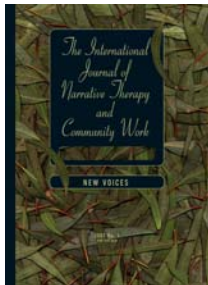


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Re-uniting Romani people with their families: Work of a lifetime

From an interview with Linda Aleksandersen

The interviewer was David Denborough (Dulwich Centre Publications)
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When I think about how long I have been trying to reunite Romani people with their families, it goes a long way back. When I was a small child, I would visit an orphanage near our family home that was full of Romani children. This orphanage was across a river from our home, but I could get across the water in the winter when the lake had frozen over. These children would start talking Romani to me, so even at that young age I understood that we were somehow related.

Some of these children didn't know their parents, and they would call out for them. I would always take these kids home with me and we'd play games together. My brother and my sister would do the same.

Some of these children would then ask my mamma and pappa if they could help them find their family. That was the beginning for me. I was about ten years old, when I first said to my dad and my mamma, 'They haven't got parents, can you help them?' Eventually, this situation became so normal for me that if I didn't come home with some new friends, my parents would think 'What's wrong with Linda today?'

At one time, we were living in a one room cabin. It had a small kitchen, but nothing more. One day, according to my mother, I invited 12 children home with me! Some were crying, some were remembering their parents, others could not remember their family. All of them, however, were upset, and wanted to be with their loved ones.

In the middle of all of this, my father sat down to write a telegram. We didn't have a telephone and he was writing the telegram to try to find out who the parents were to all these children. From there, the work just kept going. So many Romani children were separated from their families that trying to link our people back together is enough work for a lifetime.

When my father or mother would find the parents of these children, they would invite them to come to the cabin to meet their kids. Then we would have even more people in our home! Sometimes, though, the police would come to look for the missing children and try to take them back to the orphanage. This would be a very difficult time. Often, the parents would try to take their children and run away before the police arrived.

Now, many years later, things have changed. In fact, the police now send Romani people to me. They know that I will probably be able to assist those who are looking for their families. They know this is my life's work.

Six years ago, for example, I found a boy ringing my doorbell, and calling out my name. He lived in Mandola, 50 kilometres from here. He told me he was running away from his adopted parents, to try to find his Romani parents. He didn't know for certain that he was Romani, but one day he heard something that began to make him wonder. He had gone to the police station and said, 'Who can help me to find out? I think I am Romani, but I'm not quite sure'. The police said to him 'You can go to Linda'. So up he came to my house and rang the bell.

Next thing, he's sitting in my home, showing me a lot of pictures. He told me that he thought his Romani mother was dead, and that his Romani father was an alcoholic. But he didn't really know who they were. He told me that he had once overdosed on drugs himself. While he was talking, I could feel something – I cannot really explain this, but sometimes when talking with other Romani people I start to feel things that help me to make links. My mother says this is probably because I started doing this when I was only ten.

Anyway, I started to show this boy some photographs from *my* photo album. Photos are very useful in this work. When I'm out and about, I'm always taking pictures. Links can be made through photographs.

He was sitting there looking, then stopping, looking, then stopping. And after he had done this a lot of times, I realised something and said 'I think I've seen the people in your photographs before'. When I looked at them more carefully every one of them were members of *my* family. My cousin in northern Norway had been looking for her son for 18 years. Here was this boy who thought his mother has died because of drugs, and in the north, my cousin had been searching for so long for her son. I quickly phoned another cousin and asked him to call this boy's mother. Before too long, everybody who was in my apartment at the time was crying. For me, though, this was not so unusual. These sorts of things happen all the time. It turned out that this boy was my cousin's son. It turned out that I had actually seen him once before when he was a month old, just before he was taken away from my cousin.

Sometimes it is much more difficult to trace people's parents. In the past, a lot of Romani children's names were changed by the government, to make it hard for parents to find their children, and for children to find their parents. Perhaps a girl would have been called Laura, but when the government took her away, they would change her name to Sandra. Birthdates were also changed, whether on purpose, or because the government simply didn't know the correct information. Babies were taken away from the hospitals or tents in which they had been born and were put straight into orphanages like the one close to my childhood home.

Today, this work of linking people with their families is much easier. Nowadays people often know their dates of birth and today we have a special organisation that helps parents and children find each other. Every day I still receive letters that say: 'Can you please help me, I think I am from a Romani family...' And now, many people help me do this work.

Sometimes, these days, finding the family is the easy part. When people meet up with their families for the first time in years, it can be very, very good. But sometimes it is very difficult. If the Romani children have not grown up in Romani culture, if they have lived together with Norwegian people, learnt Norwegian language and culture, then when they get put in touch with their Romani family, it can be very confusing.

They might have had big hopes that as soon as they meet their family everything would be happy and easy. But, sometimes their families find it hard to accept them, and sometimes they find it hard to accept their families. After all, they have grown up in such different ways. There can be sadness, misunderstanding, jealousy and heartache. These are all part of the reasons why some of our people break down, or have troubles with alcohol, drugs, and violence. Part of my work now is to stay in touch with people after they have reunited with their families. If the families do not treat them well, then I make sure that I am there for them. It's so important that some care is taken.

Thinking about all the Romani children who were separated from their families makes me remember my own childhood. When I was a small girl, I played games only with my family, so I couldn't speak Norwegian. My mother and pappa hadn't been to school themselves, but they were determined that I would go. They were too embarrassed to take me, so I went alone. I remember standing in the school garden on my first day and the teachers were calling out this name and that name, but not my name. I was standing totally alone and I will never forget this. But they knew where I was from. They knew I was from the Travellers.

If anything went missing at school, they would say, 'A-ha, it's the Traveller who's taken it'. One day, a girl's silver ring went missing, and I was blamed. I came home very upset, but my father told me to go back to the school and fight for my rights. You see, Romani people traditionally don't use silver, we only use gold. My father told me to go back to the school, and invite all the children and the teachers to come to our house to look for this girl's ring. He knew they wouldn't be able to find it, because we had no silver in our home at all!

My father was a proud man. He and my mother taught us about Romani culture – how to make food, how the oldest child must look after the youngest, and so on. And each year, we would go travelling. We'd leave in May and come home in September. We learnt how to set up the tent, and how to travel together with a lot of other families. When we turned 12, the girls would go with their mothers and sell things to the people who lived in houses in the mountains. The boys would go with the fathers and learn about their work. In this way, we all helped earn money for our families. I learned many things from my parents. One of the most significant was what it meant to open our home to others.

I still take children into my home today. Some children are from the streets, some have moved here from other countries, or are refugees. One time in 1999, I had 32 children and young people living with me. I travel a lot. So it's important that there is a good understanding between me and the young people staying in my home. I trust the young people who stay at my house. I give them the key and say 'Take this, give the flowers water, wash the dishes after you cook, do that and that, blah blah blah', and they do it. I show them trust, and in return, they trust me. They also know that if they do something wrong, they must leave the house for one month, even if it's raining or snowing. It's a clear rule – one month. That's the deal, and they know it from the beginning. We have an understanding and our relationships are based on honesty. There has been an unexpected outcome of opening my house to young people. 75% of the teenagers who have been at my home, and who then go onto university, study health and social work! All the time their parents had been saying to them 'You should be a lawyer, you should be in the police'. Now, their parents are saying, 'I don't understand it, they were never interested in social work before!'

When I meet with Romani adults now who are still trying to find their families, I wonder if they were once in the orphanage near my childhood home. I wonder if we might have met before as children. I wonder if they might have stayed with me and my family all those years ago. Some of them have remembered those times. They have told me what it meant to them that a little girl and her parents once tried to help them find their family. We get to talk about those old days, and what has happened since. I always have a lot in common with them.

Many of us have seen the effects of drugs. For me, my sister died of a drug overdose, and I had to care for her three children. The children's father had died, and their mother couldn't live without her husband, so she took her own life by an overdose. The children were 9, 11, and 15 and so I looked after them until they grew up. Stories like this are common amongst our people. You might think this is sad – and it is sad. But we have these experiences in common. We have a shared understanding and we know how to support each other.

We Romani people are also clever and creative. We have had to be in order to survive over the generations – not just to have food and shelter, but to escape from punishment and repression. We have many stories about how we have survived. And some of them are funny.

For instance, one Romani family built their house right on the border between Sweden and Norway. An old man, about 90 years old showed this to me one day. He showed me how 25% of the building was on Norwegian ground, and 75% of the house was on Swedish ground. When I was sitting there, I felt I was in another world. The people who built the place realised that if the police from one country came to arrest them, then they could simply move to another part of the house and they would be safe! You might be in trouble in Sweden, and you're sitting in the kitchen, so when the Swedish police come, you just go into the dining room! Yes, Romani people are very clever.

We are also determined. We will continue to find ways to reunite our families and our people. This is the work of my lifetime. It began many years ago and it will continue.