



RCA Missionary Update

from the Otternesses

Roma (Gypsy) people make up the largest ethnic minority in Central and Eastern Europe. They are very poor and isolated, mostly illiterate, and almost universally unemployed. Dick and Carolyn Otterness work with the Hungarian Reformed Church to train volunteers who work with the Roma. Together they establish new Roma congregations, improve access to health care and education, and help find employment. Before moving to Hungary, Dick served as a pastor and administrator for 27 years while Carolyn worked as a nurse and nurse practitioner.

Hungary facts:

- Population: 9,981,334
- Size: 92,340 square kilometers (slightly smaller than Indiana)
- Major religions: 52 percent Roman Catholic; 16 percent Calvinist; 14.5 percent unaffiliated; 17.5 percent other



MINISTRY

Compassion and Justice

LOCATION

Budapest, Hungary

PARTNER

Reformed Church in Hungary

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Dear Friends,

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A new school and church year begins. As you have been getting ready for this new season, so have we! We pray that God will bless your families, churches, and communities in this fall season.

America here in Hungary, and three ELCA volunteers in Slovakia to our immediate north. Part of our task this year is to stay in touch with these wonderful volunteers, to care for them and support them. This is a joyful task for us!

We thank God for bringing our first RCA volunteers here to Hungary! Trazy Richter and Jeffery Lampen, both from Michigan, arrived September 1, and have been studying in a two-week Hungarian language crash course. We joined them in mid-September to help lead the volunteer's orientation seminar before the volunteers were dispersed to their placement sites. Trazy is working in a Budapest school in a relatively poor, ethnically mixed district. Many of the students are Roma. Many of the students have learning disabilities, perhaps including some of the Roma. The school is next door to St. Columba's, the Church of Scotland congregation we attend. Our church has an active ministry with refugees, and Trazy will also be working in developing the youth group. Jeff's volunteer site in Nyirtelek in northeast Hungary. He is working with a Lutheran church that reaches out to its community and Roma who live there. Trazy and Jeff join three ELCA (Lutheran) volunteers from North



Trazy Richter at the loom



Jeffrey Lampen

These volunteers participate in a program with which we work called RGDTs—Roma Gadge Dialogue Through Service. RGDTs received an important award from the Alliance for Democracy and Tolerance in Germany this year. The award was in recognition of RGDTs efforts in European communities to change attitudes regarding Roma. RGDTs and four other organizations were chosen to be honored from 146 proposed projects. We work closely with RGDTs as it places Gadge (non-Roma) volunteers into Roma communities and places Roma volunteers into other projects. We believe that through the interaction and dialogue of Gadge and Roma attitudes can begin to change—that Gadge will see Roma as real people and Roma see that they can be more than what the majority people have told them they are.

Working for such a change is especially

important now, as attitudes between majority populations towards Roma have taken a turn for the worse. The economic crisis, as we all know, is felt world wide. As people here are stressed by rising costs, rising taxes (the general sales tax here in Hungary increased from 20% to 25% a few months ago), the falling value of the forint (Hungarian currency), the lack of jobs, and a general mistrust of the current national government, Roma have become a target in the midst of this stress. You may have heard the recent report aired on National Public Radio: "Wave Of Violence Strikes Eastern Europe's Gypsies": <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12460670&sc=fb&cc=fp>

We want to stress that both we and the volunteers are safe here! These incidents of violence are isolated and scattered. People here are horrified by the violence and are supporting local authorities to find the hoodlums that create the violence. The circles within which we work are not likely to be a target of these attacks, but the fact that such violence has taken place at all is deeply disturbing, and it is symptomatic of the longstanding ethnic and racial divide in Central and Eastern Europe between Roma and the majority populations.

Another facet of our mission this fall is working with Presbyterian (PCUSA) and Hungarian Reformed colleagues here and with local indigenous Roma and other community leaders on a water project, a basket project, and possibly a medical project for Roma and Reformed Church in Carpathia Ukraine. Some of you may have heard us talk in the past about our hopes for a micro-economic project with Roma basket makers. Everything here takes time, happens slowly, and depends in part on building trustworthy relationships in communities. So these projects are in the beginning stages of discussion and deliberation. The main emphasis right now is working with Roma and non-Roma people in a couple of local communities to try to build a locally directed network out of which some of these projects may grow. Sometimes well-intentioned Westerners visit from abroad, look around, think they understand what needs to be done and how to do it without taking the time to really understand the people and their circumstances, and then they try to "fix" the problems. This is exactly what we don't want to be doing. First, relationships are more important



Jolan—basket maker, mentor, and church leader

than projects, and projects need to develop from the ground up and be "owned" by the local people, rather than having something imposed on them. And involving the church in such an effort is crucial as a way of demonstrating that, as important as evangelism is, mission (both from abroad and locally) is more holistic.

Dick has also begun to become involved with a Healing of Memories network here in Europe—a ministry of the Foundation [of] Reconciliation in South East Europe. This network brings together people from many countries and cultures committed to a process of reconciliation between people with deep and long-term estrangement, hurt and injustice. Dick is working to be a link between the network, some Roma leaders in Central and Eastern Europe, and the Hungarian Reformed Church. Clearly this will be a long-term process. Right now plans are beginning to take shape for an international faith-based conference in Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) next spring. The first part will be on learning from specific projects taking place around the world (e.g. in Palestine/Israel, South Africa, First Nations Canada, the Balkans, and so on). The second part of the conference will focus on Roma and the Church in South East Europe. The conference will not be seen as the culmination of anything, but as a catalyst for working groups in local communities within the larger region.

We give thanks to God who led us here. Our mission continues to develop and it seems that each new season bring new possibilities. Choices over priorities need to be made, and we pray for a clear spirit of discernment. We are especially interested in walking with the Church here as it is confronted with the challenge of reconciliation between people in difficult times in this country. We ask for your prayers as we study Hungarian, and as we plan for the rest of this year and for the years ahead. Please pray that God will work in people's minds and hearts as they work and struggle here. We ask for prayers that Roma and others will know God through our efforts. We hope that you will join us

in these prayers and that you will especially remember our new volunteer friends, Trazy and Jeff, in this time of adjustment to very new and different situations.

Grace and peace,
Carolyn and Dick

To access extensive information about the Otternesses, or to make a financial gift for their ministry, simply go to www.rca.org/otterness.

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