ministry, according to the Parkses. The root of the conflict, Jon said, is "mainly a clash of cultures."

"Even though the Roma people have lived here for centuries, they still



In Slovakia, the Roma people struggle to gain access to quality education because of deep prejudices and long-standing social conflicts.

hold onto different traditions, different cultural practices and understandings," Jon said. "So, as in most places where you have minority cultures, the majority will constantly wonder why these people don't try harder to fit in."

The Parkses intentionally keep a balanced perspective and avoid assigning blame. "There's mistrust and hatred on both sides, and any solution will require changes from both sides," Jon said.

"It's easy for us to demonize if we get too far on one side or the other," Tanya added.



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The Parkses learned a lesson about prejudice and acceptance from their colleague, Pavol, a Slovak teacher at the Roma school. “His parents have a dark history with Roma,” Tanya said. “He has all kinds of reasons to hate them.” Pavol has remained at the school even though “he could be working as a writer or in a prestigious *gymnazium*,” she explained.

“He said, ‘I have made a choice not to be prejudiced and to believe they can get an education,’” Tanya recalled.

“People like Pavol help us keep that balance,” said Jon.

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“For many years now, the Slovak system has dealt with Roma children by labeling them as [having] ‘special needs’ and putting them into separate special-needs schools,” Jon said. “This essentially cuts them off from mainstream education, limits their resources and all but destroys their chance at achieving any level of higher education.”

The situation is tragically similar to the segregation of African-Americans in the United States. Many states tried to maintain so-called “separate but equal” school systems for black and white students until

the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954. Similarly, a national-level Slovak court ruled in 2012 that this segregation is unlawful.

“But almost two years later, hardly anyone has done anything about it,” Jon reflected, “and the courts don’t have power to enforce anything.”

Hardly limited to Slovakia, mistrust of the Roma has been part of European history for centuries.

Their ancestors emigrated from India to the Middle East and, in the 14th century, on to Eastern Europe. Their darker skin led Europeans to believe they were descended from Egyptians, which led to the misnomer of “Gypsy.” They developed (perhaps not by their own choice) a somewhat nomadic lifestyle, working as craftsmen who sold their wares from city to city and entertained in their exotic ways.

“Eventually, a few took advantage of the trust and superstition of the European people and turned to thievery and deception,” Jon said. “For their part, Europeans began to mistreat these outsiders, denying them basic rights and in some places even enslaving them.”

Today the Roma are the second largest minority in Slovakia — roughly 9 percent

of the country’s 5.4 million people. Most are poor and live in slums outside the cities. In Košice and elsewhere, these slums often have no running water — it is delivered sporadically by truck. Slum residents heat and cook by wood, and Slovakia’s minimal welfare system does little to alleviate the poverty.

“People see this group of Roma people walking along the street and they say, ‘They stink so bad!’” explained Tanya. “But they don’t know they don’t have water. Or else they say, ‘Why would we give them water? They don’t know how to be clean.’”

This kind of circular reasoning works to perpetuate stereotypes.

“Roma people in general are looked at as thieves and dirty by the majority Slovak population,” said Tanya. “Even the clean, well-dressed ones are often followed in stores to make sure that they don’t steal anything. They often congregate in larger groups, which makes Slovaks feel uncomfortable. When they aren’t being ignored, they are often spoken to rudely and blamed for things that may or may not have been their fault.”

The stereotypes make it difficult for the Roma to get good jobs, she said. “We know a number of Roma who have degrees and



Jon, Tanya and their two children, Abigail and Kaitlyn (above), are spending their first year in Slovakia learning about the different cultures and learning Slovak, the local language. Jon and Tanya also minister to both the Roma and Slovak people, helping to bridge the divide between the two groups.

Many Roma dream of escaping the slums and the cycle of poverty to make something of themselves, but they face difficult odds.

education and still cannot find a job.”

Businesses that do hire them for high-visibility jobs can expect to lose customers. “You are not going to see one working as a waiter,” Jon added. Most of the jobs they find are manual labor — construction and cleaning services.

Leo, a friend of Jon and Tanya, has one of those jobs. Although he is trained as a veterinary assistant and a musician, Tanya said, Leo has been unable to find a good job. “He shovels coal at the U.S. steel plant in Košice because he has to have a job to support his young family.”

“He’s talked about how difficult it is to do this menial task when he has training to work with animals. But he’s been trying to find meaning and find his joy working in this place.”

Leo recently began studying at a music conservatory with a dream of starting a music-teaching ministry. He wants to travel and teach in Roma villages to add professional training to the Romany’s popular love of music.

Many Roma dream of escaping the slums and the cycle of poverty to make something of themselves, but they face difficult odds. The vast majority of Roma young people are steered into vocational

schools instead of *gymnaziiums*.

Patrick, who grew up in the slums, was one of the few who graduated from the Roma *gymnazium* in Košice and was admitted into college. “He would never have made it in a predominantly Slovak school,” said Tanya, who helped teach the boy. Out of about 50 who started the Roma high school with him, “maybe two of them make it to college,” she said.

“The Roma-Slovak relationship is old, deep and will not be solved quickly,” Tanya said.

“If we want to have any more than a Band-Aid benefit in Europe, it’s going to take a lot more than clever speeches from Amnesty International or mission groups coming from the U.S.,” Jon added. “Both sides are going to have to move to have any progress.”

The Parkses aren’t looking for easy solutions anyway.

“Right now we are taking the long-term view in regard to ministry,” Jon said. The priorities during this first year are building relationships and learning two difficult languages — Slovak and the local Roma dialect.

“There are very few Roma who speak English that we can make that connection



Tanya Parks (pictured in red below) spends time with Roma and Slovak children.

with,” he said. “... To a certain extent, we can function here in English, and we could even focus solely on teaching English. But we’re quickly realizing that, while we could *get by* speaking English, we won’t be able to build many deeper relationships.”

“This learning is itself a ministry,” he said. “I can’t count the number of times we’ve been able to share our story — and a little of the gospel — with Slovaks and Roma who simply want to know why we’re bothering to learn their language.”

In addition to helping teach English to high school students, Jon and Tanya volunteer at their small Košice church, Devleskero Kher, which means “House of God” in Romani. The predominantly Roma congregation has adopted a worship style that reflects Romany culture — lively and celebrative. But Slovaks, Germans and others also attend.

“This fall we will begin teaching English classes in the church building as a way for the church members to do some outreach — inviting other people who are interested in learning English,” Jon said.

Their 16 months on the field — which included three months in the States to resolve a visa problem — have been a strange in-between time for the Parkses and their two girls, Abigail, 9, and Kaitlyn, 7. “We are between the ‘already’ and ‘not yet,’” Jon said — ministering while learning to minister. Together, the family looks forward to seeing where their ministry will take them.

