

How God Is Breaking Walls of Racism—in Europe

I can't communicate too well with my friend Dániel Kovács. He doesn't speak much English, and I only know three phrases in Hungarian. But last week we sat beside each other in a worship conference and enjoyed fellowship with the help of a translator.

Dániel is my brother in Christ. But many people in Europe look down on him because he is a Gypsy. He faces huge obstacles because Gypsies—also known as the Roma people—have the highest rates of unemployment, illiteracy and poverty in Eastern Europe, along with the lowest life expectancy rates.

Dániel and the people in his village of Uszka, in northeast Hungary, suffer from what is known as *antiziganism*, the hatred of Gypsies. It is racial profiling at its worst. It has plagued Europe since the Roma people arrived from India in their caravans 600 years ago. The highest Gypsy populations are in Romania, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Hungary, Slovakia and Spain, but Gypsies are scattered all over Europe and the Middle East—and many have come to North America.

Wherever they go, they experience discrimination.

Antiziganism reached its peak during the 1940s, when German Nazis murdered between 250,000 and 500,000 Gypsies in concentration camps. Like the Jews, many Gypsies were starved or gassed; others were sterilized. Scientists also used Gypsies as human guinea pigs for diabolical experiments because they felt their slightly darker skin made them racially inferior.

The Gypsy genocide in Europe was called “the devouring.” But even though Europeans eventually condemned what the Nazis did, antiziganist feelings have remained strong. Today, Gypsy

children are still segregated in their own substandard schools, and Gypsy adults are denied work. Many Gypsies resort to crime in order to exist in this oppressed state, thus reinforcing the stereotype that they are all criminals.

Racism against Gypsies has been compared to what African-Americans suffered in the United States in the Jim Crow era or what blacks endured in the apartheid years in South Africa. Up until the 1960s in England, it was common to see signs in pubs that read "NO BLACKS, NO DOGS, NO GYPSIES."

A poll in England just 10 years ago showed that a third of British people still have racist feelings toward Gypsies. These feelings are even stronger in Eastern Europe, where Gypsies are viewed as a public health threat. Some people fear serious violence could erupt in Hungary because anti-Gypsy sentiment is being fueled by right-wing politicians.

Zsolt Bayer, a Hungarian journalist who is now an elected official representing the Fidesz Party, grabbed headlines in January of this year when he made this shocking statement: "Most Gypsies are not suitable for cohabitation. They are not suitable for being among people. Most are animals and behave like animals. They shouldn't be tolerated or understood but stamped out."

Statements from leaders like Bayer have fueled suspicion of Gypsies, causing an increase in the number of racially motivated assaults of Gypsy people in Eastern Europe. Romanis have been attacked in their homes, in workplaces and in markets. The victims of these incidents of racial profiling include children and the elderly.

Yet amid the darkness of racism in Hungary, a bright light is shining among Pentecostal and charismatic Christians who have been building bridges of reconciliation and healing. Gypsy people have been open to the moving of the Holy Spirit for many years, and ethnic Hungarian churches are working in

partnership with them.

When I preached at a worship conference last week in the city of Debrecen, I invited my friend Dániel; his father, who is a Gypsy pastor; and two other Gypsy guys to perform a popular Gypsy praise chorus for everyone. The audience cheered, not just because Dániel's team performed so skillfully, but also because Hungarian Christians realize God is breaking down walls that man has not been able to dismantle for centuries.

And I know the same God who is tearing down the stronghold of antiziganism in Europe can break racism in America—even when the Trayvon Martin case in Florida seems to have reinforced racial divisions in our country.

The apostle Paul wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28, NASB). That verse has broad application: to Native Americans who have suffered on our reservations; to Aborigines who have been marginalized in Australia; to warring tribes in Africa; to Gypsies in Europe; and to African-American men who feel they are labeled criminals simply because of their skin color.

Racism is alive and well in the world today, and it will never be stopped by juries, street protests, riots or even legislation. Christ alone, through the power of the Holy Spirit, can give us the kind of love that looks beyond the outside to see the heart.

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