

The Gypsies of Svinia

Director & Camera: John Paskievich

Producer: Joe MacDonald

National Film Board of Canada www.nfb.ca/

95 minutes; Originalversion mit englischen Untertiteln. 1998

Kontakt

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Synopsis

Moved by a sense of outrage, **David Scheffel**, a Canadian anthropologist, is determined to help the impoverished Roma (Gypsies) rebuild their community in Svinia, a village in Eastern Slovakia.

So-called "white" Svinia is a picturesque, typical Slovak village with well-kept homes, gardens, a store and a school. Just some 300 metres past the last "white" home is "black" Svinia.

The Gypsies of Svinia is a portrait of the Svinian Roma community and the firm resolve of Scheffel and the Roma to make things better. Throughout Eastern Europe, the painful transition from communism to democracy has relegated the Roma to the farthest, most grotesque margins of society.

The Gypsies of Svinia offers an unprecedented look into the everyday lives of the Roma. In a life characterized by decay and despair, the Roma dwell in squalid tenement blocks and in one-room huts made of sticks and mud where they live without clean water or sewage facilities and with little hope of employment. Many "whites" of Svinia, whose homes and gardens are regularly burglarized by the desperate Roma, have lost all patience and sympathy. In terrible fits of rage, some praise Hitler's policy of trying to exterminate them.

While the subject is compelling enough, what distinguishes the film is its capacity for analysis. The Roma live under appalling conditions in a rat-infested village, drinking contaminated water, using the fields as toilets, with 100 percent unemployment. In education, they are subjected to a semi-official apartheid. Among the causes attributed to the Communists are failed attempts at integration (i.e. "reform" from above without community involvement) and the faulty construction of drains and sanitation. Among the causes attributed to privatisation is the right of employers not to employ Roma (thus forcing them on to benefits) and the reclamation of forest land for private use. One member of the community was arrested for building a wooden house. In conditions that breed disease, crime, alcoholism and dependence on social security, the question is how to reverse a situation that has become endemic.

It is also not surprising that members of the white community react adversely. One sympathises with Hitler while another contemplates his own emigration. The Roma, they allege, have children in order to get security benefits and then spend the money almost instantaneously, especially on alcohol. The Roma view, apart from the traditional commitment to children, is that they also provide "a reason for getting up in the morning." Alcohol is also used as a necessary disinfectant. It's almost a "Catch 22" situation in which problems rooted in history, tradition, apathy and prejudice seem almost incapable of change. Successful Roma professionals are also shown to prefer rising "above" their background rather than feeding their skills back into the community. But, as Paskievich makes clear, this is not a purely Slovak problem. It is the condition of many countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

But while Paskievich's film addresses a particular subject, its approach reaches beyond the situation of Svinia and the Roma as such to confront us with the sources of prejudice and the roots of racism in its broader sense. It refuses to demonise and places all of its observations within a context. It's certainly one of the best films I've seen on the subject, and it would be a pity if its specific time and place were to confine it to a sociological ghetto.

Informationen teilweise aus <http://www.kinoeye.org/>

Literatur

SVINIA IN BLACK AND WHITE: Slovak Roma and Their Neighbours

Author: David Z. Scheffel; 1551116073, BROADVIEW PRESS, June 2005, 272pp, PB

Roma - or Gypsies as some people still call them - constitute Europe's largest, poorest, and most enigmatic minority. This book is about a Romani settlement in eastern Slovakia. It is a community that has grown to become one of the largest and most problematic townships of rural Roma in the entire district. The dark-skinned squatters on the margins of Svinia are segregated from the surrounding society by means of physical and social barriers entrenched in local ideology and enforced by rules and conventions reminiscent of apartheid.