

## Romani Community in Turkey:

Kırklareli, Edirne, Ankara, Istanbul, Duzce, Izmit, Izmir, Afyon, Tokat, Sivas, Denizli, Mardin, Gaziantep, Kahramanmaras, Adana, Samsun are the cities that are known for their gypsy inhabitants. Gypsy population is 500 thousand according to official channels while it is estimated to be 1.5 million according to unofficial figures. 95% of gypsies are settled nomads<sup>1</sup>.

Gypsies are given different names in different regions of Turkey. They are called "*Çingene (Gypsy)*" in Western Anatolia and Thrace, "*Mutrip*" in Van-Ardahan and surrounding areas, "*Elekçi (Siever)*" in Central Anatolia, "*Poşa (Nomad)*" in Erzurum and around, "*Cano*" in Adana, and "*Esmer Vatandaş (Dark Citizen)*", "*Köçer (Nomad)*", "*Arabacı (Cabman)*" in various regions of Anatolia.

Gypsies, settled nomads mostly living in big cities, earn their living by playing music, selling flowers, involving in basketry, tinner-working, ironworking or collecting waste. Other gypsies are still conserving their nomadic traditions. They live in warm areas in winter and move to outer districts of cities in summer.

## History of Sulukule:

The first records we have of groups of people that we may identify unequivocally as Romani, come from Byzantium in the later 11th century. In these works by eminent scholars such as the canon Theodore Balsamon, the Rom are referred to as "Aiguptissa" or "Egyptians" in Greek. This is because of the link made by writers like Michael Psellos and Michael Italikos, between the practice of divination (fortune-telling), and sorcery relating to leading bears and charming snakes as practiced by the early Rom, and the land of Egypt, where Pharoah's magicians had once challenged Moses. The "Egyptians", or Gypsies, as they came to be called by the Byzantines and subsequently elsewhere, were frequently persecuted by the Orthodox Church for their behaviour, and forced to live on the margins of the city of Constantinople, camping outside the walls in their black tents, close to the Adrianople Gate and the Square, or Water Tower. The Gypsies were eventually to find space within the walls, during these troubled times of threat and attacks upon the city, but always maintained their connection with that first site of settlement, as they do to this day. The area that became known in Ottoman times as Edirne Kapi (Adrianople Gate) and Sulukule (The Water Tower), remains the home of the oldest community of Romani Gypsies in the world, speaking their own language (a variety of Romanes), with a very long historical tradition of entertainment from fortune-telling and bear-leading of the past, to the

---

<sup>1</sup> According to Hacer Foggo's research

music and dance of more recent times. This community has been affected before by the changes in the developing city in the 1950's and 1970's, but has been resilient in their occupation of much of this land unbroken since 1054, when Theodore Balsamon first mentions them. The Gypsies were located here in this city long before the first Turks arrived, and were instrumental in forging at Tophane when the Conqueror finally took Constantinople in 1453. Settled throughout his capital of Istanbul, the Sultan brought new communities of Romani people from elsewhere, to bring life and commerce to revive the once-great city, and at one time they controlled the richest guilds in the Empire of the horse-traders, basket-makers and dancers. The Romani people of Sulukule and the city are depicted in numerous Ottoman miniatures showing acrobats and jugglers, dancers and musicians, and in the long processions and festivals that accompanied the accession of a new sultan, or the setting out for campaigns against the Persians or Europeans.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the fame of Sulukule reached Europe and America, with plans to take groups of Gypsy dancers and musicians to the various World Fairs of that period (never realized due to Sultan Abdul Hasid's opposition on religious grounds). Sulukule featured in numerous films and television programmes of the later 20th century, the area has been the backdrop and setting for drama and comedy, spy-thrillers ("From Russia with Love" features scenes in the famous quarter) and musicals. The community and the Romani people of it, have been the beating heart of the old city for some ten centuries, and the anniversary of our first arrival 1,000 years ago (1054-2054), will mark the end of the first Gypsy millennium and the beginning of the next. To mark this in the location where Gypsies have lived continuously for this time, will be an event of international significance, for our people and for our history as a people. Sulukule represents the origins of the Gypsies, in that this is where the name and identity first came to be established, it is our heart and our well-spring - from here the Romani people have set out throughout the world. If we, as Gypsies, were ever to identify somewhere we could call our first home, Sulukule would surely be it.

## **Nowadays Situation of Sulukule:**

Sulukule has been facing a series of demolitions since 2007 due to a renewal project developed by the Fatih Municipality of Istanbul and the Mass Housing Administration of Turkey. The project envisages the eradication of the historical Roma settlement and the creation of a new area defined as "Ottoman style" villas, hotels and other so called recreational establishments. The civil fight against the plans of the municipality has been going on since 2006, however more than 150 buildings out of more than 500 have been demolished to date. This equates to the forced displacement of approximately 5000 residents.

## **Sulukule Socioeconomic Data based on Area Works<sup>2</sup>:**

- In terms of kids, there are ongoing risks in Sulukule due to poverty.
- Most of the families are living below the starving line.
- 83 per cent of the families have to continue their life with monthly income under 1000 TL (480 €), and the other 50 per cent is under 500 TL (240€).
- Kids that live in Sulukule start working in early ages. One of the families collects junk for living and thus kids are directly involved. Furthermore street conditions and informal sector leave these kids bare to all risks and danger.
- 70 per cent of the kids never attended to school or abandoned. Without making any categorization like attending and not attending to school, the percentage of literacy is just 10.
- Most of the kids choose not attending to the school after a few times. Because of critical family economy, education seems as the first thing to sacrifice.
- Kids in Sulukule have abilities to the different branches of art; especially music, dance and acting. Indeed community's genetic structure gives this advantage.

---

<sup>2</sup> According to Neşe Ozan's research at the settlement