

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
March 16 2009	Sarah B	Jake B	37	

Key timing	Initial of person speaking	Transcription of Interview
00:00		<p>My name's Jake Bowers. I'm a Gypsy and I'm a Journalist.</p> <p>Well, I'd say my young life kind of reflected probably that of my generation. I'm 37 years old and its... I've lived in all kinds of different places. I've lived in trailers all across Sussex and Surrey, I've lived in wagons at an older stage but that is something that I chose to do, I've lived in council houses, I've lived in lots of different ways. You know, it was always part of our identity, who we were. We didn't consider ourselves, really, that different from anybody else but it was drummed into us, this is who we are and we're proud of it.</p> <p>My situation is slightly complicated in that my mum and dad split up when I was quite small. My mum moved away, so I lived with my mum and we had quite a kind of sedentary house based existence. So, as kind of, school was very regular but then I'd go and live my dad which was completely opposite. Which we would never go to school, we were in trailers, we'd be working. We were expected to work with the family from the age of 13. So, very, very different depending on which parent I was with at any one time. We use to do tarmac used to sell logs and stuff like that. Used to bag up logs. He had a bit of ground, actually that he... he had a couple of bits of ground so we weren't always travelling that much but we were based on bits of ground that he owned and umm.. for example in one place he had pigs so we raised pig umm... at another place he did a salmon farm. He dug out everything and put in a big salmon pond and we had to.. we were there kind of collecting the money from the fishermen that were there. It wasn't salmon, it was trout, sorry trout, a big trout pond and we'd collect the money from the people coming in, in there. Often we weren't working, do you know what I mean, as boys. We were quite free range and going all over the place. Yeah, we were kind of feral in the best sense of the word. We'd be climbing trees and getting up to no good sometimes actually to be honest. Yeah I was about 13 when I started working.</p>
02:23		<p>But you know I went back to school, I mean, I'm not typical as well in that I had 2 holes in my heart, so I was never a great physical worker and never was gonna be, because I didn't have the capacity for physical labour that my brothers had. So a lot of my brothers, say, went into trades where they were went into tarmac or building or roofing and stuff like that and I decided from a very early age that what I wanted to do was to get... complete enough of an education to do something different and I've done all kinds of different things since, but they've all been based around using my head and my tongue and the ability to communicate, rather than use my hands and my back.</p>
02:58		<p>I had the first operation when I was 4 and I was quite a sickly child and then I had another heart operation when I was 30. So, it proved to be quite a wise decision. You know, I have 17 brothers and sisters so they'd be... so its kind of rare.... Its very kind of Varied what they are doing. I mean some of them are on benefits, a lot of them haven't proved to have great health I have to say. I have one brother who worked so hard in tarmac that he got a... whether it was genetic or caused by it, he has a degenerative disease in his back. So now he's kind of long term sick. But I have other brothers calling, doing kind of modern gypsy work or kind of building and stuff like that. We're kind of spread out all across the south of England so we're spread from Hampshire to Sussex.</p>
03:54		<p>My knowledge of East Anglia and Travellers in East Anglia really does come through my work, rather than through just normal life, in that for a couple of years (well actually for the last 10 years) I've been involved in kind of doing research and journalism with</p>

	<p>travellers all over the world, but a lot in East Anglia as well. So, I've done a lot of work in research with travellers, particularly young travellers. I've done work in terms of research about peoples housing needs and their cultural needs in East of England and all over. But the thing that I've probably done the most in the East of England is actually journalism 'cos I did a programme across the East of England umm called 'Rokker Radio' which was based ... needing ... based on needing to go out and get stories each week about culture and conflicts on the gypsy and traveller community, so I know an awful lot of people across the east of England and all about history and culture and stuff like that, which has changed. I think what has happened in the East of England is obviously a lot of travellers came here even from my part of the world. I have relatives that moved up here because of the agricultural economy and because of the relative low value of land at that time. So they moved up here. So I've got relations for example live outside of Wisbech that came up here. They were born in Sussex, but came up here because of the favourable conditions. Umm... and so what's changed is they came up because of that and then obviously land work became more mechanised, so they moved into different trades. It became less about the land work, being nomadic to actually being much more kind of sedentary and establishing, err.. build... err..., firms based around construction and stuff like that, that's really what's changed. But also you know a lot of people have kind of umm... gone into housing. People have become hidden, you know there is a hidden a massive hidden community across the East of England of which the people living in caravans is just the tip of the iceberg. I think its been driven by a number of factors. I think its been driven by a general economic change, a mechanisation that that's obviously affected things, been driven by you know, kind of, social exclusion. I mean the preference that there is in the community still for self-employment is partly driven by social exclusion, but if nobody will employ you, you employ yourself and that's really why people kind of hold onto it, because it's a way of economically liberating yourself. But that's something that goes back hundreds and hundreds of years, you know. But being nomadic isn't about a life style, its actually about a mind set which is actually about changing with the times, about standing on your own 2 feet and valuing self reliance. And so whilst things have changed, things actually have really stayed the same. People have just moved with the times, which is what they always did, you know. People lived in tents and they moved into wagons and they moved into trailers and then they moved into houses and people are just adapting to the political and economic situation that they find themselves in.</p>
06:53	<p>I think there have been changes for the better, but I think probably the situation of women has probably changed for much better situation in that, you know, traditionally your gypsy women were expected to be purely housewives and mothers. You used to, particularly in the English gypsy community, that girls are widening there aspirations beyond that and, and not that, and that those are 2 very big and important and demanding roles in themselves being a wife and mother where you see English gypsy girls becoming well educated, increasingly articulate, increasingly umm... aware of their equality, which does pose a kind of threat to traditional ways in which they would have been treated within the community. That's probably one of the biggest changes for the better umm... in some ways things have got worse, I mean people of our generation, their health is certainly worse than that of senior generations because people aren't as physically active as they used to be. There's much more diabetes there's much more health problems bad mental health problems umm... you know and the reasons are complex for that. So, the things have changed for the better but they've also got worse for people.</p>
08:06	<p>I don't really consider myself to have experienced old ways really because you've only ever experienced your ways and its very easy for people to look back in the past and say oh wasn't it romantic when people lived like this, when people lived like that and I think within the span on my lifetime I've certainly seen things breaking down which I think are regrettable and unfortunate the way that people would... you know I remember still very much as a boy that you would go into peoples places and you.... the hospitality would be absolutely incredible to who ever, if they were a traveller because we saw that</p>

09:47	<p>people needed to look out for each other. The only people we had were each other and what I've seen happen is that people have become more individual; individualistic, more materialistic. People have become more westernised in the kind of negative sense and I think that's one thing that's changed that might make you want to, kind of, long for the old days. But also, the kind of, the land and the connection with nature, I think its something that's breaking down. Our path of development is parallel with that of the wider world in thought. It might be a generation behind in some circumstances but it is that people are realising what they are missing and they're going back to it. You know one of the reasons that gypsy men are still really into horses is not because the horse has any practical benefit to their lives. It's because it is a slower pace; it is very, very kind of therapeutic; it is just wonderful. Enriches their lives, not in an economic way but in a kind of spiritual and a cultural way and that's where a lot of that comes from. That will never go I don't think.</p> <p>No, I didn't lead a typical life: we went to school, we had a quite a settled existence umm... on, at some points. So if you don't, if your not physically living outside the norm, you're seen to be the same as everybody else, so you don't necessarily get it. And then when we're living in trailers or moving about or whatever, we were in some ways so isolated from people in the settled community that there weren't many interactions where we would have experienced it. So we never went to school, so we wouldn't have been bullied in school. So no, not really. I've experienced racism probably later in life but as a child I wouldn't say I experienced it overtly. I think it's really, it's at that point where you are visibly different. I mean one of the things I did as an adult is, because I'd never experienced that kind of living in horses and wagons which really was the kind of experience of my parents and grand parents, is something that I decided to do and it is at that point that, you know, that you really come up against the fact that the world is constructed in a way to stop that and if you persist in being different that's when the racism comes. And so being evicted, moved on, shouted at, abused you know and particularly, I'd say, the worst racism I've ever experienced is actually in the process of standing up for the rights of other gypsies and travellers to persist to be different; where you actually begin to confront prejudice that's when its at its most biting. If you run away from prejudice then you never really confront it, but its in that confrontation that you experience it. But that just makes it... that just encourages me, it doesn't bother me. There's something very challenging to a system about, and of course this is the whole reason of being a journalist, of actually having a voice and finding a voice for other people, you know. To articulate their rights to be different. That's when you experience it. Umm yeah, I wouldn't say that I am a spokes person. I say that I experience more today than I did in the past. Well I choose to find it and look for it you know so that's why but you know a lot of people don't experience racism if they don't want to do that. So yeah, I go looking for it. Where the racism is, is where I go. So I'm not typical. I go where the bite point is, I go where the conflicts are and they are generally racially driven. So I experience far more racism than most gypsies and travellers do.</p>
12:15	<p>I had a good primary and secondary education I had 5 GCSE's which... and I'm very rare amongst my brothers and sisters in that. That's what happened I wouldn't say it was good necessarily. It was enough to equip me with the skills of reading and writing, so that I could umm.... No, I didn't like school, I didn't like teachers, I didn't like the authority necessarily, I didn't like the conformity that it imposed on people, but I kind of instinctively knew that as somebody, you know, that had a bad heart that the other way is not a way that was going to be profitable for me. So I saw it as a necessary evil. We were at a place the other day where Gloria Buckley, bless her, she quotes Mark Twain where she says 'Don't let your schooling interfere with your education' and they're very, very different things. You do get taught things in school but actually for a lot of gypsies and travellers, I'd say that I was the same as that actually, schools were a place that you endured rather than enjoyed but actually education is a life long process of actually challenging yourself and opening your mind wherever you go and the most learning I've had, have been outside and educational institution. My kids, two of them go to a</p>

13:33	<p>primary school and one of them goes to a nursery.</p> <p>I mean life will continue to change. We live in a time of rapid technological change umm... and if we are to remain true to the... that nomadic mindset and spirit of our ancestors, we wont shirk away from it or be ignorant of it. We will actually embrace it as hard and as fast as we can, you know. There's no doubt that the one day they'll be gypsies in space. (laughs)</p> <p>You know and in the information age we need to see information as a commodity and a resource that we can do. There are very few people that are actually doing it and culture is a resource and a commodity. We live in a cultural economy as well and you know, I just sincerely hope that enough of our community actually see that that writings on the wall. I'd like to see people both go backwards and go forwards at the same time. Id like to see people return to their roots in the terms of the good things that are within our tradition which is you know a closeness to the land, a closeness to nature, a lack of materialism which is getting eroded all the time by a kind of materialism and individualism and competition and violence and brutality. I think we've become a brutalised community, which is very brutal amongst ourselves sometimes and brutal to other people. I think we need to reject that and go backwards umm.. to a much, kind of, softer, stealthier, umm.. more productive approach but I also think we need to embrace the benefits of education for our children, so that we can have the best of those deep roots but also enjoy the best of the future. Because for far too many of us are currently missing out on it you know, far too many children have their options are too narrow because their choices their parents are making them (not sending them to school, of remaining in the bad of the past) are curtailing the opportunities their children will have in the future. So we need to do both: we need to draw on our strengths, but also open our eyes. There's a great history and a great strength and defiance in us as a community, which has enabled us to survive for hundreds of years. People have been talking about the end of gypsies for hundreds and hundreds of years and it's never come to pass and it never will come to pass umm, because people are adaptable. They shift their shape. They move on. So yeah, I am optimistic about it but also, you know, I'm lucky to go to countries where things are far, far worse than they are here. Where the racism and the persecution puts anything people in this country experience into... it just knocks it completely into touch. You know, we're not forcibly sterilised, we're not sent to the schools for the educationally sub-normal, we're not hunted, we're not shot, we're not burnt you know and so I can't help but be optimistic when I come here. That doesn't mean that there aren't problems, because there are problems, you know, we live in a much kinder, softer environment for us than a lot of our peers in other countries do.</p>
16:16	

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