


hartbeat

Humanitarian Aid Response Teams



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Seek JUSTICE
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of the FATHERLESS
PLEAD the case
of the WIDOW



Pastor to the Gypsies

by Iryna Voloshyn

Gypsies are the poorest, most unemployed, least educated, most imprisoned and most segregated people in Eastern Europe



Pastor Ruslan

“One day, I came to the point when **I praised God for having made me an orphan.**” We were taken aback by his words, but Ruslan seemed calm and sure about what he had just said.

With a slight smile on his lips and his eyes focused on the cup he was holding, it was as if he was watching scenes of his life in the sparkling tea.

Somehow we got the sense he

wasn't just merely thanking God for whatever happens, but was a prelude to a much greater story.

Ruslan Surmay, is a 47-year old Gypsy pastor, father and grandfather. He is one of the very few people in Ukraine who preach the Gospel to those considered thieves, beggars and cheats in society. He is also the first translator of the Bible into the Gypsy language.

His wife Irina was sitting next to him in the tiny kitchen of their house, adjoined to a small village church-building for approximately 60-70 people.

Despite its size, the house stood out dramatically, compared to typical Gypsy shacks in the village of Perechyn, nestled at the base of the Carpathian Mountains of Ukraine.

“We moved to this house about eight years ago **when HART blessed us with this building,**” Irina said. “Before that, we lived in a traditional Gypsy hut that we built ourselves. We made hundreds of clay and straw bricks, and let them dry for a few weeks before constructing the walls. Nobody helped us. Everyone had their own bitter lives...”

GYPSY LIFE

Perechyn is a multi-ethnic town of Ukrainians, Hungarians (it was once part of Hungary) and Gypsies, who live in a small community on the outskirts of the village. They represent a completely different picture and lifestyle than the rest of Perechyn.

Here you find yourself in slums, mud and crowds of half-naked kids, playing with sticks, torn tires and home-made primitive toys.

They swarm around you, as soon as you enter their world, creating a feeling that the whole community has far more kids than adults. And it's true, as most families have six, ten or more children.



Their homes are primitive shacks, built with hand-made clay brick walls and a well 'ventilated' roof above.

There are no fridges or indoor stoves, nor washrooms or kitchens in these dwellings. Cooking takes place outside. Well-built, comfortable houses are not common in Gypsy villages.



STRANGERS FROM EGYPT

Historically, Gypsies were nomadic tribes from India who migrated to the Middle East, eventually into Egypt, and then reached Europe.

“How did we end up being beggars, thieves and vagrants?” Ruslan brought up this troublesome issue while giving us a tour around the village.

“The legend says that our people were famous for their creative and artistic nature. Singers and dancers, not eager to work hard though, therefore were despised and rejected in society.

Moreover, these Indian tribes had learned some magic while travelling through Egypt. The name “Gypsy” means “those, who came from Egypt.”

In partnership with local Gypsy churches, HART is working to transform these villages thru:

Water well construction
Micro-loans for growing produce
New schools for children
Summer day-camp programs
Medical & dental care
Church buildings

However, back then in Catholic Europe, such knowledge about magic was not an advantage. Eventually, these suspicious strangers didn't get official permission to work in Europe, so they were left with no other option but to beg and steal."

THE LEAST OF THESE

We were immersed in typical Gypsy life as we strolled along the winding trails between homes in these slums.

A young mother sat on the ground breast-feeding her newborn; old ladies wore bright colorful clothing while cooking on outdoor fires; tanned and wrinkled men curiously looked out of their glassless windows; and dirt-covered little boys were trying to make a rusted bike with flat-tires move down the muddy path.

Years earlier, Ruslan and Irina had started life as a typical Gypsy couple. **They were married at the age of 14, which is considered a 'normal' marriage age among Gypsies.**

Their marriage ceremonies are nothing formal - more like a verbal agreement between families, a "shaking hand" ritual, without even government registration or a church ceremony.

Ruslan and Irina met at an orphanage, both having no parents and, despite big families and numerous relatives, had no one to take care of them.

"We came to Perechyn after graduating from vocational schools with the only possession we had – our first son Gopal." Irina continued, "At first, we lived with Ruslan's brother. But he wasn't very welcoming. He eventually evicted us, and we tasted the life of being homeless."

There were times, when this young family spent nights at the railway station trying to keep warm when it was -30°C.

Work was scarce in Perechyn. Gypsy women and kids traditionally would beg, while men wove baskets or brooms or sold items they found in garbage dumps. Ruslan and Irina followed the pattern.

"Could you ever imagine a dirty, poor Gypsy man, who sneaks onto trains, begs for bread and spare change, sleeps on the ground and drowns his despair in alcohol - as a future Christian pastor!?" Ruslan asked. **"But that's exactly how God saw me!"**

WHY HAD GOD CHOSEN ME?

"Get up, Ruslan! Christians are in the village!" A neighbour cried out at the door of their shack. This was during the tough post-Soviet 90's in Ukraine, which was especially difficult for the Gypsies.

Christian missionaries were seen as a source of food and second hand clothing. They had heard some Germans were distributing



Gypsy grandmother and her outdoor stove

snacks and clothes, so now it was an opportunity too promising to miss. "Go and grab anything you can there for us and our kids," Irina implored her husband.

Ruslan dressed up hurriedly and headed to a house where the outreach was going on.

"To this day, I cannot comprehend how the whole village fit into that tiny place!" He smiled. "When I arrived, people were in the middle of a repentance prayer. Dozens of them, crying, praying and no more seeking food and clothing, but forgiveness and salvation..."

"I gave my heart to Jesus at the next service that took place in my sister's house. Was it easy transformation? Did we all instantly become saints? No...far from it. There were times when all of us men pretended to be listening to the preacher while being completely drunk and dreaming only about good food and sleep."

To continue reading the rest of Ruslan's inspiring story - please go to the [HOME page on our website \(www.hart.ca\)](http://www.hart.ca) and scroll down to "Pastor to the Gypsies."

You'll learn how he became a Pastor, the struggles he's faced in transforming his village and the importance of HART's ministry to his Church.



Ruslan & Irina in front of their first home

you are
invited!

HART'S Annual Summer Camp Auctions

Calgary: Friday, April 13
Edmonton: Saturday, April 28

FOR MORE INFO OR TO PURCHASE TICKETS:

www.hart.ca or 403.230.8263 or 1.888.788.3880



PURPOSE OF THE AUCTION

To send **thousands** of underprivileged children from Ukraine and other Eastern European countries to summer camps.

BENEFICIARIES

Children from orphanages, foster homes, street kids, gypsy villages; children with special needs, and those from desperately poor families including **refugees** from the war in Eastern Ukraine.

WAYS YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

■ PRAY FOR GYPSY PASTORS

Please pray for **Pastor Ruslan** and all the **Gypsy pastors** in Ukraine, who demonstrate God's love and minister to "the LEAST of these" in Eastern Europe. Pray that God will provide them with the resources they need for their ministries.

■ PRAY FOR THE WAR TO END

Please pray that peace will return to Ukraine. Pray for the Churches throughout Ukraine that are extending their love and resources to displaced people due to the war.

■ DONATE TO: WHERE MOST NEEDED

Your gifts will allow us to respond practically and effectively to the current needs of our partner churches and ministries in Eastern Europe.

■ SUPPORT OUR SUMMER CAMP PROGRAMS

If you want to change a country – start with its children! Sending a child to summer camp is an investment in the future leaders of a country – raised with Christian values and character. Help us send **10,000** children to camps this summer!

■ PLANNED GIVING

How can you...provide for your family, simplify the work of your estate trustees, continue support for the charities of your choice, and minimize taxes?

HART and **Abundance Canada** are partnering to provide the best advice and direction as it relates to wills, estates and other planned giving activities. Please go to our website for info: **GET INVOLVED > PLANNED GIVING.**

 **Humanitarian Aid Response Team**
International Relief

CANADA - 106, 90 Freeport Blvd, NE, Calgary, AB, T3J 5J9
Tel: 403.230.8263 Toll free: 1.888.788.3880
Web: www.hart.ca Email: office@hart.ca

USA - 7340 E Main St. #200, Scottsdale, AZ 85251
Toll free: 1.888.788.3880

HART is audited annually by an independent accounting firm and our financial statements are available upon request. Our Board of Directors has established the policy that all contributions designated for specific projects shall be applied to that project, with up to 5 per cent to be used if needed for administering the gifts. Occasionally we receive more contributions for a given project than can be wisely applied to that project. When that happens, we use these funds to meet a similar pressing need.

Our greatest FEAR
should not be of
FAILURE
but of **succeeding**
at things in life that
DON'T REALLY MATTER