

## MY STORY AS A VOLUNTEER IN A GREEK CAMP IN RITSONA

From the very first moment you – a stranger – enter the community of Ritsona, you feel accepted. People see an unknown face, I see all new faces, but no need for awkward silences or elaborate ice-breakers. Being part of an established and well-respected charity group called 'ECHO100Plus' is enough. They know why you are there, a guest in their home to help out a bit. Soon plenty know your name, with or without a name tag. Of course it helps if you have a name that resembles an Arabic word, especially one so frequently used to request someone to hurry up. As you can imagine it is a reason for laughter, yet very few need one to smile.

Humans who have witnessed and gone through the worst continue to amaze me. Even more so as they are trapped in a place nobody wants to be. People are joking, patiently waiting while we assemble their food, which is not that good. I can best compare it to airplane food, but even that is a stretch at times. Admittedly it could be a lot worse in general since there is enough fruit, Arabic bread and water for everyone on a daily basis. People are grateful, kindhearted, courteous, warm and hospitable to say the least. Behind all of this there is of course anger, anxiety, frustration, helplessness, hopelessness and indifference. It's a mix of emotions and thoughts after being in this confusing little world far away from everything else.

At times, the negative emotions come out as well and we just try to be understanding and hopefully not make it worse. This is hard sometimes, but we know it's rarely personal and the reaction has little to do with what we did or did not do. I'd do the same if I'd get the same food almost every single day, get told I cannot have an orange for my child because the cutoff age is 3 or another salad because tonight you decided we can have only one per house. Most people understand we are not in charge, it is the army / air force and we hand out as much as we can but are forced to give out per person / child / baby due to the numbers. I'm still surprised though that people often accept our explanation.

While our main task as Echo volunteers is food distribution, we also do hygiene and clothes distribution. In my first week we have had a few break-ins, which were frustrating but we did not let it get us down. People were upset about it too and of course agreed it was not right. We had it fixed every single time. We left the clothes for what they were since it was a mess every morning and they were clearly looking for something, at some point there is no point. This also counts for the perpetrators and what they took, which included some clothes but also nappies, diabetic bread, dog food, diapers and such. The items seemed random so it was almost funny. Luckily it stopped and we are currently in the process of getting a solid wall.

Partly thanks to Lighthouse Relief and some of their amazing team members we managed to solidify the wall in the meantime. Aside from their carpentry skills, they run a child and woman friendly space. There is also I am You who run educational programs. Then we have the big ones UNHCR, IOM and Red Cross. The main difference is we are there on all 7 days, pretty much for 12 hours (9-21) straight and is pretty much front and center as you enter the camp. Just like on Leros, it seems that responsibility and cooperation between all of the parties involved is the biggest challenge to give the residents the best help they can get.

Luckily, Ritsonians understand that we are limited due to politics and money. However, as this place was supposed to be temporary, some have now been here for about a year! That is unacceptable. Standing in line twice a day for your food, then waiting for that one day when you can get coffee, tea, some wet wipes – which are not to be handed out due to clogging of pipes – and waiting for opening hours to see a doctor. Ritsona is deemed one of the better camps, probably because they live in isoboxes (caravans / mobile homes) with heating, a stove, toilet and shower. Can you imagine this being your life though?

There is a good vibe in the camp regardless of what is going on. The 2nd or 3rd day after a tragic loss of life was probably one of the most positive and vibrant days yet. The sun was shining, people were up and about, children in the playground. People have probably already been through so much that the death of a baby is not that shocking. Staying positive is also a way to deal with it of course. I have no explanation for it and I know it sounds weird,

but it's the truth. Of course I mean no disrespect. The loss for me was a reminder of how fragile life is, how horrible living in a place like this must be, especially when going through something tragic as a family. Hearing other people's stories about their lives in Syria and how they feel about living here is also a reality check.

Ritsona, a surreal and very real place at the same time. In the words of a young man: "If I was human, they would not put me in a place like this". Most of my time here has been positive and it's all because of the group we have and the residents of Ritsona. There is a ritual you have to pass before you can be fully accepted and you will not see it coming. See there is an old man in his sixties / seventies nicknamed 'Baba' who usually hangs around the warehouse before food distribution. The first time I saw him someone had already spilled the beans, but I was still surprised when he did the following. He signaled me over and pointed to my shirt. I looked down and of course he hit me in the nose. Then when you walk away, as soon as you turn your back actually, you feel something stinging your calve. He hit me with his walking stick! He does it to everyone and it's hilarious. The man loves to pull pranks, also to pat you down for security reasons or for cigarettes. I recently grabbed a broom so he slowly extended his cane to increase his reach.

There are a lot of others who like to be silly and have fun with us. Two big men who always come early together just laugh at anything and take any opportunity to crack jokes. Then there's people who prefer for certain volunteers to do their food order. Some children do likewise, one of them a girl who just says to everyone "you crazy". There are a lot of cute babies and children who wave, say hello, blow kisses or just stand there with a smile, but there are definitely some little rascals as well. One boy just keeps saying "one, one, one" and wouldn't stop. Then one day I was doing the tickets and this man at the window says lll. I look up and the resemblance is striking. That's why the boy kept saying it! Not that he needs a reason, none of them do. Just shouting "my friend" – don't try this with one of our founders though – for cups, water, a box, oranges, I want, give me, all night long..It can be annoying, but if you just have fun with it and stay positive, remind yourself they are just kids who are trying to have a normal childhood

then it doesn't really matter.

People in Ritsona try to make the best out of their situation and do it with such an overall positive attitude, that they've made this place into a community that is nothing short of admirable.

by Jelle Wassenaar

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"I never considered myself discriminated as a roma in Romania. It is only up to you to surpass your circumstances."

I am half hungarian and half gypsy, born and raised in Romania. This mix of cultures was never a problem for me. I am ardelean (which is a citizen of the region Transylvania in Romania). This is my identity, I am romanian because of my citizenship and education and I am hungarian/gypsy due to my genes. My country



is Romania, I was born and raised here, I love it and I would never move anywhere else. I consider myself a true patriot, sometimes even a bit nationalistic.

Even if I come from this mixed background I never considered myself discriminated in Romania. It is only up to you to surpass your circumstances. I have two bachelor degrees, one in Psychology and the other in Acting. I have an NGO "Romo Sapiens" which is focused on education, more specifically on promoting non formal education through theatre.

Only after the revolution in 1989 did I start reading and doing research on my Roma roots, learned the romani language and so I got more involved with this issue. I consider it to be a complex and varied culture, unique in the world.

I got the chance to travel a lot due to my job as an actor and one of my major achievements was to direct and play in "*A stormy night*" in romani language with romani actors, this play being one of the most famous Romanian plays.

One of my dissatisfactions is the fact that up to this moment not that many NGOs managed by roma people have actually managed to obtain funding from the European Union to solve some of the problems within the roma community.

My mission in life can be defined through this sentence: 'God please offer me the right of not arriving to complacency'."

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**Webpage title:** "I never considered myself discriminated as a roma in Romania. It is only up to you to surpass your circumstances."

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Romania is my home without a doubt.  
But I am also proud to be called a  
'gypsy'."



"I was born and raised in Romania and I currently live in Alba Iulia in Romania. I am an active campaigner for human rights, fighting against violence and discrimination towards the Roma community. I am constantly advocating for multi-ethnic co-existence and common understanding. Because of my constant political activity I have been involved in several organizations fighting for Roma rights, having different positions within these organizations including title of president of Romania IVLP Alumni Association, General Secretary at the International Romani Union and president of Pakiv Romania NGO.

I consider myself to be a European citizen, part of the diverse European family. I am very proud of my roots. Because I was born and raised in Romania, Romania is my country and Romanian is my nationality. I am also gypsy according to my ethnicity. These mix of cultures do not represent a problem for me, I am actually proud of them.

Romania is my home without a doubt and I never considered migrating to a different country. Romani are often discriminated in Romania but we are still citizens of this country. The word 'gypsy' does not exist in Romani language so it does not bother me to use it or to be called like this and not romani.

I was the president of the International Romani Union, Union which was founded in 1971 and it received the status of consulting organization with the United Nations.

I am actively involved in politics and one of my life missions is to fight for the international recognition of Romani. We have many Romani across

Europe, we have our own language, we have our flag, our culture and traditions, why not obtain a UN recognition on this matter?"

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"I want to go to school and get an education. I want to have a better life."

My name is Guta and I am a gypsy from Tonciu. Tonciu is a village in Mures County in Romania.



We are many romani here, it is a village only with Roma people.

I don't have a job as most people who live here do so basically I live out of what the state is giving me which is not that much, I need more money.

I barely went to school so I can't really read or write.

I would like now to go to school and get an education. I have heard about this program 'Second Chance', where you can get a degree even at a later stage in your life, I want that for myself.

I really don't understand what discrimination means but when I go to town in Targu Mures and I have to solve a problem there with Romanians I always solve it, so they help me.

If I go to the doctor they help me, if I go to City Hall or anywhere else they help me.

I am proud to be a gypsy as all other gypsies. We are proud people. I am Hungarian but I speak Romanian as well because I live in Romania.

I want more for my people from the Romanian government. I want to have a better life."

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# One of my life missions is to help integrate the Roma community through education.

I live in Batos (Mures County in Transylvania), where I was chosen as a representative of the community in the Local Council and I am also the President of the Roma Democratic Party in the county. I also work as a Romani language teacher in the school of Apalina, a village with Roma inhabitants only; and I am a certified translator for Romanian, Hungarian and Romani languages.



Romani is an indo-European language similar to Sanskrit and the language was recognised by the Indian State. We have a language, an anthem, a flag and now we are also recognised by the Indian Government because Roma people are descendent from India.

Even though my mother was an illiterate she always promoted the importance of education so that you can surpass your condition. I invested constantly in my education this is why I graduated at 51 years old from the University of Bucharest, the Language Faculty (Romani), studying with the biggest expert of Romani language in Romania, professor Gheorge Sarius.

I am a Roma and I am proud to be. I never felt discriminated in Romania and I never wanted to migrate to a different country.

I think what is missing in the Roma community is proper education and the lack of models. What you see is what you follow, so if children see their parents benefiting from the Romanian welfare and refusing to work then why

should they go to school?

I also think that the Romanian legislation is inappropriate for Roma people. As an example if you get pregnant at 14 years old which is extremely common in the Roma community, you receive prenatal help, money which actually go to the parents of the new mother because she is a minor. How is this measure helping? This is not preventing them from getting pregnant at early ages but in a way it is actually stimulating the natality among them because the state is giving them money.

The projects for the Roma people are not managed by Roma people because different NGOs which have obtained EU funding do not understand the problems within the Roma community and are not using the funding properly.

I have written two books presenting the Roma culture, its roots, historical evolution and many other interesting facts. I wanted to shed some light regarding the Roma community. The books are entitled "*The Untouchable from yesterday, the Roma people from Today*" and "*Oarba de Mures, bloody land*".

I think that the only way in which you can improve the situation of the Roma community is through education so one of my life missions is to help integrate the Roma community through education."

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Never give up. If you are defeated you rise up and this is how you become a champion. That's what I teach my Roma students."

"I am a citizen of Sarmasu, a village located in Mures County, in Romania. I have been living in Sarmasu for the last 30 years but I was born and raised in Lechinta, a village in Bistrita county.



I am a geography teacher, married with two children and I teach here at the school in Sarmasu. I care a lot about the local Roma community and I was involved in local politics, in the Local Council but I did not really like it so I am no longer politically active.

I like teaching, in my opinion one of the best ways you can stimulate children is through sports. I personally played soccer at a professional level in the second Romanian division when I was younger. I know how much you can learn and develop through sports; we had organized a national soccer championship at our school for Roma children and our team won. The Roma children really enjoyed this competition.

I am proud of my Roma roots and I never felt discriminated against here in Romania. I got the opportunity to play soccer at a professional level and now I get the chance to teach and impact the lives of so many Roma children.

I never wanted to migrate to a different country for a better life, Romania is home for me, my mother language is Romanian and I also speak Romani.

My mission in life at this stage from a professional perspective is to

achieve better results for my Roma community. I want more children to obtain an education here in the village and attend High School and University; to help decrease the percentage of dropouts among Romani children; and to motivate them and help them grow.

In addition my suggestions for the municipality are the following (if funding would be available): *“School after School”* ( A supervisor would take care of the Roma children after school and help them with their assignments); *“Second Chance”* ( This would be a program meant to help the alumni finish their education, you can take intensive classes and do two years in one); *“School for Parents”* ( Bringing parents to school to guide them on the importance of obtaining an education, so that they encourage their children to stay in school and obtain an education.)

As a former athlete one of my life mottos is: *“Never give up. If you are defeated you rise up and this is how you become a champion.”*

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“If I can do something good for my community then I am up for the challenge.”

“My name is Dodo Anna and I am a school mediator and Romani teacher in Band, a village located in Mures County, in Romania. As a school mediator I establish the connection between the school and the Roma community’s children and their parents, wether they face problems at school or sometimes at home. I am proud to be Roma, even though my first language and mother language is Hungarian, I also speak Romanian due to my studies. In my opinion it is never too late to get an education.



Although I went to school only until 10th grade, I wanted to complete my education and learn more, at 39 years old I went to evening classes to recover some of the missing classes needed in order to obtain the baccalaureate degree. When I applied for University I applied for the 2 vacant seats assigned for Roma representatives and I got in. I studied at Babes Bolyoi University the branch from Targu Mures, faculty of “*Educators and Teachers*” . As a student among Romanian students I never felt discriminated, I was always treated the same as others by both my colleagues and my teachers, the Romanian state also offered me a scholarship. I was highly appreciated by everyone during my study period.

Romania is my home and Band is my home town, I never thought of migrating to another place. Most of the Romas who go abroad move for a couple of years to work and make savings to come build a house back home, maybe buy a car. They always returned back home, Romas like to stick together and live in their home country which in this case is Romania.

I think that the most important thing in order to solve some of the problems in the Roma community is to improve the education system. Parents should be more involved in the education of their children and encourage them to go to school, teach them the importance of obtaining a degree so that further in their life they can get a job and contribute in the society they live in.

I would like to obtain for my community the following: *"School after school"*, a program where children are kept in schools after classes and helped with their homework by a supervisor. This project helps them socialize and obtain better results in school; scholarships; jobs; even access to water as you do not have water in all the houses in Roma community from Band. In Band there are three roma communities, situated in different places in the village.

One of my life motto`s is: *"If I can do something good for my community then I am up for the challenge otherwise I prefer not doing anything".*

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**Webpage title:** *"If I can do something good for my community then I am up for the challenge."*

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