

## **Living with Roma in a Ghetto for a Fortnight Every Day a New Challenge**

By Annemarie Dick, Aalen

Since March 2010 I have been working from Germany for a Roma ghetto in Bulgaria. 3000 people live in this ghetto, 70 % of them being children.

About 130 Roma children and young people are attended to by Frank Abbas and his team of volunteers.

In November 2010 I went there for my first visit. Every day I spent time with the Roma people and had many occasions to get to know them. In spite of great poverty, unemployment, financial problems and many other difficulties, the Roma are friendly, obliging and ready to help! They live together with ethnic Bulgarians who come to the ghetto nearly every day to teach lessons to these children and to help them. The Roma accept the help. They do their very best to become self-reliant and independent.

Now there are classes of Roma children at a public school in Varna. To go to school challenges these children anew every day. On the one hand, the parents are obstructing as they do not realise, or only with difficulty, that school attendance is compulsory for their children. Some of the children have never held a pencil in their hand before and have no idea of lines or of sitting still, but they work very hard! I was present during lessons and talked with the teacher, the school psychologist. It is extremely hard work for these children and for teachers and helpers, but this work is not in vain! I learned with joy that the young adults are catching up to get their school leaving certificate and have passed some exams with very good results.



Unfortunately, Frank Abbas still has to face many difficulties. School uniforms had to be paid for by him, as some documents allegedly had got lost. He also had to purchase the complete school materials, as the public authorities in charge turned a deaf ear. It was an enormous amount of money. I was present when the purchases were made.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> day of my visit the electricity was cut off all of a sudden. All the documents and receipts were collected together, then we went to the supplier. We could prove that everything had been paid, but the lady at the counter said that we should pay again. In 2 or 3 months they would have checked the case and the money would then be repaid. Ok, what could we do but pay?

The next day: Shopping again, school materials for private lessons in the afternoon. By and by money ran short, and we still needed food for about 130 children and the salaries for the tuition teachers were also due.

I helped to compare the prices. Together with 3 youths and a pencil and paper, we went to 4 big food stores. We took down the amounts and prices of the most important groceries to compare them. Back in the ghetto we then compared everything, ok, then we could buy food for nearly the next fortnight.

The 12<sup>th</sup> day of my stay – electricity cut-off! I was shocked as I was present myself when everything was paid for the second time. It was explained to me that something like this happens quite frequently. This time it took only a telephone call to get light again.

One day the telephone connection was cut off, each day there was something else, and Frank Abbas had to deal with public authorities, parents, school officials. We never got bored.

We also had a lot of good time with the Roma of which I would not want to miss one minute, one second!

In my opinion it is important to get to know much more about the Roma people and to reduce prejudices. Many Roma look for better living conditions but they are often still excluded. Why don't they get better chances - from us, for example, who call ourselves Christians? I will do it with the help of God, as far as I can.

**Wealth should be moderated, poverty should be limited.**

**Goethe already said:**

*Whatever you can do, or dream of doing, start doing.*

