

Report for
The Open Society Institute

The Mother Project

Bacau, Romania
Spring 2003



*Conducted by Laura Simms, Mediator's Foundation Inc.
in collaboration with Fundatia de Sprijin Comunitar
"Ready, Willing, and Able"*

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Laura Simms, Director of the Gaindeh Project (an international storytelling initiative to aid people in crisis around the world), has completed The Mother Project in Bacau, Romania, generously funded by the Open Society Institute. The fourteen workshops conducted over three visits to Romania between February to June 2003 provided women with inspiration and skills for retelling and creating traditional and personal stories as a means of empowerment, to strengthen living skills, and to give them tools in order to communicate, make needs known, and to envision a future not bounded by a sense of hopelessness and victimization. They were also provided with new tales and the capacity to share these tales with their children and families.

The Mother Project was designed as a creative intervention to strengthen self-esteem, offer immediate relief from stress and hopelessness, and develops fertile ground for sustainable behavioral change. In addition it attempted to provide Roma women with an effective means of maintaining and strengthening their sense of cultural and personal integrity while they received training for housing and mainstream jobs. Fundatia de Sprijin Comunitar, Gata, Dispus si Capabil, our Romanian partner, gets Roma children off the streets, away from begging and into the schools. The women are becoming supportive storytellers and communicators, both at home and in the schools their children attend. They are bringing stories, language skills and creative capacities to their children, themselves and their communities.

“You opened our souls. We had forgotten that we can be happy or that we had happiness in our childhoods. Something happened to us here.”

-- Roma Mother

Twenty-one women, ranging in age from 17 to 50 years, participated in the fourteen workshops. They were first-year participants of “Ready, Willing and Able,” a vocational training project that prepares Roma women for housing, medical assistance and menial jobs. The therapy they receive focuses primarily on how to work with and for Romanian employees, manage family life, and cope with the prejudice the Roma people encounter in Romanian society. Our program builds communication skills and strengthens the inner facilities needed to help these women to make this transition from unemployment to inclusion in mainstream society with dignity and meaning.

All of the women are married and have several children. (Their children attend a transitional school for Roma children. Many move on to regular schools; some return to the streets.) Their living situations are less than basic and are riddled with poverty. 65% of Roma women without papers have no access to contraception, 28% of women between the ages of 16 and 50 have borne 6 to 10 children; 6.7% of them had had more than 10 children, while making massive use of abortion for lack of proper health education. A further factor for ill health is the low vaccination rate among Roma, which fosters the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and polio among Roma communities.

At our first sessions (March 2003) the women's verbal skills were very basic; their willingness to speak openly was limited. After two months of storytelling activities their ability to construct narrative, use images, discuss issues, and make their needs known improved tremendously. Many were habitually reticent because of the abuse and negative perceptions they encounter in their daily lives. There is a 59% illiteracy rate amongst Roma women and these women seemed to reflect that statistic: some could read, others could not. The women are not used to others showing interest in them as worthwhile individuals; they are unaccustomed to being seen for their goodness, creativity and resourcefulness. They flourished before our eyes.

"The women cheered up. It was beyond my expectations to see what they can do and who they are. I want this project to continue."

-- Leslie Hawke, director of GDC

During the second phase (April 2003) the Roma women created stories about their childhoods, taking pride in describing gypsy gatherings and cultural ideas that they had not spoken of with trust at the start. These stories, along with the others they have constructed, are printed in Romanian and posted on the walls of "Doinitza," their meeting house.

The third phase (June 2003) combined seeing the women for four workshops and were more about their discussing their lives, their struggles and creating alternative and potential pathways of change. We talked about their relationship to other Roma tribes, and their interest in becoming accepted into Romanian schools. Our emphasis became less storytelling and more about how to listen to oneself, to each other, and to communicate with clarity and straightforwardness, rather than as a victim or with frustration. This session was particularly hopeful and intense. The new trust they felt in themselves and with us, the staff, and the feeling of actualized hope for their futures was palpable. Ms. Simms felt this was a great achievement. They were about to engage in a community project of fixing their houses, and purchasing needed beds and wood burning stoves through a USAID grant. Our conversations were a good foundation for sustaining this sense of moving forward and using their success as a touchstone for the future. We ended by reviewing the initial personal childhood stories they had told. This time the tales were fully developed, included more memories and images. We decided to meet again in the fall, which we did this past November 2003, to put in motion some baby steps toward their actualizing their dreams.

Program Activities and Accomplishments

The first three workshop sessions (March 2003), two to four hours each, engaged the women in a process that involved memory training, imaging, solving story problems, creating varied endings and, finally, creating a story together. (The story is attached to this report.) All of the stories that the women recalled and retold were taped, and many were transcribed. Each woman received a packet of stories to read to her children, and a journal in which to record her own tales and thoughts.

In the second phase (April 2003), consisting of four two-hour workshops, the women created stories and engaged in a series of exercises that build communication skills and strengthen self-esteem through telling their own stories; solving problems based on daily issues; relaxation and

team building. The change in their sense of self-worth, their capacity to experience joy, and their ability speak openly was profound. To support the continuation of the project, Ms. Simms gave two workshops in communication skills to staff working with Roma women and children.

In the third and last phase (June 2003) communication was much improved, and the relationship between the Gata staff and the women was also improved. The women had finally received trust and respect from the staff who until this time had seen them more as people to be fixed, than as individuals. For everyone it was a very potent and fruitful process.

Ms. Simms' hope is that we can continue and document the work more fully so it can be replicated and also so that these women can improve their life skills further.

The structure of each session is essential to the progress Ms. Simms has made. Each session began with the women talking about their daily lives and state of mind. Then games were introduced that strengthen skills of focus and awareness, and reinforce a satisfying sense of teamwork. Through words and images, they practiced using the faculties of imagination and perception, with a lot of attention on descriptive emotional language; then they moved into storymaking. Ms. Simms told at least two stories in each session. The mothers relished being engaged in this way, and receiving stimulating and refreshing sensory, emotional and intellectual input. Each session closed with a circle where the women reflected on what has occurred and shared their wishes for their own and each other's good fortune.

As the weeks progressed, the women added the elements of singing Roma songs and talking about their homes. Ms. Simms' process combines slow and steady progress with gentle, comforting tales. Continuous discussion and training of staff became part of the daily activities. Ms. Simms also traveled to see how the women and their families lived and worked. Storytelling sessions for the children took place in their school, Stefenita, where the mothers attended if possible.

Evaluation Sessions

For the first visit (in March), Ms. Simms brought Romanian therapist Daniella Cornestean (with whom she had worked before) to act as both therapist and translator. In weekly evaluation sessions, Ms. Cornestean helped Ms. Simms to see and understand how simple things -- such as the women bonding with each other, or leaning in to listen, and committing time to the session without leaving or falling asleep -- were indications that the program was having a positive effect. Ms. Cornestean was amazed at how open and cheerful the women became in the workshops. Ms. Simms was also assisted by Wendy Phillips of the Alex Fund, a drama therapist from New York, who participated in the evaluation sessions and took photos. (see attached)

"They are developing a group dynamic. They trust the situation and each other, now. Hence, they can learn to trust themselves. I have never seen this happen so fast and with such strength. Change will not happen overnight; this is an excellent beginning"

-- Daniella Cornestean, therapist (The Joseph Foundation, Iasi)

During the second visit, Laura worked exclusively with the Romanian therapists designated to work with the Roma women to mentor them in storytelling techniques and support their process. Present at the evaluation meetings were a Roma mother; Dr. Florin Drezliu, the

women's physician; and Leslie Hawke, director of Gata.

"They have no place to work, no money, nothing to eat. It is difficult to help them. It is a hard job. I can help people by seeing the physical signs. If you want to really help someone you have to involve the soul. To bring out the good part that exists in everyone. What you are doing is important."

Dr. Florin Drezliu,, medical doctor for Gata

The last visit was attended by Leslie Hawke, the director of Gata and her main teacher Maria Gheorgio. It was very important that both the women and Leslie were able to be in dialogue about their lives in this way. We taped these sessions and are still in process of transcribing the last tapes.

Impact: How the Women Responded to the Project

The women loved the project and wanted to continue. They expressed tremendous excitement about "remembering and feeling the joy that we knew in our childhoods, that we had forgotten about." They bonded easily with one another and trusted Ms. Simms. At the outset, most of the women appeared to be depressed, hopelessness and angry. This was understandable, given the fact that they are usually treated as persons who "need fixing," rather than as the resourceful and struggling individuals they are. It is difficult for them to maintain their enthusiasm when Ms. Simms is not present, but they did bring stories to their children and progressed by leaps and bounds in their ability to construct meaningful narrative in the second phase of workshops.

"The storytelling work is essential. It is far more than storytelling. I worked with them last summer and would never have believed that they could show themselves in this way. I am astonished at their strength and intelligence."

—Vali Rancilor, art therapist, Gasteni

At the end of the second phase, one woman, Doinitza, gathered all the women in a circle to give Ms. Simms a gift: they sang a Gypsy song and then blessed one another, discussing the Roma Easter celebrations called Green Thursday. They asked to meet for one hour a week (in their very full schedule) to share their stories while Ms. Simms was gone.

Really, the end of the third phase, our last sessions, was actually a celebration and a new beginning. We had achieved something precious: not only empowerment, but an abiding recognition that their own inherent ability to find joy, resilience, hope, and zeal for change was inextinguishable regardless of circumstance.

Next Steps

Laura returned in November 2003 and in February 2004 to implement a new phase of the project. During this visit, she developed further training, work with the Romanian therapists based on our last conversations about creating a sustainable work for the future based on their own creating of businesses over the next five years; and Laura met with a second group of women who will participate in the project beginning in spring 2004. These women arrived excited and ready. They had been told by the first group about the experience and it was easy to engage them in speaking about their lives and creating and sharing stories. Ms. Simms has applied for

funds from the US Embassy “Democracy Now” fund to continue. We would like to ask Open Society for further funds to continue this work, as well as to document the next groups work so we can make the process available to others working with this and other ethnic minorities.

The work on the three phases of the project laid the foundation for subsequent work. In the future, Ms. Simms will have the women tell stories to groups of Roma children and then evaluate and discuss their stories with one another. A more in-depth training is also planned for the Doinitza staff, during which they will undergo the same exercises as the Roma women. This experience will help to increase the staff members’ understanding of the value of the project and inspire them to think about ways to continue the work in the future.

In the first sessions of the second phase, the women had an opportunity to discuss their preferences for what they would like to do next. They wanted to continue creating stories, this time more about their own lives. They created twelve stories on the issues of theft, honesty and community. These tales are being translated into Romanian so they can explore the responses of their children and husbands.

In the future, we plan to bring in a video camera to document the sessions for the first time. (Ms. Simms’ intention during the first two phases was to be as non-intrusive as possible, to allow the time needed to build trust and to give the women an opportunity to speak freely about what they hoped to gain from participating in the project and their preferences regarding project methodology and activities.) Our last session will include a celebration in the village of Buhusi, where most of the women live; as well as an evaluation session with all of them present to contribute their suggestions for future project development.

Program Development

Our work thus far seems to confirm our theory that regardless of how many external changes the Roma women make to improve their lives -- through housing, medical help, job training and life skills -- to make these changes enduring and self-sustaining, it is essential that the women develop their internal (intellectual, emotional and spiritual) capacities for transformation and meaning in their own lives. As they continue to gain self-awareness, the women will need consistent, ongoing professional support.

The potential of this project to impact the women’s lives in a self-sustaining way also depends on the further training of staff to reinforce the behavioral changes being made by the women. Ms. Simms plans to continue the project through next year (2005) and is currently applying for additional funding from private funders, the US Embassy, and foundations.

The Mother Project is developing strategies that can be replicated as a model for other projects working with populations that are in transition and under stress from poverty, social marginalization and racial prejudice. Future plans include: video documentation (June 2004 – June 2005); a book of stories created by the Roma women; and a digital documentary recording of the mothers’ stories and Roma songs. (Vali Rancilor will work with us on this documentation.)

In addition, our Roma mothers will work side by side with Romanian storytellers, telling stories in the schools to introduce positive aspects of both cultures to school children. The Mother

Project will also work with a neighborhood initiative to encourage social activities in the community based on storytelling and sharing of issues and ideas in a creative and productive way.

Conclusion:

Multicultural enrichment protects and enhances civil society. The fundamental goal of the Mother Project is to create an atmosphere of trust in which the Roma women can take pride in their gypsy heritage as a part of themselves that they do not have to relinquish in order to live in mainstream Romanian culture. "The long road" is the Roma people's ethnic birthright: a healthy and active imagination sustains the "traveler" throughout his or her life's journey. Gaining a new perspective on what was originally non-self-reflective existence connects the Roma women with their ancestors and renders them bi-cultural -- participants in both the Roman and Romanian cultures.

The Gaindeh Project and Laura Simms are grateful to the Open Society for their generous support. Through such alliances The Mother Project can continue to grow; offering happiness, empowerment and hope to the Roma women of Romania. And, if we can receive further funding, this can be categorized into a work manual that can be utilized in many situations throughout the world.

Project Goals

- 1.** Break the cycle of habituated hopelessness and fury; improve state of mind and self image; nurture relaxation and sense of hope; provide models of thinking, inspiration, and emotional wholesomeness that remind women of their childhood happiness, ability to solve problems, capacity to dream of an empowered future.
- 2.** Transform the conditioning of being a victim into someone willing and able to help themselves by gaining viable internal skills to recognize.
- 3.** inherent ability to imagine, solve problems, be joyful regardless of circumstance recognize to learn what skills are needed.
- 4.** Recognize the cultural mindset of Romanians and make adjustments in behavior without losing self-esteem. Feel confident to try new things as a learning curve without feeling that you are giving away identity.
- 5.** Access and develop group trust and communication facility.
- 6.** Renew and discover an appreciation for Roma heritage and the history of the Roma in Romania and Europe. Appreciate the diversity within Roma culture and assimilate without losing connection to the past.
- 7.** Gain skills for benefit of children and community
- 8.** Learn to focus, to rest the mind, to listen, to discern actual danger from projected fear of rejection. Develop capacity to respond instead of react speaking clearly one at a time with respect for different opinions.
- 9.** Learn to live rather than survive.



The Hidden Story

In Bacau, a group of women came together in order to remember a story. Each of them had heard a piece of the story, but it was hidden in their memories. They did not know that they had the story, until one day they decided to find it together. Piece by piece, the old story came to life again.

A very long time ago, an old man and an old woman told an ancient story to their children. It passed from generation to generation. Then it happened that after many years only one girl in the world still knew the story. When she grew up, she married and told the story to her husband. However, they had no children.


When the couple were young, their parents did not want them to marry. The girl's mother saw a witch/wise woman who said, "If your daughter marries without your permission she will not have a child." But the girl and the boy loved each other and they married. They went to live in a small village in a small house near a forest. They grew old and remained poor. But they wished that before they died they would have a child of their own.


One day the old man went to the forest and saw a pig and her piglets in the mud. The mother pig grew afraid and ran with all her babies, except one that got stuck in the mud. So the old man took the little piglet home and he and his old wife called the piglet their son. Shortly after that the old woman dreamed of a Zana (fairywoman). She showed her a baby in a cradle at the end of a road. When the old woman awoke she went out and there on the road was a little baby in a cradle. Since there was no one near by, she took the child, for it was the same child as in the dream. The little boy grew up with the pig. They were the best of friends. The pig was special. He could hear and understand everything, although he could not speak.

Some people told the old woman that a very poor couple, who had ten children, gave birth to another child and knew they could not afford to feed him. So they left the baby on the road in the hopes that someone would find him and take him home. It was not for lack of love that they abandoned the child, but the result of extreme poverty.

The boy and the pig grew up and the old man died. Shortly after that the old woman grew ill. One night she called her sons to her bedside and told them the story that she remembered:

Long ago in a far away country, across seven seas and seven mountain ranges, lived a witch who kept three magic objects. Anyone who was good who had the objects could bring happiness into the world; anyone who was evil could bring evil into the world. But the witch's heart was closed and she could do nothing. So she kept the objects secretly.





The three objects were a carpet that could fly, a stick that could transform things, and a ring that fulfilled all wishes.

That night the old woman died and the pig and the boy decided that they would set out into the world and find the country of the witch and get the magic objects to make happiness come back into the world. They had no idea which direction to walk so they started down the road and entered the forest.

Because the boy and the pig were such good people, the nature spirit in the forest appeared to them dressed in a white gown. She told them that they could find the old witch. And she touched the pig, giving him the power to speak.


The boy climbed on the pig's back. They thanked the spirit and continued on their way.

How they arrived in the world of the witch is a mystery that cannot be explained. When they arrived, the witch was out of the house gathering plants in the forest. They entered the house and found the three objects. Quickly, they climbed on the carpet and flew back to their world. The witch returned and was furious, but as soon as she opened the door there was a great storm and she could not follow them.

When the boy and the pig arrived at their house, the boy took the stick and turned the pig into a boy. The brothers both turned the ring and gave everyone in need a wish, so many people grew happy.

As time passed the boy married the Emperor's daughter. The brother married a girl from the village. Together they ruled and took care that everyone lived well, even the animals in the forest and those that were kept by the people. But one night the boy turned the ring and wished that he could find his real mother and father. A very, very old man and woman appeared before him. They wept for joy and begged their son's forgiveness. Some people say that the boy forgave them because he knew how sad they had been to leave him on the road. Those people are certain that the old people lived in the palace until their deaths. Others say he could not forgive them so he gave them some gold and sent them on their way.

But everyone agreed that because of the boy and his brother (who had been a pig) everyone in the kingdom, whether rich or poor, lived happily ever after.






The Ghost Grandmother

Once upon a time there was a very caring and loving grandmother. She loved to cook cheese and apple pies. But one day, when she was preparing herself to bake her grandchildren some pies, she discovered she'd run out of flour. Seeing that the grandchildren were expecting the pies she went to the shop to buy some flour even though the hour was late. She bought a lot of flour, just in case. On her way back home, the naughty children in the village scared her. They'd made some pumpkins into lamps and put candles in them to scare the old lady. When the old lady got close to the lamps she got very scared and dropped the flour, which spread everywhere. She started running as fast as she could, thinking the ghost was released. When the grandmother got home all her relatives asked her what had so scared her and where was the bag of flour? The old lady was so scared she couldn't utter a word. After a while she calmed down and she explained everything that had happened to her but nobody believed her.

The next morning when she got up she went to a neighbor to borrow some flour. She told the neighbor what had happened and she was amazed but tried to encourage the old lady, saying these are only some games children play. The grandmother took the flour and happily left to start making the pies. When she finished the dough she started cleaning the house. Her grandchildren stole some dough and started playing with it. They made all kinds of figures out of it but they were all ugly. All of them were ghosts and monsters. After finishing the masks they stuck them on their faces and went outside to scare their grandmother.

After the grandmother had finished all the work she went into the kitchen to start making the pies and when she saw the masks she realized it was the grandchildren who made them. Thinking a little, she decided to bake the pies in the shape of ghosts and monsters made by the grandchildren. She made apple and cheese pies and when the children saw them they were amazed.

The grandmother found out whom the children were who played that trick on her and gave them some pies, too. They promised never to scare her again and since then the grandmother has only cooked pies shaped like ghosts and monsters.





*All photos by Laura Simms,
Izvoara, Roma Housing*

*Roma Women
Working on Stories*



Project Results

Roma woman and child telling stories at an outdoor festival.

1. Women reported experiencing a sense of happiness
2. Increased capacity for creative thinking
3. Imagining a possible future
4. Remembering their childhood
5. Speaking more openly about being Roma
6. Improved communication skills
7. Telling stories to their children
8. Feeling empowered and being trusted
9. Able to explore the roots of “theft” and “begging”
10. Two women becoming storytellers in their own right