UNDERSTANDING CANADA’S IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD THROUGH ROMANI CASES AND ISSUES

Presentation for the Migration and Ethnic Relations Program Colloquium, University of Western Ontario

By Julianna Butler

PhD Student, Anthropology Department and Migration and Ethnic Relations Program
What is the Immigration and Refugee Board?

- Canada’s “largest independent administrative tribunal” (IRB 2010)
- Refugee Protection Division decides claims made by people in Canada; Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) decides refugee claims made outside of Canada
- 74 Victoria Street, Toronto

Photo by author
What is the Immigration and Refugee Board?

- Overview of process
- Official lingo
  - Referred
  - Pending
  - Finalized
    - Accepted
    - Rejected
    - Withdrawn
    - Abandoned

Flowchart from: IRB Overview brochure
National and Central Comparison of Referred Claims
National and Central Referred Claims, alternative view
“Gypsy” stereotypes

Romani Realities

- Persecuted ethnic minority
- Slavery, genocide, forced sterilization, forced adoptions, etc.
- Every-day human rights abuses and violence, fire bombings, beatings, etc.
- Lack of state/police protection

Slovakia plans forced school for Roma children

BY TOM PARRY ON MAR 14, 10 11:22 AM IN ROMA

Taking children from their parents to be forcibly placed in boarding schools does sound like something that happens in modern-day Europe.

Amnesty, however, claims this policy is exactly what is proposed in Slovakia.

http://blogs.mirror.co.uk/developing-world-stories/2010/03/slovakia-plans-forced-school-f.html
Who are Romani people?

- Many names—Romany, Rroma, Romanichal, Sinti, etc.
- Originally from north-west India
- Europe’s largest non-territorial ethnic minority
- 5 – 20 million

Romani Organizations

- European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC)
  - Roma Rights Journal
- International Romani Union
  - World Romani Congress
  - International Roma Day – April 8
- European Roma Information Office (ERIO)
- Roma Virtual Network
Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005 - 2015

- Vision and values statement
  - Nothing about us without us: Roma participation will make or break the Decade. Roma representatives and civil society organizations are involved in every stage of the Decade. Roma shaped and defined the vision from the very outset. Roma civil society groups and experts identified policy priorities and played a key role in defining Decade goals and targets. Roma participation will be central to regular oversight and monitoring of the process over the next ten years. (From the Declaration of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, signed in Sofia, Bulgaria, Feb. 2005)

- Founding international partner organizations
  - World Bank, UN Development Program, Council of Europe, UNHCR, Open Society Institute, and more

- 12 European countries
Romani refugees and Roma in Canada

- Roma Community Centre, Toronto
- Transnational networks spanning centuries

Painting by JoEllen Brydon depicting the Gypsy caravans and wedding feast that took place in Peterborough, Ontario, 1909.

Photos by author at the Roma Community Centre
Past Research

- **Oulu, Finland**
  - 2002-2003
- **Kale/Kaale** (from *kàlo* = black);
  - *Mustalaiset*
- Virtually invisible
- Traditional dress
- Social welfare system interesting comparison for Canadian system

National Referred Claims by Nationality

- Czech claims referred
- Hungarian claims referred
Why this research now?

- The IRB as a relatively new institution with many significant changes in the last 10 years
- Policies that affect claimants, all Canadians, international relations, transnational communities, and more
- Refugee issues intertwined with immigration policies, including public attitudes
- November 2007: lifting visa restrictions
- July 2009: re-imposing visa restrictions
Why anthropology?

- Issues of representation, identity, agency, history, memory, as well as the varied and heterogeneous effects of displacement, discrimination, persecution, violence, etc.

- Ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews and participant-observation lead to insights gained from long-term contact with informants.

- The anthropology of policy – to reconfigure supposedly neutral or apolitical statistics and numbers. Part of a holistic platform to understand lived experiences, emphasize urgency: speak the language of the policy-makers.
National Acceptance Rates

Zero Czech claims accepted or rejected

Average Acceptance Rate
Czech Acceptance Rate
Hungarian Acceptance Rate
National “Success” Rates
Dear Mr. Kenney...

- “It’s hard to believe that the Czech Republic is an island of persecution in Europe... [We need to] prevent people from abusing our very generous refugee determination system.” (Canwest News 2009)

- “The sheer volume of these claims is undermining our ability to help people fleeing real persecution.” (CIC 2009, emphasis added)
National Referred, Finalized, and Pending Claims
The Canadian refugee system is not a “neutral” process

- Human errors, misconceptions, and prejudice work to reinforce and institutionalize ethnicity-based discrimination
- Influence by international relations and contexts

Research is needed (from all angles)

- Understanding lived experiences of refugee claimants and refugee communities in Canada
- Reform is vital (Rousseau et al. 2002, Showler 2008)
  - Better training for Board Members, more accurate reports
  - Implementation of appeal process
  - Reduce backlog
Thank you

- Dr. Randa Farah, my supportive supervisor
- The Migration & Ethnic Relations program, coordinators, faculty, and peers
- Anthropology Department
- Welcoming Communities Initiative
- Roma Community Centre, especially Ronald Lee and Paul St. Clair
- IRB Documentation Centre staff