INTERVIEW

Traditionalism and Change: Gypsies in a Postmodern Society

Iancu Gabor (IG) is a businessman and TV program host in Romania and belongs to the Gabor family of Gypsies. Cristian Dumitrescu (CD) is associate editor of the Journal of Adventist Mission Studies.

CD: Tell us something about yourself.

IG: I am 25 years old, but I have already been involved in working with non-governmental organizations for improving the Gypsies’ situation and also been a travelling merchant in many European countries. I spent four years in Zagreb, Croatia and since I returned home, three years ago, I am taking care of the family roofing business. I am part of the GABORII male vocal group and I schedule, coordinate, and organize their concerts. We already have held more than a hundred concerts in Romania and abroad. I am also trying to launch the program “Roma for Roma” in partnership with the Romanian Union of Seventh-day Adventists, a program designed to motivate Gypsies for mission.

In 2009 I was invited to host a Light Channel TV program about Gypsies, with Gypsy guests. In May 2010 we finished the first series with 25 programs, which aired on Light Channel TV and was lately contracted by Credo TV. The second series is on hold until funds come in. In the meantime I attended a TV presenters school which I just finished in November. My family is a traditional Gabor family. I married at 16 and now I have two boys, six and four years old.

CD: What attracted you to television and how is media viewed by Gypsies?
IG: When I was invited to host the TV program I initially declined the invitation, but after much thought I accepted hoping that through such programs other Gypsies would be able to see how God can change their lives if they accept him. At the same time, I hoped that the majority population would also better understand the Gypsy minority by witnessing changed lives. I invited Gypsies from different branches of activity and society strata to these programs. I discovered that I enjoyed hosting TV programs and that I have a gift for it, so I decided to learn how to do it better. Gypsies are avid media consumers, especially TV programs, but they usually cannot see themselves as media people for it is not one of their traditional occupations. When some of them saw me the first time on TV they started to laugh, especially the young ones, but later they came to understand that new occupations are possible.

CD: I understand you opened a shop where you sell traditional Gypsy clothes. Are your customers interested to find out more about your people and culture?

IG: I have an online shop, and my contact with the customers is very limited. A real store may open up opportunities for more detailed conversations.

CD: Why do you think that a high percentage of the Gabor Gypsies embraced Seventh-day Adventism while other Gypsy groups chose to become Orthodox or Pentecostal?

IG: We believe that the Adventists preach the biblical truth. On the other hand, the Gabor Gypsies were attracted by the Adventist Church because they felt accepted, loved, and not discriminated against as they are in society at large. In the Adventist Church they can get involved, in spite of the fact that most have only finished the fourth grade, and have been able to serve and worship along with those who have the highest educational degrees. Those who decided to become Pentecostals were attracted more to a worship style where feelings and emotions are more important, or because they received material help. The Gypsies belonging to the Eastern Orthodox Church seldom go to church, mainly twice a year, at Christmas and at Easter.

CD: When did the Gabor Gypsies embrace Seventh-day Adventism?

IG: Around 1960 a few Gabor Gypsies embraced Adventism. Two of them are still alive today. Through those few, the Adventist message spread to their families and relatives, so in 1985 there were already sev-
eral families in the church. After the fall of communism in Romania, in 1989, the Gabor Gypsies accepted in large numbers the biblical message preached by the Adventists. There are no exact statistics, but approximately 70 percent of the Gabor Gypsies today are Adventists.

**CD:** I know there are several Gypsy Adventist churches, how many Gabor Adventist churches exist in Romania?

**IG:** Unfortunately, there is only one Adventist church exclusively for Gabor Gypsies; it is located at Craciunesti de Mures, with about 200 members, but the rest of Gabor Gypsies worship in churches along with Romans, Hungarians, etc. However, there are twelve other Gypsy churches made up of other types of Gypsies. Soon the first Adventist Gabor pastor, Gabriel Samu, will graduate and become the first Gabor to have an advanced degree. No other Gabor has dreamed of studying in a university yet, and we are proud to see him as a model for others to follow.

**CD:** Which evangelistic or missionary method do you think works best with Gypsies and why?

**IG:** It is difficult to generalize and suggest one method only because there are so many Gypsy subgroups, and I believe the missionary method should specifically be adapted to each group. But, as a general rule, the group’s language should be used, with the presenter belonging to the group and using the group’s history. The music should be specific to that group, too. Public evangelism works with Gypsies, as well as working with extended families which are part of the group. Gypsy Christian concerts are well received in large Gypsy communities.

**CD:** What are the most urgent needs among the Gypsies?

**IG:** The most pressing needs are spiritual ones, but you cannot talk about Jesus if people do not feel Jesus’ hand and feet at work. Gypsies have material and educational needs, too, and these are always the doors to accepting the good news of salvation through Christ.

**CD:** What are the major cultural differences between the Gypsies and the rest of the population?

**IG:** The most striking difference between the Gabor Gypsies and the majority of the population is the way we dress. I mentioned the Gabor Gypsies because not all Gypsy groups preserve their traditional dress.
But another important difference is the way Gypsies see and interpret the world around them. Most Gypsies do not value formal education. They prefer to live together, several generations in one house. The married men live together with their parents who frequently educate their grandchildren. They also work together and perpetuate the family business or trade. They earn money together and the first one to benefit is the eldest brother who moves out first. The second will move out only when enough money is gathered again, and so on. The youngest son inherits the parents’ house and takes care of them for the rest of their lives. The Gabor gypsies are especially proud that none of their parents are in an asylum or nursing home. It is a shame to abandon elderly parents or to place them in the care of strangers. In order to preserve the family, the women do not seek employment out of the house, but stay at home and raise the children and educate them.

**CD:** *Is the nomadic spirit still alive among the Gypsies today?*

**IG:** Gypsies have always travelled, either going to Europe or within Europe. Today, Gypsies are partly settled, partly nomadic, some have houses and land but they still travel for their business or trade. Very few travel in wagons, they use modern means of travel, use cell phones, and other advanced technology. Some decide to move to another country and settle there, but family ties remain equally strong. In case of a wedding or a death or another important family event all gather together. It is a shame to miss a family reunion.

**CD:** *Is there an improvement in the integration of Gypsies in society after the local governments and the EU decided to allocate funds for integration projects?*

**IG:** The integration of Gypsies is very difficult to attain. In spite of so many programs, funds allocated, and strategies developed, very little has been achieved. I believe only God can change the Gypsies.