

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 |
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| 15-02-11 | | Sinead | Gratton Puxon | 72 | 17:18 |
| Key timing | Initial of person speaking | Transcription of Interview | | | |
| 00:00 | | <p>Gratton Puxon. I was the founder back in 1966 of the Gypsy Council. I was doing apprenticeship on the local paper in Colchester. Just coming to the end of the British Army Conscription, so I was going to be conscripted into the British Army. I was re... ban the bomb protester. Didn't believe in military solutions, so I tore up my call up papers and went over to Ireland.</p> | | | |
| 00:28 | | <p>Pretty soon after getting over to the Republic I got in with Travellers at a place called the Gala Cinema, you know, camped up in a place called the California Hills. Of course that was in the days of wagons, no trailers around at all more people were in tents so we moved in to Cherryor... well no it wasn't Cherryorchard, it was a piece of land called the Ring Road. It was an old piece of factory land in Ballyfermot. We were moving around all over the place. I had the idea of putting up a school. It was the first St Christopher's School. A rather grand name for a shack put together from stuff we got from a scrap yard, but then about a week, government corporation reacted by sending in the bailiffs tearing St Christopher's down and burning it. In the meanwhile we gathered some support. Pretty strong sense of solidarity was building. We'd also been on a horse and cart protest down to city hall. We would ask the Dublin City Manager. could we have a water supply laid on. We went because we believed that the Commission on Itinerancy in Ireland that was 1963 had just recommended Travellers should have legal places to pull into, so we felt we had some rights. But the Manager was quick to tell us and drive us out of his office with the words 'You've got no right to turn, you'd better get off that land and get shifted'. That's what happened. A week later they burnt down the school. We formed up in a column of 18 wagons out on the road. It was quite a spectacular wild west vision, if you can imagine that, because there were lots of little carts in between and dogs running about. We set off for a place called Walkinstown because we'd been told that if you leave here by 2 o'clock, because by the way we've had a sit-in in the school and refused to leave and they put a chain around the school and were about to drag it down on our heads, so we had to get out. But we negotiated that if we went somewhere else and left the field at 2 o'clock we would be left a month at the next place we chose to pull on to, and that sounded grand in terms of what was happening in those days where you only got a couple of days here and there. So we went off in this dramatic column of wagons down to a place called Walkinstown. Pulled in on some land there. It did mean breaking a bit of fence but we got on it and at 7 o'clock that night. The guards; the police, the local Irish police came in on the field and said if you are not out of here in 2 hours we'll see you burnt out and I swear that the inspectors breath smelt strongly of whisky. It was pretty inflamed, so we had a very nervous and frightening night expecting the police to come back but they didn't. It was calm in the morning, but we spent a number of days there, but we did pull out to another piece of land to cut the story a bit short we were evicted from 10 pieces of ground around Dublin until pulling into this great big field. 26 acres just on the outskirts of Dublin, Ballyfermot, which became know as Cherryorchard or Cherryorchard Camp. 400 travellers from all over Ireland gathered together and made a stand there for 3 or 4 years until the very first official council site was opened which was Labra Park. It was a great victory at the time, but looking back on it of course others have come to pretty much dislike council sites with all their regulations and all the imposition that comes with it. So of course today people don't want council sites in the large, I must say a lot of travellers would be leaving. Many people would prefer to have a private site. Be their own bosses and that's what we</p> | | | |

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| 04:09 | <p>campaign for and fight for now.</p> <p>That took us up to about 1966 when a lot of travellers left Ireland, came to England with a Trailer. They hadn't had their wagon, they got a trailer pulled into some land down in Kent which belonged to a huge estate belonging to Lord Stamford. His land agents or whatever, His gamekeeper didn't notice we were there for 6 months, so big was that estate about 20,000 acres and in that time the Gypsy Council was formed at a pub in St Mary Cray. In a pub called the Bull, which had a nice sign on the door 'No Gypsies'. Gone along a couple of nights before. Said we want a meeting, can we book your hall for a human rights meeting on such and such a date and gave him £10. Except that when he found out that it was going to be travellers, he tried to cancel it. We said here's the contract, he let us go ahead with it. It did go ahead. That was the foundation of the Gypsy Council.</p> <p>After '66, there were a lot of battles over pieces of land around this country especially up in the midlands. There were a lot of travellers threw their lives into it. Pops Johnny Connors who had been with me in Ireland, Tommy Docherty, who has since died and these were great and the Gypsy Council in a way was hailed as the trade union of the Travellers and Tommy Docherty was one of those people who could really get people together.</p> |
| 05:28 | <p>First Congress. The first World Romany Congress 1971, which for the first time brought people from Eastern and Western Europe together. Roma from Eastern Europe, we could chose the flag, so that flag that you now see with the blue sky and green land with the big red wheel in the middle which is the international chakra. You know, we could chose that. Something the congress could do and have the national anthem 'Gelem Gelem' and the 8th April became Roma Nation Day; the Day of the congress opening. I was then elected general secretary and I has the job of organising the next 2 congresses, but I did find in my time of 10 years as general secretary, it was all about meetings and conferences and I felt that I was losing touch with the ground roots.</p> |
| 06:19 | <p>Some years later after a long sojourn in Yugoslavia, Greece and a 5 year visit to America. When I did eventually come back to this country in 1992, I was determined that I would work at ground level if you like. It just so happened that within almost a few miles of my home, just 30 miles away; Dale Farm. Great issue of whether the Dale farm families would be getting planning permission; of being allowed to stay or whether there was going to be an eviction is what I've been working on ever since. But I feel more satisfaction and I think more significant to get something done locally than talk endlessly internationally, I think not much seems to change There was quite a few Romany Families with us at Cherryorchard, so its always been mixed. When I went off to Eastern Europe I was living with all the settled Romany families in Macedonia, the town ship of Skopje which now has a population of about 70,000 Roma, elect their own MP who was one of the people who came to the first world Romany Congress. So I was really very much integrated into a Romany Community at that time and speak Romany and translating my fourth 'Destiny of Europe's Gypsies' into the Romany Language. But at the moment Dale Farm just happens to be mostly Travellers of Irish Heritage and some of the older people as I've mentioned who came to Oak Lane from Palmers Yard in Romford, they are Romany Families.</p> |
| 08:05 | <p>In 1960's and of course 1950's and the further back you go it was all at one time all tents. So, if you like, the habitat has changed from tents to wagons to trailers to mobile homes to chalets; that's how its evolved. Bigger and better in fact. The travelling way in one sense, in many senses is thriving and has developed enormously. Where people were travelling around only one county they are now travelling around the whole of Europe. Travelling in style in good gear, it looks great. But where we are hit very hard is the intolerance, the racism, the impossibility to get planning permission when you need it for a piece of land. To be tolerated at a pub or restaurant, as there are still people turned away at the door. I don't know how this has come about, but certainly since 1989 and the fall of the soviet union, the whole change over of Eastern Europe, although in the long term might be a good thing for democracy, has not been a good thing for Roma because being the minority at the bottom of the pile, where Yugoslavia you might just get a job and the chance of education, now I know particularly in Macedonia where I</p> |

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lived for a number of years you just cannot get a job. Somebody is always going to get ahead of you either they're going to be Macedonians or local Albanians. You are not as a Rom going to get that job, you might have the qualifications, gone to university. People came from Macedonia for the congress. Feikh Amdi the local MP invited me back, but I had also had a strong attachment to Yugoslavia particularly Eastern Europe since a child. I first went down there as a child of about 15 all by myself in fact as a kind of adventure across Yugoslavia. So that's how it happened and as I said I don't know why the racism that we see so strongly in Eastern Europe and that. The killings in Hungary that we see going on' why that has also affected this country? But I think its also because of migration. There's huge bad feelings towards migrants. 20,000 Roma have come into the UK. They are part of the migrant scene and we are all getting a huge backlash of intolerance and racism you know.

The Romanies have been here for 500 years and the interesting thing is that the Irish travellers have their own even longer tradition of being nomads of their own language and kind of showing the Roma who have their tradition from India and Indian language in fact so we're all together in the same boat, but you know under a terrible hammer of a lot of intolerance.

But we had a meeting, a meeting we recently had with John Baron who was supposed to negotiate a settlement over Dale Farm. He pretty well closed the conference by saying 'I don't care about the UN, I don't care how many human rights people speak out against this eviction, we're going to go ahead with it. We have the political will to do it'. That pretty well summed up the situation with the present government.

At this moment, all my energies are going into helping Dale Farm and we just don't know which way it's going to go. We were told a few weeks ago that Essex police has estimated that the policing side of this huge eviction operation which is going to be bulldozing 90 homes and ending education for more than 100 children, throwing people out on the road who will then will be driven out of the district by the police (although that's supposed to be illegal, but we can see it happening; we have seen it happen). Are they going to get... The big question is 'Are they going to get the £10 million? Which they've asked the Home Secretary for as a special funding for this colossal police operation. At the same time, we have a message from the police that they would like the Dale Farm families to be informed of the day of the eviction because they fear that children will go to school in the morning and come out in the afternoon and not know where their parents are. They have expressed that concern and the local Primary Care Trust says its undoubtable, its unavoidable there will be trauma for the children, injuries to people during the eviction. Despite all those warnings and despite the letters from the UN; 2 separate United Nations bodies have sent letters to the UK government requesting that this eviction not take place, certainly should not take place unless alternatives have been provided and they have not been provided. And yet it is all very much in the balance and we don't know which way its going to go. We've got another meeting now and this will probably be dated from this interview, but on the 1st March we meet again with John Baron, we meet with head of Basildon Council, Tony Ball on 14th March. They have their own special Council Meeting to decide the last nuts and bolts of the eviction to vote for the money to decide on the issue of the 28 day letter of you know quit or be evicted. All those things seem to be in train and unstoppable and all we can do is prepare for an eviction.

We are doing everything we can to avoid it. We are in the process with 2 planning applications for land within the Basildon area because they've got 45 square miles of land mostly green belt, but a lot has already been given up to housing. We've got a planning application in for a piece of land provided by, you could say by the government, the homes and counties.... homes and communities Agency, the Homes and Communities Agency umm which they see as perfectly suitable for travellers. Its already been passed for 3500 housing units, but that project has been delayed for 5 years because of an access, so we... why can't we have it as an alternative to Dale Farm and we're going ahead with those as hard as we can. The council is making all kinds of difficulties saying one piece of land we have been looking as has got greater crested newts on it, we've got to have a special survey and study on it to see how we can avoid

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| 15:39 | | <p>doing them any harm. Does that mean newts are more important than people? I don't know and there we are we're putting that on the table, but it looks like that we will be over taken by events that it will go ahead with the eviction in the meanwhile we're still struggling to get an alternative set up. Common sense would say don't spend £13 million on an eviction, leave the families where they are, its their own land, their own houses. They don't want anything except the piece of paper, which they'd pay for saying they've got permit to live on their own land. That's all we want.</p> <p>I think that this battle is hugely important for travellers all over this country because I think that if they flatten Dale Farm, they can flatten anything. Many Travellers are very feared of that. So we want to win at Dale farm for the sake of everybody and we hope in our own way, perhaps a small way, but in some way to chalk up one victory that might begin to turn tide against the racism the travellers are facing in France, Italy, Hungary and where else right across Russia.</p> <p>Well, the only thing I'm putting my cards on is Dale Farm because, as I say, I have worked at international level I was the secretary of the International Romany Union. The IRU has no great reputation at the moment for getting much done. So I am hoping with a local victory to raise the flag if necessary for Roma, Travellers, the Gypsies of this country to make a stand for their rights. It's not me but its what the next generation will do and what younger people will do. I am 72 years old now. I'm not up to carrying the whole thing and I'm hoping that by winning at Dale Farm it will be a rallying call for others to join in.</p> |
| 16:53 | | <p>We lived in a terrible muddy field at Cherryorchard and it was a freezing winter, but it used to be great to wake up in the morning and see the sunrise over grass, over trees. You did feel out in the country even though you were in appalling situations. That was kind of it. There is a beautiful side to travelling way of life if the majority of society will just let us get on with it.</p> |

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