

Profile of Angéla Kóczé, a Roma Human Rights Activist

by Helen Harnett*

Angéla Kóczé, a Roma human rights activist, will be co-teaching “Ethnic Identity and International Law” at the Washington College of Law (WCL) in April 2000 with Professor Diane Orentlicher. Kóczé currently serves as the director of Human Rights Education at the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) in Budapest, Hungary. Professor Orentlicher, a co-director of the Center for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law at WCL, met Kóczé last year while in Hungary preparing a report on discrimination against Roma for the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) High Commissioner for National Minorities. Kóczé’s visit to WCL is made possible through a grant from the Open Society Institute.

The ERRC, founded in 1995, advocates for the rights of Roma, often referred to as Gypsies. Roma, the largest minority group in Europe, are the subject of discrimination and violence throughout the continent. Roma face discrimination in employment, housing, and educational opportunities, and many countries deny Roma the right to citizenship. In recent years, racist hate speech against Roma—sometimes by government officials—has increased. There has been a corresponding increase in violence against Roma, by both civilians and law enforcement officials, including murder, arson, and mass evictions. Government apathy and lack of public sympathy often leave Roma without legal recourse. Although much of the vio-

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lence has occurred in Central and Eastern Europe, Western Europe has contributed to the Roma’s problems by ignoring their grim plight. Western European governments deny Roma refugees asylee status by claiming that Roma are merely economic migrants. The Western European press inflames public opinion against Roma, referring to them as criminals and parasites, and often blames Roma for the violence against them. Furthermore, over the past decade the Western media has barely mentioned the numerous atrocities committed by all sides in the former Yugoslavia against Roma, including recent gruesome rapes and murders in Kosovo.

Kóczé became involved with the ERRC on a volunteer basis at its inception in 1995. The ERRC works for Roma rights by publicizing human rights abuses and by providing legal defense to victims of abuse. The ERRC publishes a monthly newsletter, advocates for Roma with government officials, and litigates civil rights cases involving Romani victims. As the director of the ERRC’s Human Rights Education activities, Kóczé coordinates human rights trainings with local Roma populations in the Czech Republic, Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, and Albania. These trainings teach Roma about their basic civil rights, such as how to file a complaint regarding police brutality, what to do if they are detained or arrested, and what pre-trial rights they have. The trainings also discuss the rights to nondiscrimination and non-violent conflict

resolution. The Human Rights Education program also provides scholarships and internships for Roma law students. Kóczé believes that local Roma communities can be empowered to protect their own community through learning about their legal rights.

Kóczé, a member of the Romani community, became involved in human rights advocacy through a desire to help her own community. While studying for degrees in teaching, sociology, and human rights, Kóczé explored Romani civil rights issues. Kóczé’s 1994 Bachelor of Arts thesis at Teacher’s College, Budapest, discussed the education of Roma in Hungary. While attending Teacher’s College, Kóczé also earned a degree in politics from the Budapest School of Politics. Kóczé then earned a master’s degree in United Nations Ethnic and Minority Studies through the Department of Sociology at Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest. While at Eotvos Lorand, Kóczé worked as a trainer in the Multicultural Education Training for Teachers program and as a community social worker. She also interned at the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights’ Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues in Warsaw, Poland. The OSCE published Kóczé’s report, *The Roma in Central and Eastern Europe: Legal Invisibility or Legal Remedy?*, which described litigation involving discrimination and violence against Roma. Kóczé also served as a program director at the Foundation for Roma Civil Rights in Budapest, where she designed an education program for Roma youth.

In 1997, Kóczé worked as a trainer at a Roma Youth Leader Training organized by the Council of Europe in Helsinki, Finland. Kóczé then earned a master’s degree in Human Rights from the Central European University in Budapest. She also edited a documentary film on Roma education in Central and Eastern Europe. In 1998, Kóczé was a Pew Fellow at Columbia University’s Human Rights and Religious Freedom Program.

Kóczé’s visit to WCL marks the first time a Rom has taught at a law school. While at WCL, Kóczé will discuss discrimination and violence against the Romani community. She will describe the legal instruments advocates can use to defend Roma rights at the national and international level, and hopes that this course will inspire American law students to work on Roma rights issues. ☺

Additional information about Roma is available on the ERRC web page at www.errc.org.

*Helen Harnett is a J.D. candidate at the Washington College of Law.



Diane Orentlicher

