



Zoltán Tábori

Guns, fire and ditches

A report from Tatárszentgyörgy on the Roma killings

Zoltán Tábori reports from Tatárszentgyörgy, where in February 2009 a house belonging to a Roma was torched and the owner and his son murdered, the seventh in a series of attacks that left six Roma dead and three injured. Tábori's conversations with Roma and non-Roma villagers gives a disturbing insight into the spiral of crime and resentment in small communities facing increasing competition for employment and education.

An old Gypsy woman forages in the meadow behind the birch trees. Her bicycle lies on the bank of a ditch. She could easily pedal off. Instead she waits for me to come over and shows me a handful of small white funnel-shaped mushrooms in a plastic bag. "For soup," she explains. "Sometimes there are lots, others when it's hard to find any at all. This is enough for soup." "Do you too live at the edge of the village?" I ask. She nods. As we amble along the skies rumble: Tatárszentgyörgy, a short drive from the capital, adjoins the biggest military range in Hungary, and has done since pre-WWI Imperial days. Villagers haven't flinched at the sound of gunshot for generations. Her home totters on the village outskirts, festooned with colourful clothes hung out to dry.

The seeds of wrath

Well-meaning but badly designed government policies which aim to lift the Roma out of poverty have tended to have the perverse impact of reinforcing difficulties associated with them. On the [background](#) to the spate of anti-Roma violence in Hungary in 2009.

"Aren't you afraid living here with the constant gunfire?"

"No, there's nothing to be afraid of. They were caught; one from the next village, another here, and a third from Pest."

She vanishes inside.

Hers was not the house torched on the night of 22 February 2009. That house stood at the other end of the village. Home to a man gunned down along with two of his small children as they fled its burning timbers, it proudly stood alongside four fenceless houses on a manmade road. Opposite, waist-high shrubs and acacia mount a swathe of sand. A sparse pine copse is a stone's throw away.

The front door of the last house in the row opens directly onto the trees. It was spanking new, nicely plastered and painted, and it had double-glazing sturdy enough to even withstand a petrol bomb. An attacker would surely have sought out a filthy shanty with broken windows. After all there were plenty around. But this was the house they wanted.

Next door lives the father of the murdered 27-year-old man (the murdered

five-year-old boy's grandfather). His front window looks onto the burned-out wreckage — a daily reminder of what happened. He is a short 48-year-old with a head of thick grey hair and a small silver ring in his left ear. Two concrete steps lead up to the front door. He points towards the small room on the right. "That was where they were sleeping when they were attacked." I step up beside him and look in but I am outflanked by a little girl, who nips ahead and stops in the wreckage of what had been the largest room in the house, in the middle of the living room.

"It wasn't there, but here!"

"Okay then it was there. The telly was probably on; they would lie down here. My son stuck by my grandson, come rain or shine."

"Which of the three?"

"The one who departed this life, the one he always had slept with; he took him away with him."

We go outside again. Inside the house is just one big pile of rubble.

"When was it built?"

"Three years ago. They had just started their life together; the state child subsidy payment went on it — there were three kids. My daughter-in-law has moved back in with her parents in the village and won't talk to me."

He does not say so, but I get the feeling that his daughter-in-law pins the blame on him. Whatever the case, the family has broken apart, with one of the two surviving children here, the other there.

"What will happen to the house?"

"I don't know. Maybe I'll take it over on behalf of my younger son."

"How many children do you have?"

"Eight boys, one girl. Seven boys now."

When he was young he used to work on a factory assembly line in Budapest. He later came back to the village where he works as a car repair man. Usually two or three cars stand in front of the house.

"A garage will charge twenty or thirty thousand forints; I'll do it for four or five."

"Was your son also a mechanic?"

"He was more into wheeling and dealing. He used to work on building sites in Budapest." He falls silent before deciding that I am likely to be well-informed and therefore will know that his son was charged with stealing timber worth half a million forints. So he chooses to broach the subject himself: "It happened this winter. It's all true, but everyone was filching — Gypsies and Hungarians alike."

In the photograph the young man who was killed is showing off his muscles in a grey t-shirt, arms crossed. He is well-proportioned, and even if there is no hint of a smile, he looks serious rather than hard-faced.

"So, this is where they died, in the snow?"

"No, I picked my son up, took him into our place and put him on my bed. That's where he bled to death."

"And the little boy? Shouldn't he have been seen to first?"

"Nothing could be done to help him. His little head... at the back there was a big chunk missing. That was the exit wound. Eighteen fragments of shot were dug out of his body."

The car mechanic's house is a huge Kádár-era mud-brick house, at least twice as big as the one belonging to his son. The wall of countless small, brown mud bricks presents a bizarre sight. He sees that I am inspecting his house.

"I built it with my own hands. There must be twenty or twenty-five thousand mud bricks in it; every one I laid myself. We were always hard at work; we don't have enough bread to eat, let alone to spend on guns. If I had the money, I'd buy one. But that's not going to bring my son back, or my grandson."

"What happened that night?"

"Around half-past midnight, my wife was woken up by a loud bang, a crackling of flames: our son's house was on fire. I raced out but didn't see anyone. I dashed into the blazing house, and no one was there either. It was only when I came out again that I saw them lying there in the snow at the edge of the acacia grove: my son and grandson. My son was still alive, groaning. I reckon he knew who his attackers were, but he couldn't get it out. I carried him onto the couch inside and wrapped him up. He was cold all over. There were three holes in his back; the detective said a spiked beam probably fell onto him — that's what did it..." His voice choked.

"The little girl was injured as well. Where was she? Where did you find her?"

"There. Look, she'll show you herself where."

I look up. The dark-eyed six-year-old girl, raven hair, is crouching three feet up one of the acacia trees. She was probably as far away again from her father and younger brother lying in the snow as they were from the front door of the burning house. Not far — the blink of an eye if you're running. Right now she is sitting in the tree just as she did then, but then she comes down and over to us.

"She was shot on her finger and also her back."

The grandfather hauls up her dress and shows the wounds. I can see four angry red puncture scars that are within a matchbox length of each other. The scar on the finger is not so obvious.

"Stop it!" the little girl says angrily, the first vocal sign she has given of her presence. She is the sole eyewitness. I might try asking but haven't the heart to do so: she has been interrogated more than enough.

The first to arrive at the scene was the police, followed by firemen and finally an ambulance. Their job was not easy: snowfall, wind howling, dark and cold, an isolated house on fire with no one in sight. Then it turns out that people have been injured. It's just that their relatives have taken them indoors into a neighbouring house: you can imagine the uproar that greeted the police, fire fighters and ambulance service.

What happened next is common knowledge: even though everyone from the emergency services saw the dead bodies, no one stopped to think a crime had been committed. A report written on the spot recorded two unexplained deaths. It was only in the morning, after the cartridge cases had been discovered, that a fresh search was ordered and the crime scene was taped off. Meanwhile outrage was mounting as the similarities with other petrol-bomb attacks targeting Roma households on the outskirts were becoming more obvious. There were reports of a black SUV from several places such as the village of Nagycséc, near Miskolc in the north, where, at daybreak on 3 November 2008, two houses on opposite sides of a street of Roma houses had petrol bombs lobbed at them. József Nagy, 43, and his 40-year-old wife likewise had been killed with a shotgun.

The media went on for weeks about the blunders during the investigation of the incident at Tatárszentgyörgy. The public was bombarded with distorted accounts. Under enormous political pressure, the national police chief got his act together and said his force would now investigate the killings as serial murders which had put the entire Roma community in fear of their lives since July 2008. The reward for information leading to the capture of the culprits was being raised to 50 million forints (euro 200,000).

"Do politicians and the media have any idea of the damage they are causing with these reports?" says Mrs Imre Berente, Mayor of Tatárszentgyörgy. "They shouldn't keep on and on about racism, because this is a tinderbox. Roma are stirring up trouble. Some pupils are saying that they have been getting abuse for being Roma, and in bars people are saying their glasses haven't been

washed properly or filled up to the mark because anything is good enough for a Gypsy. That's what gets the far-right going."

It is Monday, 8 June 2009, the day after the election of Hungary's new members of the European Parliament. Tatárszentgyörgy has 1,415 people on its electoral roll. Only 28.4 percent vote: the anti-Roma far-right party Jobbik has won just over 17.9 percent, the Roma Alliance party just 6.7 per cent. Close to Budapest and on the western fringe of the Great Plain, the village appears prosperous. Its public buildings are modern and in a good state of repair. Apart from two officials who share the mayoral duties, seven other employees oversee a total of 42 people — around 80 per cent of them Roma — locally employed in public works. Unlike most northern Hungarian communities with an equally large Roma population, not only the streets but individual houses too are hooked up to public utilities. The mayor insists that the village has more than one string to its bow but potential investors find the military range off-putting.

"In the villages round here people are employed on industrial estates; there is no reason why we should not have one as well. I have held talks with a number of firms, but the military range is off-putting, as the roads leading to the properties are subject to closure at unpredictable times."

"Is unemployment high in the village?"

"That depends on how you look at it. A Roma can qualify as disabled, get child support, be a full-time mother or be employed in public works. That means they work for nine months for the legal minimum wage to get them started. As soon as that's done they qualify to receive dole money again. There are always going to be people prepared to do this kind of thing."

"Was that father with the three small children who was shot dead known to social services?"

"Not really. He was not employed in any of our public works projects, did not draw any benefit payments, and, as far as I know, he worked on construction sites in Budapest from spring to autumn. He bought the plot of land on which he built his house from the local council; he used state child subsidy payment to fund the building and even had the electricity supply installed in the standard way. His father lives nearby, though, and tapped his supply; and, because there was such a tangle of cables, at first they thought the fire had been caused by a short circuit."

"People in the village are saying that the culprits have been arrested, with talk about a Gypsy gang from a neighbouring village."

"It would be no bad thing if it turned out that it wasn't locals. Being put down as a racist village is going a step too far. It looks as if an attempt is being made to stoke the hysteria."

"But it was here, in December 2007, that Magyar Gárda [the uniformed arm of the far-right Jobbik party, since outlawed] held its first public march in Hungary. What was their reason for choosing this particular village?"

"That was something I asked them myself. They said that two or three of their members were from Tatárszentgyörgy. They made the proposal, claiming that the mother of one of them had been assaulted."

In the village I had heard about an elderly woman being knocked about and robbed, but no one had been able to name her. Neither could the mayor.

"They referred to the crime rate being statistically high. That's true; mainly property-related offences, pimping or drug-dealing. And then there are always traffic offences like driving without a licence. It is not unheard of for a young offender to be picked up by the police and they are powerless to bring charges; the kid has no job and therefore no income. That is when attempts are made to employ them in public works, but then this expires. Only this morning I received three letters to say that the community-service term is up and has to

be cancelled. Unless the car can be confiscated they will keep on playing the game for ever. They don't have a clue why they're being harassed. 'Driving without a license — is that a crime?' I constantly put in requests for there to be a permanent police presence in the village. For a month after the murder not a word was to be heard about break-ins, and the Roma went around on foot, because there were police patrolling all over the place; one month later, though, it started all over again. There is a police officer assigned to this district, but he is often detailed to other duties, and as soon as he goes off duty he can no longer be reached by phone. If I am woken at night by the noise of youngsters joyriding in the village, it's no use calling him because his phone is off the hook. But then again, why would he bother? That gang just jeers at the police. People are arrested, but the people he arrests get home even before he gets off duty. Everybody points the finger of blame at someone else. That makes room for Jobbik. A lot of the villagers say that it's not a policeman that's needed but one of the old-style gendarmes. You've probably heard that as well; it's grown louder since the tragedy. Matters relating to the Roma have always been swept under the carpet, and now political leaders are helpless. Jobbik has been hailed as the saviour."

"What proportion of the village population is Roma?"

"Over 20 per cent, but in the general school it is around 30 per cent and the nursery school has already reached 40. There are now 130 infants in a nursery school designed for 75. The fact is that it could be filled just with Roma infants alone, especially now there is that extra financial support for nursery-school children from families on social support. Places for the children of the so-called 'multiply socially disadvantaged' are now at a premium, so children whose parents work must be rejected. Those parents are asking whether it's fair that their child has no place in a nursery while the child of a Gypsy who just lazes around at home is accepted."

"So education is the real breaking-point, isn't it?"

"That's the usual line, but the headmistress of our general school recently told me about some Roma girls in their final year. She had been urging them to go on to further education but they told her, 'You won't get me studying any more! I'll have children and get more money by claiming social benefits.' She was stunned."

"I was assigned to Tatárszentgyörgy in December 1964 because they were having trouble with Gypsies!" grumbles 'Uncle' Mick, the district's retired police officer, now into his seventies, over a pint. "No one had what it takes to tangle with me! A hundred and sixty lads got the hell out of here I was such a hard bastard!"

Weighing in at nearly 300 lb, 'Uncle' Mick is one of the Mini Café's regulars. It is a drinking hole with a clientele of both Roma and non-Roma.

"I've beaten up more men than the rest of the force put together! I preferred dealing out a few good punches to a low-life to getting him banged away in a cell so his family would miss him. The five-day suspensions that were handed out never scared me!"

His square jaw implacably grinds out sentences.

"There was one occasion when a complaint was lodged that I had worked someone over. I took these things very personally. It's just in my blood to hate a thief."

"What's the word on this, on the double murder?"

"The culprits have been identified. They were from the neighbouring village; they've been arrested. It's just that it's not been made public."

Uncle Mick's popularity doesn't go deep. This is a farming village; there is not much respect for the police force. The owner of the bar, a retired lieutenant

colonel, is an industrious man, always doing this and that in the huge plot of land that surrounds the place; right now he is in the process of watering the plants.

"Hey Józsi! A bit more care about how you clip that grass! Look at what you missed here: you'd better go over that again!" A Roma man in his thirties is clipping the area around the bar. "His brother-in-law is among the men who have been arrested," he whispers to me. But then, as if to deter me from questioning anyone on his payroll, he adds: "Of course, what would I know! The whole thing might be nothing more than gossip." The man turns round with the trimmer and comes over hesitantly. Swarthy and humble, he is slow in his movements. The toe-caps of both shoes are split, as if to flaunt his poverty. "You had a bite to eat, didn't you? Not just a drink?" the lieutenant colonel chides. "You know I don't like it if all you do is drink!"

"Sure I did, Uncle Béla!" he responds with a nervous laugh. We take a seat in the beer garden. "I'm a suspect as well," he says, almost shamefacedly. Then, on seeing my look of incomprehension, adds: "I've also got a bit of wood at the edge of the village where trees vanished. Reason enough to get even!"

From time to time farmers drop in with bits of news; they take a seat next to us.

"Bandi's lot has finished digging the ditch."

"Is it deep enough?"

"You won't get even a tractor over that!"

In this part of the world, timber is not filched by the bicycle load like up north, but by the truckload, and the owners of woodland try to bar the way to trespassers by digging ditches. Tatárszentgyörgy is now a village of ditches: the ditches are intended to keep timber thieves out of the woodlands and joyriders off the communal football pitch. Now the Roma have dug ditches across the man-made road around the street where the murdered lived, with thorny trimmings piled up in the ditches as an added obstacle.

We are standing at the edge of the football pitch, looking up at what was originally built as a gendarme barracks. It has been properly restored, incorporated into the wing of a nearby building, the loft spaces converted into rooms. It is at least as big as, if not bigger than, a whole eight-year general school with its own yard.

"It's for sale," the lieutenant colonel explains. "I was thinking of buying it as a guesthouse; this sports field is part of it. But then again, you'd hardly say tourism was thriving in the village."

"Is that because of the murders?" I ask.

The lieutenant colonel shakes his head; that is an explanation he will visibly have no truck with.

"What a great property! Don't you know anyone who might be interested? The street façade has even retained the helmet of the gendarme's coat of arms."

"There's a lot of properties for sale round here," I muse, looking along the street, starting with one at the far end, which is in a state of semi-collapse.

"Yes, even my neighbour is selling up. A lot of people have got sick of the place, and if it were up to them, they'd get out."

"Why is that?"

"There's a lot of burglary. Not long ago the entire stock of meat in a deepfreeze belonging to a poor young man was cleared out. His wife has died and he is bringing up his young daughter as a single parent. He works in the bakery, so he is never home at night. That is common knowledge around here; while the daughter was sleeping they could empty the freezer in the outside kitchen without fear of being disturbed. The other night all the hams and other preserved meats belonging to a single mother with her two children were burgled from her pantry — that's over there, just a few houses away. An eye is kept out for where the most vulnerable people live, and that's where they hit."

"Is that last night, you mean?"

"Absolutely!" He comes out of the gate to show me which house it was.

"When the Soviet Red Army arrived at the end of '44, the saying that went round was, 'From now on we're going to be living with the goats and poultry!' Hungary has now degenerated to the point where we must sleep with any animals we own to make sure they are not stolen."

It is clear that the single mother with the two children won't report the theft; the mayor reckons that there are countless such cases which will never show up in the crime statistics. This is going to be one of them.

I told them, and I'm not going to mince words: "The first one of your kind that comes over my fence is going to get blown away like a dog. I don't care what comes of it! Take note of where I work'."

I have: the military range. He is a ruddy-cheeked, blue-eyed fine figure of a man of 45 years, wearing flame-resistant twill slacks and army boots as he grazes a dozen or more goats and sheep on the hedged meadow next to the village sports ground. A hill rises behind the sports ground; there was a time when this was a cemetery. Now it is an illegal moto-cross circuit. Not long ago a ditch had to be dug around the football pitch because of all the joyriding that goes on here of an evening.

"Should I take that to mean you have already been robbed?" I enquire.

"Me? No way! And I don't advise it either. No one's going to lift my potatoes and get away with it."

Built like a tree, the man says this with so much determination it is as if the intactness of his yard and garden were a matter of honour, and if it were lost, he would no longer be able to face the village.

"Could you make a living from rearing animals?" I ask him.

"Out of the question. I only keep these as hobby; gives me something to unwind with after work."

"I've got four kids, and I have to watch every single forint I earn. The smallest is at nursery school; I get no concessions. Gypsy kids get free grub; my own don't even get 50 per cent off. A Gypsy can get exemption even if he has fewer kids than me."

"Does your wife stay at home?"

"No, she works for Tesco."

Most people in Tatárszentgyörgy try to make a living raising animals or working the land and many make a success of it. One of the finest-looking farms lies not far on the other side of the highway. Like the man I just spoke to, the farmer is likewise forty-five but is a lot more hot-tempered.

"I'll tell you my opinion, but only if you write it down!"

"Why wouldn't I write it down?"

"Because I didn't like it one bit how those dirty Gypsies were protected. We had the murders pinned on us and get taken in as if we were Gypsies and time didn't matter! Gábor even got taken in twice!"

A few of his men are hanging about impatiently nearby; he points to the youngest, who strikes me as being a quiet, decent sort. He nods, sombre-faced.

"We are hunters, you see," the farmer continues. "We were on a hunt for three days, and they start accusing us of being the murderers. Last year, I got into a tangle with somebody at the local fête. I had my gun taken away, but no matter. I don't even have a weapon, but they still took me in for questioning.

They took in everyone I had any contact with. They even took in my poor old neighbour, who can't even walk fifty yards, just because he owns a grey four-wheel drive! Another villager, a highly-respected figure, was hauled in for the same reason — and three times at that! I'll tell you where they got that invention about a grey four-wheel drive! The forestry men go around in grey

four-wheel drives, and the Gypsies see them on a daily basis, so they immediately recall seeing something like that on the evening in question. Gypsies spout any old rubbish, especially if it's a matter of a complaint being lodged. They can get people to defend them, as well, for a big enough fee. Let anyone else have a go at making a farm like this pay; then they can open their gob! Someone should take a look at who has paid their taxes and social security, and how much. All they need say is that they live off casual work. As to where and what the casual work was, and is there any paperwork to back that up — that's of no possible interest to anyone. Look at them: off to the village fields to steal."

He is gesturing towards the highway where a horse-drawn cart is trotting speedily along, two young Gypsies on the box. I can't let that pass without saying something.

"How do you know they are off to steal something?"

"Come off it! Why would anyone take a cart to the village fields at noon? No one's around at noon!"

"Even so, there might be lots of reasons..." I start to protest, but he brushes me off, "People who don't live round here don't know what's what."

There is a pause of aggrieved silence before I go on:

"Did you vote?"

"No, but if I had, I don't mind telling you that I would have voted for Jobbik. Their programme was much to my taste. None of your foreign multinationals telling a small village like this what to do! Co-operative farm properties being juggled around with cute banking tricks, and the mayor's office have not pushed hard enough for them to be brought back under their authority. Now it's like the bank boss's private land: four thousand acres of conference and leisure centre, and he gets the same amount of state support as an ordinary farmer like me does."

He himself is not doing badly. Along with the land and livestock, he figures out any number of other schemes, including getting hold of some horse-drawn Gypsy caravans. They got hold of four recently, took the horses out of harness; the caravans are standing there, parked alongside each other on the grass, their bright colours making them look like circus wagons. Each has been given its own name, so I climb up onto a yellow cart named "Stefi" and peek inside: a small cooking range in front with bunk beds in two tiers behind it, with a couch at the back, under a window. Lighting is given by a paraffin lamp, drinking water by a can. Anyone who fancies living a Gypsy life can hire a caravan and drive it away for a week.

"There's demand for this?"

"Among foreign tourists, sure. It's mainly Germans who go for it. They are given a road map, a pair of horses; then it's up to them. They can go off fifty, sixty miles into the wilds."

The price in euros is roughly as much as one would pay for a cruise down the Danube from Passau with full service, but here one has to look after the horses, provide them with water and fodder and groom them. Everything needed for the ordeal of nomadic travel: a whip, a water bucket, a spare wheel.

The farmer accompanies me to my car.

"They had to be really stupid Gypsies, though, that's for sure," he declares, shaking his head. "Doing that when there's snow on the ground, leaving tracks to show where they went! Couldn't they have waited a week until it had melted? No wonder they were caught."

"They've been caught?" I feign surprise.

"They've been arrested, only they're keeping the news under wraps. There were three of them in it, one of them from Tatárszentgyörgy."

"But why keep the lid on the news?"

"They don't want it to be known. It would be grist for the Jobbik mill."

I asked the father of the young man who had been shot what he thought about the arrests.

"To be honest with you," he responded enigmatically, "I would also do a stretch of seven or eight years if by confessing I could get my hands on a reward of thirty, forty or fifty million. Too right, I'd confess! I get out, and with that much money you can live the life of Riley for a few years!"

I was taken aback, but then I had heard so many stories already, why not add this one, too?

Epilogue

The dreadful message of the tragedy in Tatárszentgyörgy was that even Roma who try to fit in are not wanted. The same message was delivered exactly two months later, at Tiszalök, a small town about twenty-five miles due east of Miskolc. At about 9:30 or 9:45 in the evening, Jenő Kóka, a Roma, was shot dead as he was stepping out of the front door of his house. He was setting off for the night shift at Alkaloida Pharmaceuticals, where he had been employed for 33 years. He was an upright, honest man who lived for his family and his work; he had no grudges, no known enemies; he did not smoke or drink. His only sin was that he lived in the very last house on the outskirts.

What many people suspected proved to be the case: areas of Roma dwellings on the outskirts of villages had become the target for coordinated attacks. After raids by special forces on the evening of 21 August 2009, four men, 28 to 42 years of age, from Hajdú-Bihar County in eastern Hungary were picked up at a night club in the city of Debrecen. One of the men is a former soldier. They are the prime suspects in a series of attacks on Roma that have led to six deaths. The 120-strong special unit of the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation has charged two of the men with a total of eight offences, while the other two have each been linked with one of the attacks. It is a series of criminal offences that started in July 2008 and has no parallel in Hungary's criminal history. Sources inform us that the police have gathered a lot of evidence, but the men charged with the offences are saying nothing, and there have been no further arrests of accomplices as yet.

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