

Our very own gipsy daughter

In Hungary 800 to 1000 children are adopted annually. Currently there are 3500 to 4000 couples waiting in line for adoption. Due to a lack of official registry, the percentage of gipsies among adopted children is unknown. Estimates are around 20 to 40 percent, but experience shows that the number of adoptive parents declaring they would be willing to adopt gipsy children is smaller than that. The following story is the story of an adoptive couple –told from the perspective of the adoptive mother – who declared willingness to the above mentioned question, and stood by their decision.

The fact that only about ten percent of adoptive parents would be willing to adopt gipsy children has several consequences. A number of gipsy babies and children are adopted abroad, while some of them are adopted by families already raising one or more gipsy children. In addition, a large number of gipsy children remain in state custody and never have their own family.

” In the beginning they kept asking us the same two questions,” began the mother. ” Why do we want to adopt when we have two children of our own, and if we want to adopt someone, why someone like this?” Of course, we could have been offended by these questions, but that wouldn’t have taken us anywhere, so instead, hopeless as it seemed at times, we tried to explain the reasons. ” For us adoption was not an alternative to giving birth, but a means of family planning: those children needed a family, or rather a place in a family and we felt our family had vacancy.” It was much harder to give an answer that would convince everyone to the latter question. ” We just felt we wanted another baby, and the colour of skin was irrelevant in this matter.

According to the Regional Child Caretaking Services (Területi Gyermekvédelmi Szakszolgálatok, Tegyesz) current legislation does not allow for the child custody system to register the ethnic origin of children up for adoption (except for the rare cases when the natural mother declares that origin). In practice things are different, and one may find written proof of the ethnic origin. We spoke to parents who, only a few years ago, filled out questionnaires which specifically inquired about the preferences of the adoptive parents regarding ethnic origin of the child to be

adopted. That question is no longer on the form currently in use. When would-be- and practicing adoptive parents were asked whether they thought this PC legislative move was realistic in a prejudiced society, the answers were diverse.

Potential adoptive parents are being thoroughly questioned, among other things, about their willingness to adopt a child of gipsy origin. This is a very pragmatic question, although legally unfit, since the authorities are not in search of children for parents, but of families for children, and surely a family that would not accept a certain skin colour couldn't be the right family.

" We said yes without further contemplation," the mother continues, " the whole thing seemed to be a distant, less likely scenario. Usually at the time when you answer these questions you are, in fact, years away from your actual baby. But for us the scenario materialised in little more than half a year. The phone rang, they called from the hospital saying a child had been born that the mother put up for adoption, and following open adoption procedure, we could take her home soon. From the outset I was sure it was a girl and a gipsy. (We once heard from a guardian that almost everyone wants to have a blonde, blue-eyed boy, so you have to wait less for creole girls.) However, I knew I wanted to see this baby, and I knew that if I felt I could love her as my own daughter, I would take her home, without thinking twice. I called my husband, he came home from work, we got in the car and were off to the hospital. A social worker greeted us, gave us green gowns, led us down a narrow corridor, and there we were beside a tiny bed, with a charming, little creole girl sleeping in it.

At the pre-adoption training, they would tell you that when prospective parents saw the baby for the first time, they would know right away whether it was their baby or not. This was hard to believe, but it was true: we looked at the baby, then looked at each other and had only one question left: when could we take her home. That didn't happen right away, of course, since adoption involves tons of paperwork, so we had time to reflect. I couldn't say we had no doubts, but it wasn't about what you would think. We decided in that instant that she was our girl, and even though we were the only ones who knew about the decision, it was irrevocable. We had no uncertainties about ourselves, but were afraid of how people around us would react. We were afraid that they would hurt her because of her gipsy origin, and that it would be hard for her, and for us, to bear."

Even experts are divided over the question why (based on estimates) no more than ten percent of adoptive parents choose Roma children in this country. One theory claims that the above mentioned forms filter people, while another theory asserts there is more to it than that. The

latter theory talks of the institution of “dissuasion” (and by that we don’t just mean “innocent” argumentation like early sexual maturation, often there is talk about “genetic criminal strain”), which, very effectively, amplifies prejudices common in most people, and whoever had but a tiny bit of doubt will be discouraged.

The biggest problem is the social environment. The not-so hidden anti-gipsy notions, or reservations at best, that are so hard to overcome, are unveiled in these situations.

“It was so typical: whoever heard that we were soon to adopt a girl would, within a minute or so, directly or indirectly, inquire: ‘She is not gipsy, is she?’”

Even the closest family members were no exception to this rule. The same prejudices were common among guardians, as well. “One of the guardians, a very kind lady by the way, before signing the temporary decree, pulled me aside and asked me if I had seen the mother of the child, for her skin colour was as black as a Brazilian’s, and that we were still in time to withdraw our request. All we needed to do, she said, was wait a little longer, and we would surely find some other child...”

Declaring that one is willing to adopt gipsy children as well, will not necessarily be an advantage, at least not in every county. It would be considered a drawback in places with a lot of prospective adoptive parents from abroad, who often specifically apply for gipsy babies. Another assumption is that guardians use the question as a filter to “sift” parents. The system is still dependent on the pro-person funding of children in state custody, so there is a good reason not to place children with families. The proof that this is more than just a theory can be found in the results of the State Audit Office’s study, which observed that in order to maintain their state custody institutes, municipalities have a vested interest in running a full house. Maybe this also explains why in the Netherlands, a country with a population equal in number to that of Hungary’, only much richer, there are 300 to 400 children in state custody institutes, while in Hungary that number is fifty times higher. The number of children “taken away” from gipsy families is much higher, as the child custody authority renders many parents unfit for fostering. The reasons are not always financial, the authorities are not trained to handle the differing lifestyle of the gipsies properly, and do not realise that financial short comings can be compensated by the loving family.

“We met the mother twice, and both occasions were very memorable. We first met her a few hours after birth, she was weak and very tired. We were terribly embarrassed, this wasn’t an

everyday situation, a mother was about to let go of her daughter, and was sizing us to see whether we would be good parents to her child. She was quicker in overcoming her perplexity and started asking all kinds of things about our two sons, how old they were, what they liked to play, whether we had a garden and a dog and whether we read bedtime stories and what the favorite toys of our kids were. She was trying to get a picture of how we lived a family life. She even asked why we wanted to adopt a baby, whether I could have no more children. She even told us why she decided to put the baby up for adoption. I don't want to go in to too much detail, but it seems there are circumstances when you just don't have any other choice. She was a simple, open and honest gipsy woman, and she did have a very dark skin, but after the first words we spoke, that didn't matter anymore because she handled the situation so well, and made it so much easier for us, as well. It was evident that it mattered to her very much where her child would be taken, and it was such a special feeling to know that we were up to her very high standards. Probably this whole thing was not deliberate, but had it been, she could not have had arranged it more cleverly, and we are still grateful to her, because those were very difficult moments for us, and we knew that it was even more difficult for her. We met once more in the court of guardians when she signed the waiver form and other papers. It was a heart breaking moment, she fumbled with the letters, writing was probably hard for her, and she could not see the paper from the tears in her eyes. Then she held my hands and said, 'Take care of this little girl. I know you will love her very much.' I, of course, promised her I would, but I felt there was really not much to say."

According to the statement of the Data Protection Commissioner child protection laws were not clear cut with regard to the registration of data on the ethnic origin of children. The law rules that in the case of a substitutional custody of a child, the freedom of religion and faith must be respected, and national, ethnic and cultural affiliation be observed. Religious, national and ethnic affiliation qualify as special personal data, and as such its registration and processing must be carried out in strict accordance to legal conditions and only in case the data subject, having received proper briefing, approved to data processing. In case of a minor, especially an infant, such an approval is obviously impossible, thus, following legal standards, the approval may be substituted by the approval of the parent (legal guardian). The Personal Data Commissioner, however, voiced his concern over whether a person who puts his or her child up for adoption has the right to make a decision in a matter that can substantially influence the future of the child. According to the Commissioner the question of whether the authorities partaking in the adoption, observing the best interest of the child, should be allowed to deviate from the word-for-word application of laws, or should unconditionally follow the instructions of

a parent whose waiver of parental rights may have been a result of the parent's own conduct, is yet to be answered. The expert also worded a recommendation worth accepting: he suggested that parents who undertake the adoption of a gipsy child should participate in a series of discussions where they would be forewarned and prepared for the expected reactions of their environment, and made fit to protect their child from the harmful consequences of the conduct of those who are unwilling to accept diversity.

"After we took our daughter home, the guests started coming. All our relatives and friends wanted to see her. We received all kinds of advice from the most 'obvious' about not letting her bath in the sun, to the one about not giving her carrots to prevent carotinoid colouring her skin. Everyone wanted to persuade us to 'keep her as white as possible.' However, we also saw that all initial reservations disappeared the moment they saw our baby or held her in their hands. At times like those, she ceased to be a gipsy girl, and was just a girl, without any epithets. A girl who had beautiful skin and big brown eyes, and was easy to fall in love with."

"However, we were left with a dilemma which caught us unprepared: it was up to us to determine the identity of our child, it was up to us whether she would be able to come to terms with her gipsiness," said the mother, introducing a new perspective. "We had the chance to just ignore it, making her skin colour a tiny handicap, that was easy to compensate, or turn it into an extra gift in her life, a thing to be proud of. We soon learnt that being a gipsy was not an objective category but a set of assumptions and prejudices triggered by ethnic, lingual, clothing and behavioral strains. If we didn't create those things for her, if everyone in the kindergarden saw that we were her parents, and when we fetched her we had with us our little boy with hair that was blonde, and skin that was as white as a dove, then to people in the outside world she would not be a gipsy, not even to the ones who knew we adopted her. I must admit that at first we were relieved to find that those harmful prejudices just didn't stand for our daughter. But then we had long discussions and realised that if we chose not to take notice of her roots and "deny" them we would in fact deny her of her heritage, and that was not ours to take away. That was probably the hardest decision of all, but the longer we contemplated, the clearer it became. Should we be unable to accept her in her entirety, along with her origin, we would not be able to love her as much as she deserved to be loved. And this was not to say that we should be demonstrating something. If we lived as a family and raised her as our daughter, she would be treated as our daughter by the outside world, whatever colour her skin may be. She was never bullied because of that in the kindergarden or at the playground – and I can assure anyone shying away from adopting a gipsy child because of such things that they are not bound

to happen. The fact that she is a gipsy should be known by us, somewhere on the inside, and we should not be ashamed of it, or deny it, so she will not either, not that there would be any reason for it. That is why we read her gipsy tales and listen to gipsy songs, so that she will become acquainted with the culture, so when the time comes for her to find out about her identity she will have a choice. In the meantime we are very proud of her, and what she is. That basically determines the way she sees herself.

“We also learnt that positive stereotypes about gipsies also exist in society, they just surface less often, and that our daughter was the perfect example,” the mother introduces a new perspective. “She has exceptional hearing and a sense of rhythm, can learn the most complex of tunes in a matter of moments and memorise poems with a rhythm real easily. She is good at dancing, mimics moves from the TV, practices in front of the mirror and makes self-corrections. She is also considered very good in kindergarden exercises involving movement coordination. She connects well with people and has fine communicational skills, she easily becomes intimate with strangers and makes herself liked. She is full of trust, as she lacks negative experience. We hope to make sure that she won’t have any either. We protect her, and keep her from harm’s way, and tell her that the majority of people are nice, but that she should also be able to handle the hopeless members of the intolerant minority.

“She’s been with us for three years, and we believe we could not have been given a greater gift,” the mother ends her story. “She is our very own gipsy daughter, and if we do things the right way that won’t mean less to her than saying she is our very own daughter. It might even mean a little more.