

Romany Theatre Company

Atching Tan Project

Reminiscence Interview – Transcription of Edited Interview

Date of Interview	Interviewer	Interviewee	Age Range of Interviewee	Duration of Edited Recording
	S	DL	30-40	26.10

Key timing	Initial of person speaking	Transcription of Interview
0.00	DL	My first home was a twin unit chalet, that my granddad had while he was building a house. Well, I lived initially, I haven't got many memories of when we lived in the chalet. I do have some, it was quite cramped, there was a few of us in there. I was probably only a year old when we moved out of it so..
	S	What did it look like, what was the chalet? Because to me a chalet is a little Swiss thing you know.
	DL	A static mobile home. When you hear a traveller say chalet, that's what they mean normally. So if you go to a typical Gypsy site, there might be a few people living in trailers, caravans people call them, like the caravan club. But there'll be some people in what we call chalets. So a mobile home is brought there and lifted into place and probably have a run of bricks around it. And when you go in, it more or less feels like a small bungalow inside.
1.05		Life for me in the first 5 or 6 years was, very rural. We lived in the middle of, well to me what felt like the middle of the country side until we went to more remote bits of the country. We had a bit of, well almost like half a farm. With a stable block, pigs and geese, and probably always 2 or 3 horses. So, I had a little Shetland pony called Brandy, and another horse Baby-Boy. And it was nice you know, but we always had a couple of trailers about, although we'd moved out of the chalet by then and into the big house. So, but we were always very aware, with the family being in trailers you know, and lot of them were still on the road and used to come and visit.
1.55		I would have been about 10. The family business, the men generally did roofing, and then the women but some of the men as well go out and sell flowers. So I used to go and help out with that. We used to drive all round buying them off a lot of Dutch and English growers, all around the south coast, Hampshire, Sussex. And then we'd sell them. The pitch I used to be on was in Petersfield, which is an old market town with the old square, so I did a bit of that. Got a bit older and tried to help out with the roofing and building. I wasn't particularly good at it but I done my best you know. My granddad, when it was the storm, the hurricane in 1987 was the only roofer really in our part of the country, so he done well out of that. And my mums brothers, my uncles, they're not a lot older than me, only a few years, that was what they went into, building and roofing.
2.50	S	Did you mind, did you mind not travelling? I mean, what did you feel about not travelling?
	DL	When it comes to travelling, it's a funny topic amongst travellers. But Gypsies over refer to themselves as travellers. It's the first word they use, and there's other ones the same meaning. Gypies, Romany, they use those words but the main one is definitely traveller. And sometimes you think, well I haven't really travelled about. And I think that some Gypsies they'd say, well, you shouldn't really settle down like that. They say you've become gorgified, you've become kennick, someone who lives in a house. I did think that it might have been good to have experienced it, but then the stories I had, well still, my nan, my great gran, what I call my nanny, still down there is Sussex, I go down there and have my dinner on a Sunday. And she tells me about the harder side of it. So that's what I grew up hearing, it wasn't romantic, it was hard. And I think they tell you about good times in the summer, mainly in the summer when they was out hopping in the

4.40	<p>fields and that. But the winters were bad times I think. Very hard, and they said about waking up sometimes with icicles in their eyebrows and hair it was so cold. And so I was brought up to think that we were lucky to have what we had. Running water that we didn't have to go and beg a farmer for, and warmth, and to not be moved on all the time by the police. Sort of a double side to it you know. I wouldn't sit here and say I feel just terrible that I've never travelled, cos that would be wrong. But I also feel that I've missed out on something.</p> <p>The biggest change for me was when I got a scholarship to go away to boarding school. And I didn't think I was going to take it, that was when I was 11 years old. Now, my family were infamous, don't know if they'd like me saying it, but they were infamous where we lived, might as well say it. That name on the school register meant trouble. I mean the boys didn't go to school, only a couple of days a term I should think. But when they were there they were a known nuisance. My mum tried a bit harder, she got a couple of CSE's I think, as they were then. And when I was growing up, when I was at primary school, if I didn't want to go to school that was fine, don't go to school, stay at home, do a bit of work, learn something. Cos the way they saw it, I spend a lot of time with my Nan and grand dad, cos we lived with them, and they way they saw it, you didn't learn things at school. You learn things at home. So if I didn't want to go in, I didn't go in, it just wasn't a priority. So I think i was absent probably at least 50 days a year. That's what it said on my reports. I was shocked at that. I thought I was there more than that. Yes about 50 days a year. My mum and dad met a fella who'd been to a school called Christ Hospital, in West Sussex, which is one of the few public schools who gives people and prioritises, giving people an opportunity who might not have had it. You know, most public schools very exclusive, but this one inclusive. So I thought, well I'll go up there, take the exam. Very intimidating. I know it was going to be a boarding school, and no one in my family had ever done anything like that. So my mum said, well you can go and take it, you don't necessarily have to go even if you succeed. And she meant that, cos it was going to be hard for my mum especially, my mum and dad, with me going away. But I took it, and passed. I passed it well enough to get full scholarship. Which would have meant that I was going to get an education that would have normally cost you £20 - £30,000 a year for nothing. So I went, and from that day on I wasn't absent from school, ever, cos at boarding school you don't not turn up. So that was the biggest change for me. And for my family it was very hard.</p>
7.04	<p>In terms of the bigger picture of things changing for travellers, I think its been a very important few years, the past couple of decades in terms of some things getting better and some things getting worse. I mean, I think its easier now, this tends to fluctuate, but I think its easier now to talk about being a traveller than maybe it was a few years ago. I never mentioned it at school when I was growing up, absolutely not. Cos if it came up it was a problem. And that concerns teachers as well as the other pupils. A lot of teachers, when I was a primary school, were quite open about the fact that they hated gypsies. And that if people were bullying you for that, that was fine. But in terms of, I mean some of the biggest changes have been legislation. The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in the early 90's which was basically I think the government being opportunistic taking, there was a lot of 'rave' culture at the time and public opinion was very against that, and it was a great opportunity for them to get a job in against the travelling people. And I think that was when the last lot in my family were still moving about a lot, they had to stop that because it became unworkable to be on the road. But in terms of the legal picture I cant see how that's improved.</p> <p>One of the biggest changes is an awareness that there's gypsies all around the world. I don't remember anybody ever talking about that when I was young. I was shocked to find out about the Roma, that there's people who speak a similar language, or some of the same words, stretching everywhere, through out India, up through Turkey, across Europe, Britian. And then from here, gypsies went to Canada, America you know. And now that's quite known about, even among the older people . I would imagine that some of it's got to be books. People go to the horse fairs with books on history and people learn about it that way. And also through meeting up. A lot of travellers have got a lot more active, have gone on to parliament and met people there, and then you</p>

9.43

find out about these sorts of things. And through things like Gypsy History Month, its come to peoples attention that there are new communities of Roma, that are new in this country. So, there's connections being made between them and the gypsies that have been here for hundreds of years.

We face a lot of racism I think. A surprising amount considering how inoffensive we were really. And the fact that, well one reason that, it can be surprising experiencing racism as a gypsy is that you don't always look that different to everyone else, so, it introduced into a conversation in very strange ways. You'll be talking to someone, and they'll make a comment, they might make a comment about gypsies, something negative and they're expecting you to agree. And then it might go quiet, or they might notice you face change abit, and then things get very funny. People usually retract at that stage, the go 'oh I didn't mean it'. And you think, well why did you say it then. But growing up, I know that my granddad needed, he was trying to get, planning permission you know, to develop a brown field, a real scrub area of land, it wasn't a beauty spot or anything. He wanted to build a house for his family there. And he bought the land through money he'd earned through his roofing business, and the parish council really did whatever they could to stop that. And I'm in absolutely no doubt that that was cos we were gypsies. I mean, I think it was made pretty obvious really. And that's the way it tends to be. The further up you go, you can go to the House of Lords and meet people who are lovely, but you get to these small organisations and there's a lot of hatred. But that's not to underestimate that the government has done what it can to cripple the gypsy way of life. I'm not denying that, but I think small and clan-ish groups does tend to be a bit more like that. I'd say that's why something like the BNP doesn't thrive so much in somewhere like London. People just rub along, they get along you know, live with all sorts of people up your road, its alright and we don't seem to find a problem with that. But its often people who have very little contact who have got a problem with it and I find that amazing.

A few years ago, I was still in a trailer at that point. I was living on my gran and granddads private site down in Sussex, they moved out of the house back into a trailer, cos I don't think they could get on with it. So I was down there in my little 14ft Lunar Clubman. And I got a knock on the door from my granddad in the morning, which he'd do early. He'd just get up and come and knock, he usually wants ham or something. But he had a funny look on his face, he said 'I think someone's trying to tell us something'. I said what? 'I think someone's trying to tell us something'. Anyway, he just turned around and took off up the driveway, he started walking off so I followed him. We got to the gate at the top and the brand new fence he's just put up, walked out, cos its on the main road this site, so we walked out, and I couldn't believe my eyes. On the fence was spray painted in silver spray paint, it was on the orange background so it stood out you know, it said 'Pikies, get them out, and someone had done it was like a swastika with 3 arms. And I've seen that in a film, called America History X, and I think it's a Neo-Nazi swastika. And it said, 'come on Aaron'. That's the name of the district council. And then it said 'get them out' again. And erm, I didn't really know that to make of it. I thought, that was something I was used to reading about in relation to the Jewish community, was people coming and spraying swastikas. And I thought, well hang on, people still feel that way about us. And I always thought that when gypsies moaned about racism that they were being paranoid, but suddenly there it was. People had come in the middle of the night and they'd wanted to express hatred in that way. It makes you think different that.

Do we face less racism today than in the past? I don't know, I wouldn't want to talk about people in general. I think its always latent, racism always has the possibility to spring up when you least expect it. But I think that cos my family have done quite well for themselves we sort of, we can subsume yourselves a little bit more into society and I think that makes it a bit easier. But you can sometimes tell, things do sometimes get awkward. It expressed itself in funny ways. We get a lot of complaints. The RSPCA ringing up to enquire about the welfare of my granddads horse. And that horse, he is a rude state of health I can guarantee it, he's one of the most well fed looked after horses in the country. And I can't think of another reason why people would ring up and

15.53

complain other than 'it's the gypsies'.

I live in London in a house with two non-gypsies and I feel a bit distant from all that, but when I go home you do sometimes see it. And there's a bit more police attention than there is for other people. Had my great uncle Lesley's funeral last year in the winter. There was a police helicopter circling during the service, circling the graveyard. And I can't think of another reason why, I mean the dead don't usually cause people many problems do they. So why were they doing that, unless it was...., its bizarre. Again, its in funny ways. If you are going to a horse fair, there'll be police men there and they'll be standing side by side with customs and excise officers, systematically dipping everyone's tanks to see if they are using agricultural diesel. There's people that are likely to be doing that anyway in rural communities, but for some reason they focus on that, always on that, and its pretty obvious to me why that is. So yeah, I think there's still a lot out there but you experience it in different ways really.

I've had a lot of formal education. Even the amount I did go to primary school was exceptional for a travelling boy at that time. Most of my cousins were never going in. But I was learning and enjoying learning but they weren't. For some of them that's like a badge of honour. It still is. And then I went away to boarding school, did well. Got good GCSE's and A levels. Did enjoy school, I think people always enjoy what they are good at and I was just good at it. Then I went off to Oxford. I found that hard to start off with but did well in the end. As far as I know, for a gypsy, that is quite exceptional, I haven't met any other travellers that have been to Oxford. People didn't really care, I mean, we've all got a history and you shouldn't get up in arms, nobody is special. I don't think the anyone's history is any more important than the other. Talking to some gypsies they think they are the only people in the world, but I don't feel that way about it. But how do you find out? I found out that there was one girl in Kent who spoke really good Romany from being around travellers but that was just by coincidence.

The main thing I disliked at school was that it started to nurture in me two ways of being. And I've never quite gotten over this. When I went away to school, I turned up on the first day and, I've spent all my life around gypsies, and there is a specific way gypsies talk, its quite rural, there's bits of Romany in it. Some people use more or less than others. But, sometimes, the first words I learnt for something were Romany words. Like the first word I learnt for rabbit was a 'shushie'. That's what springs to mind for me. Or for a horse it's a 'gry' and for a girl it's a 'rackie'. That's the immediate word, and then learnt the English word afterwards, that's just the way it is. But when I went to school, some people heard that and they took the mickey. And they'd make this funny noise (rawl) whenever I started talking. And so I learnt to talk with this BBC accent, and I can still go into it now. But that's something I don't like about myself. I don't like the fact that I have 2 modes of communication. And being at boarding school it made that even worse I think. Because you were completely away from your family for a few weeks and then you were only with your family for a few weeks. And I couldn't find a mid point. So what happened in the end was, I went to school and spoke one way and went home and spoke another way. And I was sort of divided. It caused me a lot of anguish it did that, growing up. I suppose most people might say, well I didn't like maths or I didn't like PE, it wasn't ever anything like that – what you would normally dislike about school. It was a personality thing.

I've always been puzzled by the way that, especially gypsies, of all communities in this country, they are probably the ones who would talk most about education making you lose things but that makes no sense to me at all. I think it's a contradiction in terms. I you've been brought up a certain way, you have that for life. It can't be erased. And you can only add to that. I don't think human experience works in terms of taking away. Unless somebody gives you a lobotomy. I mean, It just doesn't make any sense. I'd say that I gained something that made me feel awkward. I gained a way of communicating with other people, for things like, I'd be sitting there having dinner with the Lord Mayor of London, and you tend to cross your T's and dot your I's in conversation when you are sitting next to someone like that. That's something you gain, and it made me feel awkward but I just don't understand this language of 'you lose'. I don't just think, I strongly believe that you can have two sets of skills at once. So, and certain people will

20.22

talk about the loss of the oral memory, you know, that when you get involved in the written word your oral memory some how goes to pot. Now that might be true for other people but from where I am standing, that's not the truth, because I communicate in a different way, when I'm with my nanny and those stories that I remember from her, that's got nothing to do with the written word. And there's a part of my brain that works like that. But then I do have a facility for the written word and there's a part of my brain that works like that. The idea that, of the noble savage, that there's some people that should be preserved and not have access to the written word in case they loose their beautiful naive country nature. I think that can remain in you and you can have access to what other people have thought as well.

I don't know how life might change for travellers in the future. I don't enjoy speculating about the future, I don't think it's a very worthwhile past time, but I know that they'll respond in a way that they always have which is optimistically and showing a tough side and getting through. I mean, who knows what we've got around the corner. The far right party is doing better in Europe. We've seen all this before, and Gypsies tend to take the brunt of that. You ask an Italian traveller what the future holds, I doubt he'll be pulling a smiley face. Cos we've got finger-printing, national registers, we know the last time that was happening on a large scale was in Germany in 1933-36, so do you know what I mean, there's a lot of different possibilities. But I think the Gypsies know how to handle adversity and they've shown that in all parts of the world in all sort of conditions. So what ever is coming will be faced down. I don't know, I'd like to think, obviously everyone has their own opinions don't they, but I'd like to hope that literacy would improve. Cos there's a whole world out there, this rich world, that people don't have access to. But I also hope that there's an increase in respect for the old ways and skills, you don't want to loose any of that. But I don't think you can only have one of those two options and I think that's actually a very dangerous idea. I've lost, you loose a skill that you don't need don't you, and its no longer necessary for me to be able to whittle a flower out of a piece of wood, which is another thing I believe my great great grand dad could do. Some of the skills I have retained. I used to go out hunting for rabbits with my uncle Ray, but he's been dead and gone 7 years now. But we'd hunt rabbits, he taught me how to gut and skin a rabbit. That's a skill I suppose Gypsy men have had in this country for years and years, and so I can do that. Some skills you keep and some skills you don't. I suppose you can have womens institute style courses for keeping the skills, but that to me, there's something slightly ridiculous about that. About trying artificially to retain things that are part of a certain time. I mean, we've got to be careful in our view of this sort of stuff. You might say that it's a skill to kill something with an English long-bow, that's a traditional skill that we've lost touch with. Am I particularly sad about that? No, not really. Another skill, you might call a Gypsy skill is boxing. I've never been particularly into that. I've witnessed fights, I've had some close shaves, but I don't think its something I should mourn, that I don't spend time learning how to punch somebody's face in. So, it depends on the skill. But the memory is very important to me. I wouldn't every want to loose the memory of that or the image. Now I sound a bit like Shamus Heaney. He doesn't have the skill for digging peat like his father had. But he says that he digs with his pen. And so, I write, so I weave words, not baskets. People will say to me that no, you should be weaving baskets and not words, but that's their business isn't it, to have that opinion of what some one else should be doing. I just think that's an unhealthy way of looking at life.

I think that there is definitely a long term future for travellers, I cant really see, I think it involved evolution, it always has. It's a conservative culture but it also adapts. You'd think from the way people talk, that travellers have always been dealing in scrap metal, for example. Or they'd always been doing certain things like building driveways or lopping trees, but you adapt don't you. I think travellers have always adapted. They cant have been doing scrap metal 500 years ago, when nobody had any cars for you to go and call for. So there's obviously been some adaptation. But I think there will be some sort of kernel about it. For me, it's a way of looking at the world. Which is optimistic, and you don't get tied up in having a long term plan, and then you'll be willing to do anything or sacrifice any of your principle to get to that end, cos I meet a lot of people like that in

26.10		London where I live. They say they've got a plan, they want to have a certain house is Hampstead Garden suburbs or where ever it is, and they will sacrifice anything to that end. And they want to marry a certain sort of person to get to that end. Well that's not really the way things are looked at in the Gypsy community. You focus on what you are doing now. And it's the right thing to do now. And if that survives then I think it would have survived. But beyond that, I mean, who knows, who knows.
-------	--	--

Key Timing Index	
Time	Topic
0.00	First home
1.05	First few years
1.55	Men in employment
2.50	Travelling
4.40	Education
7.04	The bigger picture for travellers, change in the past few decades
9.43	Racism
15.53	Education
20.22	Change in the future
26.10	End