

# Dispatch from the citizens of nowhere

By Karoline Hjorth

---

**Casilino 900 is not mentioned on any must- see lists in glossy Italian travel guides but is competing for the glare of the international media with the most spectacular of Rome's tourist attractions.**

Tucked away on the outskirts of the 'city of love', hundreds of families from the largest and most marginalised ethnic minority in Europe share their land with rats and mountains of garbage.

Campo Casilino 900 has no waste collecting points or electricity, no running water except outdoor taps and no sanitation except overflowed Portaloos where flies are commuting between the chemical toilets and food prepared on makeshift stoves outdoors.

But you cannot send letters of complaint or pity to this address because it has no street sign or mailboxes.

Most of the residents of the oldest Romani camp in the capital of Italy have come from Rumania, Kosovo, Bosnia, Macedonia or other regions of former Yugoslavia.

Some moved in yesterday while others have been here for decades.

"Roma people have been living in Italy for seven centuries and many of us are born native Italians but the Italian government have collectively considered us as nomads who must live in segregated camps", says writer and former refugee Najo Adzovic.

Najo came to Italy as a "deserter and a traitor" in 1990 at the beginning of the Yugoslav civil war.

## **The invisible people**

Sub- officer Adzovic had received a mission by the Serbian army to shoot 15 young Muslims but rejected the execution and fled to Italy and the way of life he knew from his father and his ancestors.

Almost two decades later his life in the slum has become pages in his book *The Invisible People* and he still lives in Casilino 900 with his wife and five children.

Najo has embraced the honour and duties as the Roma community's informal leader and explains with great pathos how the invisible people of Casilino 900 are a vibrant mix of children, teenagers and families who most of all wish to be treated like normal Italian citizens are treated.

“Most of the people living here are refugees from the conflicts in the Balkans and what we need are jobs, housing and status. We are fighting for our children to engage in society”, he says as his 14-year-old daughter Marta walks by.

Being asked what she would like to say if everyone were listening, she looks at her father and at the sea of mud outside her family’s makeshift home.

“I am a Rom. I want to leave this place to become a reporter and explore my world”, she says.

Nostalgic grand mothers and grand fathers dream of a return to better times while Najo and his men juggle between small- scale business ideas and frequent struggles with the local authorities.

The camp is under strict control, visitors are regulated and the police are drawing a fine line between social intervention and ghettoisation. .

### **Roma politics and Balkan beats**

Whenever Najo gets the opportunity, he puts on his finest suit and enters Parliament to take part in the innumerable debates on the development of Roma politics.

Balkan beats are booming out of the speakers in the car on the way back from yet another dead end debate with local politicians.

Najo shouts out the words he did not get the chance to contribute with half an hour earlier:

“They have confined us to the margins of our host cities and they are segregating us from the non-Roma neighbourhoods. Roma everywhere in Europe are becoming one of the major elements of urban conflict and we need a voice.”

With the recent expansion of the European Union Italy is now experiencing an upsurge of Roma integration, with an estimated Roma population of 140,000 to 170,000 according to the Italian Ministry of Interior.

Around half of these are Italian citizens while the rest are stateless or citizens of other, primarily eastern European countries.

The exodus of Romas and other immigrants since the expansion of EU has caused severe headache for Berlusconi’s coalition with Forza Italia, the anti-immigrant Northern League and the “post-Fascist” Alleanza Nazionale.

## **Berlusconi's Romani crackdown**

After winning the election last spring with a promised crackdown on crime and illegal immigration, Berlusconi's team introduced a range of controversial legislative measures that fed the international papers with headlines for months.

One particular method targeted towards "irregular immigrants" caused an international political storm by requiring all Roma to be fingerprinted and identified by their ethnicity- a move that was unprecedented in post-war Europe.

Due to the international outrage they have now modified the plans so that all Italian citizens will be fingerprinted by 2010 and illegal immigration will become a crime that could lead to up to four years of prison.

According to Amnesty International, EU citizens may also be expelled if they cannot prove their "economic resources" for longer than three months.

Thousands of Roma cannot prove their length of stay in Italy without a residency permit with a recognized address end up as prime target for these measures against "irregular immigrants".

If Berlusconi's team gets its way, the 800 inhabitants of Casilino 900 will therefore be forced to leave their makeshift dwellings made up of old wooden doors, corrugated iron, plastic and fabric.

Faced with extensive poverty, travel restrictions and social exclusion, combined with a lack of legal protection, employment prospects or the right to participate in political process, stateless Roma are left to their decaying caravans without wheels or anywhere to go.

"Poor Romas are moochers, rich Romas are criminals; professional or intellectual Romas- well they just can't be happy-go-lucky-Gypsies."

## **The 'gypsie issue'**

"The Gypsie Issue" is conventionally formulated either as a mere social problem or as a historically romantic and mythical figure.

It is easy to get blinded by ethnicity when walking through the Roma camp but Casilino 900 is not filled with exotic dancers or violin players.

They are all at work in central Rome begging at the restaurant tables of romantic pasta-loving tourists since all other avenues for gainful employment seem to be legally eliminated or denied.

### **International orphans**

But the Roma people have a long history of cultural blending and adaptability.

Europe's international orphans persistently cling on to the margins of society, and Casilino 900's teenagers are not content with their allocated margins.

Marta Adzovic practices her journalist future and asks her friends what they would tell anyone who would care to listen.

Sonia wants a cleaner camp and a Jacuzzi, while Bechan says he is waiting for the day when Roma get the chance to work again.

Zair wishes politics did not exist and Sabrina just wants some peace and quiet. Delwis wonders how his world would look without borders.

Growing up outside of society, yet being surrounded by it and connected to it, Najo attempts to conclude on Romani life's never-ending transitional state:

"There have been so many attempts to deny us our identity, to isolate us, to remove us, even to exterminate us. But none of it has worked."

"The only solution then", Najo proposes, "is to compromise, Roma and non-Roma need to learn how to exist and live in the same world."