

Stories from England

Ilona Ferková, 2007

1.

The rain was beating against the glass, I was sitting in the coach and heading for a new land. Why, I thought, had I decided to make this journey? Was I doing the right thing? The question went round and round in my head. I can't speak the language, I don't know the gorgers [non-Roma] there. Am I doing the right thing? I was really scared.

And will it ever stop raining?! Thoughts were spinning round my head like mad. Yes, I'd made the right decision. Or should I have stayed? But no, I knew I couldn't! They wouldn't leave me alone. First came the foul letters, and then there were those phone calls to my husband. I couldn't go on any more. I'd told the police everything! And what did they do? Nothing! They said I should tell them who it was, then they'd be able to do something. Some good that did! I couldn't tell them something I didn't know myself!

I had a job working with Roma mothers and children. It was good work. Some people didn't like the fact that I was working at the school as a teacher. They didn't want me to be there. That's why they sent those awful letters that struck terror into me.

The coach stopped, and the gorger who was driving said, "If you want the toilet or a smoke, we'll be here for ten minutes."

I was afraid to go out. The rain was still pouring down. I won't go anywhere. I'll hold out. I just want the bus to keep going. I just want to be there. I was terribly nervous. My head was aching, I wanted to sleep, but I couldn't.

The coach moved off again. Rain ran down the window, tears down my face. Was I doing the right thing?

2.

My daughter and her family already live over there. I haven't seen them for two years. I was looking forward to seeing them, but I wanted to cry. All the good things I'm leaving behind.

When the bus stopped at immigration it was already dark. We were in England. They took us Roma to one side and asked us what we wanted. We said we were applying for asylum. They took us to another room, told us to wait there. My nerves were more and more on edge. It wasn't till after midnight that they let me through to the other side. My daughter was waiting there. I saw the big belly she was carrying in front of her and burst into tears. She has a little one on the way. She took us home to where she lived. Her two children jumped into my arms and cried.

At that moment I was the happiest person in the world. We were all together again. All my fear fell away. What about tomorrow? The thought buzzed through my head.

3.

The second day we went out – into town. It was neither big nor small.

"Margate" it was called. I could hardly believe I was really abroad, and I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw a group of Roma from back home walking towards us.

"Ahoj, ahoj!" we shouted over to each other.

"And when did you come over?" they asked me.

I asked them the same question.

"So you're here too?"

We all welcomed one another, shaking hands and hugging. It really cheered me up to see someone from back home.

My girl just laughed, "I bet you weren't expecting them all to be here."

We reached the centre of town. It was very pretty. Wherever we went, the gorgers smiled at me. And I didn't know where to look first. Such lovely things all around! My girl kept shoving me along – we haven't seen this yet, we haven't seen that – come on, look over there! She was dragging me everywhere, and I kept bumping into people. I said the only word I knew. "Sorry, sorry."

My girl kept laughing that all I ever said was "sorry".

"Mum, come and look at the water. You've never seen anything like it."

And she was right. A beautiful beach, and water as far as the horizon. "Nan, come in the water!" the children called me.

"Not on your life!"

I was scared.

"What if there are big fish in there? They might eat us."

"Come on!" They laughed at me and pulled me in.

"Wait a second. I want to see if it really is salty."

"Nan, you know it's salty!," they splashed me.

We were staying in a big building right by the sea. There were eight Roma families in the one house. We were in the middle and my brother was downstairs. We older ones couldn't get our heads round English at all. But the older children were going to school, so they already knew how to say some things. It annoyed me that I couldn't understand anything. I wanted to pick up the language quickly, but it just wouldn't come. Luckily the girls could speak it.

The days went by and I began to wonder what I was doing here. All the old fear had left me long ago, and I suddenly felt as though all the awful things that had happened back home had been nothing but a dream. I had quickly forgotten everything.

"I'm phoning the immigration people tomorrow and going home," I tell my daughter. "I can't bear all this sitting around and doing nothing any more."

"Mum, I know you're used to working, and doing something for our people, but look: they leave you in peace here, you don't get those awful letters, no-one tries to frighten you. You wait and see. You'll get used to it here. We're all together."

Auntie broke in, "I've got used to it too. Y'know? I've been here two years. I've found God here – you know – the path to righteousness. You wait. I'll take you to church one evening. When you see and hear it, you'll feel better straight away – in your heart and your soul."

4.

It was just a little church, but pretty. I look around – Roma are gathering, they go in one after another.

"Do so many Roma really come here every day?"

My question made her laugh.

"All the Roma have turned to God here. You know what it was like back home. You only ever got so many people in church when someone had died and was being buried, then the church was full of Roma. Come on or we won't get a seat."

She shoved me into the church.

The priest read from the Bible and the gorgers and Roma responded.

I couldn't believe my ears. For a while the priest spoke English, he read a bit from the Bible, and then he turned to Auntie's daughter-in-law and asked her to read. She got up and went to read. I listen – she read in Czech and the Roma responded. In our Romany language.

I'd never thought that one day I'd hear three languages in a church. When they'd finished,

Uncle took a guitar and began to play. Everyone got up and sang the song he'd written. The Roma sang and the English clapped to the rhythm. When I left the church I felt better. My heart was lighter. Auntie was right that you should turn to God.

"We've got a great priest here. When he found out that so many of us come to church, he wanted us to understand him. So he got hold of a Czech Bible and asked my daughter-in-law if she'd like to help by reading after him. Since then everyone's started going to church and they sing in Romany. Before God we're all equal. You just saw for yourself. That wouldn't happen back home, that we'd sing in church in Romany. And these English people were more open to us than the gorgers back home. You know what happened to me back home in church? The priest said, 'Shake hands as a sign of peace and forgiveness'. You should have seen how quickly the gorger woman sitting next to me turned her back, so she wouldn't have to give me her hand." "You're telling me," I broke in. "You know what happened to us? I was once going to Prague with some of our young girls. It was for some seminar about communication. Some were in Prague for the first time, so they wanted to see the sights - Wenceslas Square, the clock on the Old Town Square. The church on the square happened to be open. So I say to them, 'Come on, let's have a look inside.' You wouldn't believe what happened. As soon as I'd opened the door, some gorger woman drove us out. She spread her arms out to stop any of us going in. 'Go away. You've got no business to be in here. We've had bad experiences with your kind!' The girls looked at her dumbfounded. She'd never seen any of us before, and then she said something like that to us. We didn't want to have an argument in the church, so we left. The girls were devastated. So we went on to the Charles Bridge. They said they needed a toilet. 'Come on. I'll come with you, so we don't lose anyone.' There was an elderly gorger sitting there, taking the money. She wanted fifty crowns from each of us. I went to pay and said, 'Well, this must be the most expensive toilet in the whole country.' When she heard me speaking Czech, she immediately asked, 'Oh, are you Czech? Well then, that will be only twenty. It's just fifty for foreigners!' We laughed so much it nearly blew the roof off. We went out. 'Well, that's great,' says one of the girls. 'In church we're thieving Roma, and in the toilet we're Czech.'"

Auntie laughed till the tears ran down her face. "That really happened to you?"

"Just ask your girl. She was with us," I laughed.

We went home, and I reflected on how I'd felt good in that church today.

6.

This morning the sun woke me up. It was shining through the window, as if it wanted to say: "Wake up, look how beautiful it is outside." I got up, opened the window and looked out. It was a beautiful sight, looking out over the sea and at the children playing outside. I felt good. Coming here was the right decision. Nobody's swearing at us, nobody's bothered by us.

I'd have stayed at the window for longer if there hadn't been a sudden yell from the stairs. I opened the door and heard the landlady yelling at the man who lived upstairs.

"What happened?" I asked him.

"Can't you see? Someone's daubed all the walls with red paint. She came to find out if I'd seen anyone."

Then I noticed. It was as if some red devil had been at the walls. I'd never seen anything like it. Everyone ran outside. They were gobsmacked. The person who did it must have been sick. "Calm down," the woman cried. "Everyone stay indoors. Don't let the children out, I'm calling the police to find out who did it."

8.

I shut the door. I wondered what would happen when the cops turned up and what I would do. Would they go round the flats looking for the paint, would they take us to the station and keep us there until someone spoke up? Would they believe us? These thoughts were spinning in my head. I hear the cops come into the house. The landlady is talking to them in the corridor. "I'm quite sure that the Romanies living here weren't the ones that did it!" the gorger landlady comes to our defence. "What a bloody mess!"

"Okay, okay, then tell me - who do you think did it?" The cop casts a glance around the hall. "If you really want to know, then I'll tell you. I've already had aggro with this bloke a couple of times – Irish, lives in the bedsit here downstairs. He's nothing but trouble, doesn't do anything I ask him. Goes around with this group of alcoholics and druggies, I wouldn't be at all surprised if he isn't dealing the stuff. Last week I told him I didn't want to see those people around here any more. You should have heard his language. I told him that next time he brings one of them in here, he's out of this house."

"Has anyone seen him this morning?" the cop asked the landlady.

"No. I just asked the Romanies here. It's just my hunch."

"May we come right in, madam? We'll try asking the man himself, if he heard anything in the night."

They were knocking on the Irishman's door for a good ten minutes before he opened up.

"What you want?" He was still half out of it. The cops didn't need to look any further - his hands were still covered with red paint. They went in. There were cans of paint and bottles of alcohol littered across the floor. They put cuffs straight on him and took him out to the car.

9.

I was dumbfounded. The Irishman has always been nice to us, what has suddenly come over him? But I was glad it had all been sorted out. If the landlady hadn't pointed the Irishman out, they'd probably have blamed us. God, I'd have been ashamed. You can be sure that all the papers would have written about what these Romanies are up to in England. In the corridor my daughter translated everything that had happened. We were really pleased that the landlady had stood by us.

That was one of the reasons why Uncle said to the others:

"Lads, come on. Let's do her a favour and repaint the whole house for nothing. After all, it's thanks to her they didn't interrogate us. What do you think?"

My husband agreed – and then all the others too. The landlady was delighted when they told her.

The next morning she knocked on our door: "I've brought the paint. Will your husband be helping with the decorating?"

"That's what he promised."

"Hey, get up! Look – the landlady's brought paint!" I yell back to my husband.

"Good morning! That'll be great. We'll have it done by tonight. The rest of the lads will be down any minute and we'll set to work," my husband gave the landlady a hug and a smile.

"Anything you need, you've got my mobile, just phone me in the office," she turned and went.

One by one the lads turned up and set to work painting. They were up half the night to get it finished. They did a good job. Not a sign remained of the red paint. Everything was nice and white.

"Can you come round?" Uncle asks on his mobile. What's happened? Why do they want me to come round? As soon as I've opened the doors, Auntie lets fly: "Those lads will drive me crazy. So they're now working for nothing, or what? They were at it half the night. They should have been paid for it! Have you any idea how much it would cost her to get decorators in? Well? A pretty packet!"

"Look here, old girl, the moment I get home, you start arguing,"

Uncle interrupts.

"Wait a minute. Stop arguing. Let me tell you something. Have you any idea how pleased it made me that the landlady stood up for us? Even though we're Romanies? And she didn't let the cops interrogate us. Can you imagine that ever happening back home? As a Romany, you'd have been the first one they'd have come to. Am I right?"

"Look?" says Uncle, "you hear what the girl's saying? You've got no idea. Go and make some coffee. I'm going downstairs. My throat's dry as a bone from all that dust."

Less than a week later, something happened that none of us would have expected.

In our house the Roma all had windows on the right side looking out to the street, and beyond that there was a large park.

One day – it was Saturday morning – I hear something: loud cries coming from outside. I look out and across the street on the lawn opposite there are two large groups of gorgers facing each other and arguing.

Of course I had no idea what they were yelling about; at the time I hardly spoke any English.

I looked around and saw that all our lot had joined me at the window and were looking out at what was going on. None of us had the faintest idea what was up. On the one side stood gorgers with their hair cropped short. Then there was a row of cops, and behind them more gorgers, and some black people.

My brother went out of the door and shouted back to us,

"Hey, come on, let's go and find out what they're getting so worked up about."

We all went out and headed towards the group that seemed closer to us – by their skin colour I mean. As soon as this guy who seemed to be their spokesman saw us, he came straight up to us and shook hands with my brother and then all of us:

"Thanks for coming."

We didn't know what to shout, so we just clapped our hands to the rhythm. In about ten minutes it was all over. The cops said it was time to go, the skinheads upped and left. The cops followed them. And we stayed behind. At first we had had no idea what it was all about, but by then we realised we had been demonstrating for the rights of all the emigrants.

I'd got used to life in England. I'd begun to learn a bit of English and I was feeling good. But I was missing my mum and sister, who had stayed in the Czech Republic. For four years now, we'd been living apart.

10.

My husband got ill. The illness clung to him for ages and ages. He was hardly getting better at all. I was afraid that something would happen to him. The pills the doctor gave him weren't helping.

"We've got to go home, back to the Czech Republic," he told me, "I won't pull through here."

I did what he wanted. I cancelled our family's asylum request and applied to go home. I explained it all to them, that my husband was ill and that he was homesick. All the Roma tried to put me off, and make me stay. I was in two minds, but my husband's mind was made up.

The day came when we were to go home. I suddenly began to shake from head to toe. I wondered what would happen when we got home. What to expect. But I was looking forward to seeing mum again, and to seeing my husband get better.

With the English emigration people all went smoothly. We got to the airport at Heathrow, we had our passports and tickets ready. I looked around for one last time, the English people wished us good luck, and I was getting on the plane. I wondered if I was doing the right thing, going back. I couldn't wait to land in the Czech Republic.

And here we are! At the airport in Prague. We all make our way to the passport control window. I was incredibly nervous, I didn't know whether it was because I was looking forward to mum and to my sister, or whether it was hearing Czech again spoken all around us. I show my passport to the policewoman, my daughter's little girl holds my hand. And the policewoman says:

"You haven't got this child in your passport, so she has to go back. Then you can go through on your own."

But my granddaughter burst into floods of tears, she was used to me, and clung on to me as tightly as she could.

"Look, the little girl has all her papers, her mother is standing just there behind us, so please let her go through with me, it's not as if we were going to run away somewhere."

"That's not my business!" And make that yelling kid calm

down!" She turns to my daughter, and pushes me back from the barrier. I say, "Please, madam, wait a second, the child will get a shock. She thinks you want to separate us."

I took my daughter's papers from her hand and shoved them to the woman through the window.

"Come on! Come on! Get a move on, and don't make such a racket. Nobody's interested in you here." It was as if that white girl had become possessed, and she continued to push me away.

I lost my temper, and I really yelled at her:

"You can see we're back in the Czech Republic. That sort of thing can only happen here! Give her all her papers back and we'll get a move on. I've more than half a mind to turn on my heels and go back to England. What a welcome! My granddaughter will remember that all her life."

I took my granddaughter by the hand, and at last I went out, white with rage. I felt better when I saw my mum and my sister. Tears poured down my cheeks when I hugged Mum, but I wasn't sure whether it was still out of anger or because I was so thrilled seeing her again.

After four years. "Quick, let's get home."

We got in the car and headed off in the direction of the town we had run away from four years before.