

CASE STUDY

written by Budapest Esély Nonprofit Kft,
Tea Erdélyi, Norbert Szalai-Komka

The Story of Mária – Recognising and Responding to Clients' Diverse Needs

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Abstract

This case study is designed as training material for guidance practitioners, mentors and social workers. It describes a situation from a mentor's¹ daily life and shows how a mentor from the Budapest Esély is dealing with clients' diverse needs and problems. It poses questions for discussion that mentors/guidance practitioners can think about and answer for themselves. Furthermore, some more background information about the social and guidance system in Budapest is given.

Keywords: professionalising career guidance practitioners, competence, clients' diverse needs, case study, training and teaching material

Summary

This case study details Mária's story, a Roma woman seeking employment. This single woman lived in a women's shelter with her two children. Due to her lack of education she was not able to find permanent employment. For this reason she applied for a project in which she was given the opportunity to learn a trade and get experience in it. In addition, this project provided personal skills development training and advice on seeking employment.

Mária started the project with good motivation; her minor learning difficulties were successfully dealt with. Help-

ing to resolve an argument between the teacher and the group meant she soon became a dominant figure, and this strengthened her self-confidence.

However, following this she had problems finding a job due to prejudice against her Roma descent and the inadequate coping strategies which she had developed as a consequence of permanently experiencing prejudice.

Throughout the project, Mária experienced several crises in her private life: her residence permit expired, so that

¹ In Hungary, a mentor is both a guidance practitioner and social worker in one, who provides clients of certain projects with professional support.

she and her two children had to leave the shelter. From this time on the residential circumstances of the family became very uncertain. This uncertainty took its toll on the children as well – the older of the two, her 15-year-old son, began spending time on the street, and this led to problems at school as well. Mária's uncertainty was also increased by the fact that she had been raised in an institution from her early childhood, and she could only get limited help from her family; also she did not trust her own mothering capabilities.

This case study is about how a guidance practitioner dealt with this difficult situation, including how he analysed and prioritised the client's needs, and how he made the client aware of the order of these priorities – in other words: how he identified the various needs of the client, and how he dealt with them. The case study touches upon the diversity of clients; it deals with the unique problems of clients coming from a minority group; and also with the possible ways to recognise and deal with these unique problems.

Part 1: Basic Situation

In July of 2010, Mária applied for the project run by Budapest Esély Nonprofit Kft. which recruits homeless unemployed people. At least 10% of the participants must be of Roma origin. In cases of identical eligibility, applicants of Roma origin received preferential treatment for acceptance². During the first half year of the project several special training classes are provided, followed by a practical traineeship lasting another six months at various workplaces. After this traineeship Budapest Esély support the employment of the course participants with further training and employment advice for an additional six months.

The project participants receive support, travel and home allowances during the training and traineeship. As part of the home allowance accommodation is financed in temporary shelters or rehabilitation homes, or sometimes rent is financed. Additionally, participants are obliged to save for a rental deposit so they can then move into their own accommodation.

During the third six-month period of the project the home allowance contributes to the payment of rent. At this point participants are already seeking employment or employed. They do not receive support and travel allowance; however, after the six-month traineeship, when their work

contract is finished, they are entitled to employment seekers' allowance paid by the state, and therefore have an income until they find employment.

During the project 3 social workers work with 30 participants. They help the participants in finding employment, sorting out health care, with residence and social issues, as well as identifying and solving daily living problems. The framework for support is agreed by the clients and the mentors at the beginning of the project.

Mária (of Roma origin), who was 32 years of age and applying for the course, was bringing up a teenager (15) and an 8-year-old child alone. They had lived in a women's shelter for one year. They had to leave the shelter³ in December of that year because their previously established period of residence had expired. Mária, who had only 8 years of education herself, did not have regular work; she supported herself and her children with municipality allowances⁴ and temporary jobs. As she could not expect help from her family, she applied for the project to obtain education and employment and to move into a rented home. Her only worry was that the training phase of the project would not be finished before they had to leave the women's shelter; however the mentor reassured her that

² In Hungary enforcement of the rights of minority groups is provided by Act CXXV of 2003 on Equal Treatment and Promotion of Equal Opportunities. Sections (1)-(2) of Article 11 of the Act are on favouring minorities and its rules. For further details please refer to the section of the Background chapter on equal opportunities.

³ Women's shelter: A place, where homeless mothers or victims of domestic violence can live for up to two years with their children (if the child 21 or younger).

⁴ She received temporary financial aid or extraordinary child protection benefit (the amount of which was between HUF 5-10 thousand --EUR 20-40-- depending on the municipality and which can normally be applied for 2-3 times a year) as well as child protection grants on occasion. The temporary financial aid and child protection benefit are among the so-called "crisis allowances", which may be awarded to families in extreme social crisis by the municipal council or an assigned committee of the municipality. The child protection grant provides free school books and free meals at school. The client also becomes entitled to free medical care on grounds of equity.

during the training and traineeship the participants would receive financial help, thus ensuring their income.

According to the results of the project admission test Mária was motivated both to study and to be employed and her intelligence was average. However, as her studies ended 15 years ago she could have problems in performing schoolwork again, a fear that she voiced herself during the first interview. Mária's appearance was neat and she was self-confident, although the admission committee

observed that she failed to maintain eye contact and was tense and quiet when questions in connection with her family and private life were asked. Her answers were focused on the questions asked and she did not give further information facilitating a longer conversation. The medical examination did not reveal any long-term illness or psychological problems which could prevent her involvement in the project, and she was therefore accepted as a project participant.

Part 2: The First Six Months

(October – March, Training)/1

The training part of the project began in October. Mária – from the options given as part of the project – chose to become a shop assistant. She was one of 15 participants in the training programme. Additionally, the students attended motivation training and personal development training. Individual development plans were prepared, and a contact system with the mentors was established. Mária had only one hour with her project mentor per month, and she received family support once a week (where she spent from 30 minutes to one hour). In addition her mentor was available by phone or in person in case of sudden problems. Although Mária was afraid of her new situation because of her ethnic origin, she soon adapted to the group; moreover she became an influential person: her peers liked and respected her and valued her opinion.

Learning, however, did not come easily at the beginning. It became clear after the first two to three weeks that Mária had a problem with managing all the subjects, arranging time for her studies and understanding the teaching material -- as a result, her mentor suggested that she attend "learning techniques training" with some of the other participants, who had similar problems.

As the training period was rather short and the syllabus was fixed, the mathematics teacher progressed with the material according to the schedule, regardless of whether the group understood or not. This increasingly frustrated the participants because they were afraid of failing the mathematics exam. This would have had two consequenc-

es for them: firstly they would have had to pay for the repeat exam, which they could not afford (as it was precisely unemployment and the resulting financial difficulties which led them to participate in the project). Secondly most of them would not have seen the point in repeating the exam as they would have to prepare themselves for it independently, and therefore they would have dropped out of the course.

The problem was discussed at length by the students among themselves. As an influential person Mária agreed to speak to the teacher. In response to this the teacher said that he had to complete the predefined syllabus, that there was no time to stop at certain topics; and he suggested private lessons to those who could not keep up with him. As private lessons would have had to be paid for and the students could not afford them, Mária explained the problem on behalf of the group at the next meeting with her mentor. The need for a solution became urgent as it concerned the majority of the group. The short training course had already reached its halfway-point and, moreover, the relationship between the group and the mathematics teacher was deteriorating.

At the request of the project manager, the teacher and two representatives of the group (one of them being Mária) sat down to discuss the problem, with the help of a mediator. They successfully came to an agreement: the teacher would slow down and help at least half the students understand the subject, and this half in turn would help those

whose progress was slower. If the syllabus to be covered for the exam was not completed, additional mathematics classes would to be held and financed by the project.

From this moment onwards the training progressed without conflict. Mária studied hard as she was in the slower half of the group in mathematics, and finally she successfully completed her exam. The outcome of the case with the mathematics teacher strengthened her self-confidence and motivation and her role in the group made her more open with others. Her self-confidence was growing, and although according to her mentor she was not strong enough to bear failures, she was successful in the project.

It seemed that Mária was thriving at school and in the group, but her affairs at home were making less progress. She had quite a good relationship with her 8-year old daughter at the beginning of the project. She regularly attended school, although she had learning difficulties due to dyslexia. From the beginning of school she had attended tutoring, seen an education counsellor⁵ and was given individual development coaching, whereby she had made progress. Her daughter was now in second grade. Mária enjoyed learning multiplication tables and measurements with her – she felt that she could finally help her child effectively.

Her son was now 15 years old and as Mária put it “he was a cheeky teenage brat with a big mouth”. He spent more time at school and with his friends than at home, and he did not help her although he did not cause serious trouble either. They knew, however, that they would have to move out of the shelter at the end of December. Mária was worried because she did not have sufficient savings to rent a home and she did not want to move in with her father, who lives in a small settlement in the Budapest area. Her mother had died when she was 8 years old and she was placed in an institution by her father. Although they spoke occasionally, their relationship was not good. Because of the Christmas holidays they were given additional time until the middle of January to leave the shelter and, as Mária had no other option, move in with her father.

As this happened not long after the incident with the mathematics teacher, Mária did not consider herself strong enough to undertake the daily two-hour return journey taking the children to their old school and enduring constant quarrels with her father about household duties and money. Her father was happy to have a “woman in the house” after such a long period and left all the housework to Mária, saying that if she could not cope with it alone she should ask her daughter for help as it was time “she learned the tasks of women”. Her father was a disability pensioner⁶ spending most of his days napping in front of the television or in the pub. He often returned home drunk, nagging Mária and her daughter about the household tasks: according to Mária he did not hit them but shouted and swore a lot.

A more serious conflict, however, broke out between them not because of this but regarding money. Mária had been saving money to rent a house since the beginning of the project. She had been trying to save ten thousand a month; however, despite her mentor’s suggestion she did not want to deposit it in the bank but keep it at home. She said that the banks were unreliable and charged a lot for bank accounts. She did not like the idea of not having access to her money whenever she wanted it. The fact that she did not have a bank card and was afraid of problems using a cash dispenser probably played a role in her decision.

Because of this she hid her money at home instead of taking it to the bank and frequently changed the hiding place to prevent her father from finding it. Her father, however, discovered the hiding place in February and took all forty thousand forints she had saved. When Mária questioned him he became angry that the money was hidden from him and about her wish to move out. Their heated arguments turned into a fight. Her children escaped to the neighbours and the neighbour called the police. The father was detained by the police but released the following day. Arriving home, he did not continue the argument but threatened to report Mária to the police and tell them that in the heat of the argument she had hit him if she attempted to move out. A few days after this incident Mária called

⁵ Education counsellor: A professional who assists pupils with adaptation, learning and/or behavioural difficulties.

⁶ In Hungary persons of active age (under the age of 65) are entitled to disability pension if the reduction in working ability reaches 67% and no improvement can be foreseen for at least one year. 2-16 years of previous employment (depending on the age) is also an eligibility criterion. Disability pensioners cannot work full-time; if they work they can only do so for limited hours for a limited wage. In practice, despite the 5% employment quota in effect in Hungary, these people are mostly only employed at special workplaces established for people with limited working capacity. Between 2008 and 2011 there were around 400-450 thousand disability pensioners registered in Hungary. The pension amounts to between one third and two-thirds, of the monthly average wage.

her mentor asking for emergency counselling. When she told the story to her mentor she stated that her father had hit her first and she was merely defending herself. There were bruises on her face and arms but she did not want a medical examination nor to press charges. Mária could not specify exactly what she wanted from her mentor but she repeated the story over and over again, and was still quite agitated. Her mentor felt that she wanted to release tension and find out what the consequences would be now that the police were involved in the case. The mentor suggested to Mária that she should cooperate with the child welfare services since she would be obliged to do so as a result of the fight. After explaining the rules and discussing his experiences with other clients the mentor managed to convince Mária that her children would not be taken into custody immediately because of this; she then relaxed and stated that she wanted to prevent similar occurrences in the future: "It'd be good to move out of there as soon as possible. I'd like to go back to Pest. It'd be better for my lad and my little girl too."

Following this her father stopped mentioning the police and the arguments at home ended. Moreover, it did not begin again even when, some days later, Mária found

thirty thousand forints in her father's mattress. She called her mentor and asked him to help her find "a good bank" for her money. In the end she opened a bank account.

A few days later, at Mária's next meeting, her mentor asked her about her father's reaction. Mária said that he had obviously found that the money was gone and was angry, but for the time being he was not saying anything. Mária was afraid of another argument, and therefore asked her mentor to safeguard her bankcard.

From this time on she asked for her allowance to be transferred to her bank account, from which she withdrew the amount she needed for the month at the beginning of every month and kept the money for the rent in the account. She had not managed to save as much money since she had moved in with her father, as her father squandered most of his pension on drink, leaving Mária to maintain the household. The overheads amounted to more than what she had paid in the shelter and she also had another mouth to feed. At the end of March, when the training ended, she had 41 thousand forints saved and she told her mentor that "her feet were itchy" with her desire to move.

Part 3: The First Six Months (October – March, Training)/2

The repeated conflict and commuting took its toll on the children. Their performance at school was deteriorating, especially that of her teenage boy, who was in the eighth grade and for whom it was time to decide about further education⁷. Her son did not want to continue his studies but Mária knew from her own experience how important it is to get a good education – therefore; she contacted his schoolteacher to discuss schools in which her son

might have a good chance, and to discuss how she could convince him to continuing his studies. At the meeting she was informed that her son had missed school⁸ on quite a few occasions in the previous few days and that a letter had even been sent to her, which she had not yet received. The teacher told her that in case of 50 unexcused absences the school would have to notify the head of the city hall⁹, and the child would probably be taken into custody

⁷ Compulsory schooling age in Hungary is from 6-18. After the one-year mandatory nursery school preparatory class the children attend primary school between the ages of 6-7. Primary schools usually have eight grades where as high schools have four grades. Sometimes students go to the highschool after fourth or sixth class – these kinds of high schools have six or eight grades. Some types of secondary schools, like bilingual schools and technical schools have more grades than four, because in these schools students learn a language on higher level, or learn a profession. Secondary technical education, where students train in a particular profession, starts after the completion of grade 10 and takes three years.

⁸ The school must notify the parent immediately in case of an unexcused absence of the child. After 10 incidents of unexcused absences the school contacts the parent of the child with the help of the Child Welfare Services. When unexcused absences reach 30 incidents, the school notifies the Authority of Minor Offences and the Child Welfare Services again. After 50 incidents of unexcused absences the headmaster notifies the responsible school clerk and the government office. In such cases taking a child under the age of 16 "under protection" is mandatory (see Point 10 of the footnote).

⁹ The head of the city hall is called a notary in Hungary. They have a degree in law and are the official operational leader of the offices of the municipality.

by the guardianship court. Due to notification of the police in February (as a result of the fight), and because Mária had asked for help (at the suggestion of her mentor), the child welfare services¹⁰ were already visiting Mária's family regularly. They were investigating the situation with regard to domestic violence, as a mother being beat up in front of the children can in itself be sufficient grounds for establishing endangerment¹¹ of the children. Mária became frightened by these new developments regarding the child welfare services and the schooling of her children. Having heard about the absences she became terrified again: the mention of taking her children "under protection"¹² reminded her of her own childhood in the institution, and she did not want to lose her children.

Arriving home, she questioned her son intensively and threatened to give him into state custody if he continued to miss school (later she told her mentor that she had not meant it, she had only been angry). The argument got out of hand and her son hit her and ran out of the house. Mária phoned her mentor in desperation, not daring to contact child welfare services as she was afraid that her child would be taken to an institute immediately.

Her mentor mediated between Mária and the child welfare services, reporting Mária's intentions and her progress in the project. They agreed that her son must regularly see the psychologist¹³ of the child welfare services on a weekly basis, as well as attend tutoring and cooperate in his application for continuing his studies. Mária would continue regular contact with both the school and the child welfare services.

Following this Mária took her son to the psychologist. She occasionally participated in the sessions to help restore her relationship with her son. Sometimes they also

participated in family recreation programmes. Moreover, while waiting for his psychologist's appointments her son made friends with some children who soon talked him into attending the drama group of the child welfare services, which also had a positive effect on him. He attended tutoring in Hungarian and history to avoid failing, as he already had to repeat the seventh grade. The teacher spoke to Mária and her son regularly. Finally, he decided to continue his studies to become either a carpenter or an electrician¹⁴ and he submitted his application to some institutions. In the meantime Mária's mentor was looking for another shelter for them temporarily, while Mária saved the money necessary to rent a house.

In connection with the case Mária provided the following account of her childhood and youth:

"When mother died I was sent to an institute with Juli. She's my sister. We had to study there, which I liked at that time. And I thought that once there I could also learn to sew. It's good work and I remember that at home Juli had an older friend who worked in the clothes factory. She sewed nice dresses for herself at home too!

I can sew well, I learnt it well. I have no paper for it 'cause I got to know Géza and got married before the end of the school year. I was 17. Géza was 27 or a bit older. He was a nice man wearing suits and he even had a gold chain. He took me to the cinema and showed me a flat saying that we would live there if I married him. It was a nice flat with new furniture and brand new pots in the kitchen.

When I left the institute we did not live there but in an old house where we had only one room. The other rooms belonged to another guy, and Géza kept promising to finish the other house and move there. He was not there often,

¹⁰Child Welfare Services: Special personal services protecting the interest of children, which by the application of the methods and tools of social work serve the progress of the physical and mental health of children and facilitate their education in the family. Its purpose is to prevent the endangerment of the children, to terminate the perceived endangerment and to help children removed from their family to return to their blood relatives.

¹¹Endangerment of children: If child seems to be in danger (physical, mental, emotional etc.), the child welfare service will suggest to the city hall that the child should be taken into custody. The parents are obliged to cooperate with the child welfare service, and if this doesn't work out well, they can lose their child: the child gets taken into care.

¹²Taking under protection is an action of the authorities within the framework of child protection. If the parent or other legal representative cannot, or does not want to, put an end to the endangerment of the child by using the basic state services voluntarily, but there is good reason to assume that the development of the child in family environment can be ensured with help, the head of the city hall of the local municipality takes the child "under protection".

¹³This was already previously offered by the child welfare services in connection with the fight in February. Mária indicated her willingness; however the agreed therapy had not yet begun.

¹⁴Both qualifications can be obtained in regular technical schools in two years after the completion of grades 9-10. The decision of the child is important partially because they are obligatory to attend a school until the age of 18, and partly because technical education in the public school system cannot be applied for over the age of 21, after which they are catered for by the adult training system; however those training programmes generally must be paid for by participants.

he was always busy and not with me. Then I got pregnant. I always cried about how bad it was for me though it was still good compared to what it was like when the child was born.

By then Géza didn't have any patience. We didn't move and when I asked why not, he beat me¹⁵. Later he beat me even if I didn't ask, though I paid the bills¹⁶.

Mária does not say how she “paid the bills” for her husband and would not openly answer the question either. She continued the story as if the question had not even been asked. Her mentor did not ask her again; it is suspected that her first husband forced her into prostitution.

Mária ran away from home with her son to her sister at the age of 19. Her sister lived with her own family and her husband's parents on a small countryside farm. Mária was accepted but her sister's mother-in-law did not welcome her because she had no farming skills, could not cook, had left her husband and moreover her husband had eyes for her. The man made a pass at Mária but she said no. From this point onwards she was constantly looking for a job because she desperately wanted to return to the capital city.

Within a few months she found a job cleaning and moved in with relatives first, and later to a rented home with her child. She soon got to know the father of her daughter, whom she did not marry (she had not been officially married to her first “husband” either, the man only claimed to be the father of their child at his birth). The new relationship worked out well at first, the man did not hurt her and treated the child well. They both worked and lived in a small house with a garden on the outskirts of the city, which the man had inherited from his parents. Mária felt

that her life had settled down. They both wanted to have a child together, and their daughter was born after two years of cohabitation, whereupon the man declared the child to be his¹⁷. After the birth nothing changed for a while, then the man started to play cards and gaming machines - first only occasionally, then more and more often as increasing amounts were lost. Mária sometimes caught him taking big sums out of the family budget and questioned him. On these occasions the man became defensive and promised to either win the money back soon or stop playing.

He could not stop, however, and he took out loans at huge interest rates against the house in secret. When he discovered that he could not repay the loans he disappeared. Mária searched for him for a long time and confessed to her mentor that she was still hoping to find him alive one day. Mária and her children were thrown out of their house by her partner's creditors – she said that she could have stayed if she had been willing to work off his debts but she “did not want to stand on a corner”¹⁸. She lived in the women's shelter from then on and even lost her job a few weeks after she moved there.

She would have preferred to rent a home and “feel free” but she did not have the money for the deposit. She was also too afraid of the guardianship court to accept temporary residence in a shelter. However a shelter in Pest was desirable for her children, as it allowed Mária to attend her traineeship that was to begin in April.

¹⁵There are no “official” statistics in Hungary with respect to domestic violence. From data collected by groups defending the interests of women (Nők a Nőkért az Erőszak Ellen --NANE Women's Rights Association--, Amnesty International, Patent Association --Association Against Patriarchy)-- it is revealed that an average of one woman (total of 72 women in 2011) per week and one child per month die as a result of domestic violence. According to police statistics 21% of murders and 16% of grievous bodily harms are committed by present or former spouses/partners. Neither the institutional system nor the law is well able to manage the problem. At the time of writing this case study, negotiations were taking place with respect to establishing domestic violence as a separately treated criminal activity at the request of the people and as a result of street demonstrations.

¹⁶Hungary joined the New York Convention in 1950 and officially outlawed prostitution and became involved in the re-training sex workers in different trades. The problem of course did not leave the streets and it gave rise to organised crime. Moreover, after the change of political regime, as a result of tincreasing unemployment, the number of prostitution victims increased. Sexual acts by persons under the age of 18 in return for payment are criminal acts. However, prostitution is currently legal if it is carried out as part of an enterprise, either in private homes or within the designated zones, and if the amount paid is put on a receipt or invoice. Pimping and procurement are, however, criminal acts. There are only a few relevant statistics but according to them the number of prostitutes is in the thousands in the capital. Most women do not work independently but with pimps, or are forced into prostitution by their husband, partner or other male relative. The number of juvenile prostitutes (under the age of 18) has risen sharply in recent years.

¹⁷They were not married, and in Hungary if a child's parents are not married the father has to declare in writing, that the child is his child (he is the responsible for the child).

¹⁸Mária is implying that the man wanted her to work for him as a prostitute.

Part 4: The Second Six Months

(April – September, Internship)

With the help of her mentor Mária and her children managed to move into a women's shelter at the end of April. Mária's father was angry about them leaving and did not talk to them for months. When Mária tried to call him, he did not answer the phone.

The agreement with the child welfare services and the school worked well. Her son went to a psychologist and to the drama workshop regularly, and took private lessons. By May the result of these activities could be seen in his school performance and in his behaviour. Mária's relationship with her son improved too, because the example she had set convinced her son to acquire some skills. He applied for training at the vocational school to become carpenter or an electrician. Due to his school results, he was accepted for the carpenter training. Mária saw this partly as her own success, which improved her self-confidence in her mothering skills. Her son hung out with friends less, and if he did so, it was not during, but after school. Mária was still worried that he was involved with the wrong friends and might begin drinking, but for the time being there was no danger that the authorities would interfere and take custody of her son. In June her son finished the eighth grade and her daughter finished the second grade successfully.

It was at this time that Mária told me the following about her childhood:

"As I have told you before, when my mother died we ended up in a children's home. I was 8 at the time, and Juli was 13. My uncle became the guardian of our brother, Lajos, because he was working at his construction site. He was an entrepreneur, and he could employ Lajos as a worker. With his help Lajos became a trained bricklayer, they moved to Vienna together, and later to Canada because my uncle got into some trouble and had to flee. But they were good workers. My uncle took his wife with him and his whole family has been living there ever since.

Juli and I stayed here the children's home, as my father was not allowed to bring us up. First they told us that they took us into custody because my father did not have a job. He became disabled when he fell off a ladder at a con-

struction site. It was not at my uncle's building site, he was actually mad at my father for working for someone else. Despite this my uncle still helped Lajos. From that time on my father drank. He drank before too, but when my mother was still alive he was a funny drunk; after this he became an aggressive drunk. When he drank he beat me and we did not see him for days. I was ok at home with Juli, but then the authorities came and put us into the children's home.

Juli was like a mother to me, she protected me from everyone in there. She even helped me with my schoolwork, as she was good at reading and I was not. When I finished the eighth grade, Juli got a job at a hairdressers. That's where she met a peasant. I did not like Pista at all, but I didn't manage to stop her marrying him¹⁹. They moved to Újfehértó, to a farm where Pista's parents lived. I was there with my child once, but I would never go there again. Those folks do not like gypsies. They only accepted Juli, because her skin is fair, and as long as she kept it a secret, people would not even know she was a gypsy.

That is why I don't want my children to end up in a children's home because I was there and it was not good. But sometimes I think maybe it would be better for them, 'cos I don't know how to bring them up, I am too stupid for that. Well, I don't hurt them; I only want the best for them..."

The internship took place partly during the summer holidays, which made it difficult for Mária. The children could not be in the shelter without their mother and Mária got an opportunity to work at a hypermarket where she had to do nightshifts. Luckily a former group member, who was also of Roma origin and with whom Mária got on very well with due to their similar background, moved into the women's shelter. The woman had a five-year-old child and worked at the same store, so they asked their boss to juggle their schedules so that one of them could take care of the children while the other one was working. Their boss was very supportive – partly because of the project – so this deal worked well until the project ended. In this six-month period Mária also participated in personal development training and job-application seminars. She learned how to write a CV and a cover letter, as well as how to "sell" her skills at an interview. But she hardly had the chance to use

¹⁹In Mária's language this means that she moved in with a non-Roma man. The word "peasant" does not necessarily mean that he was working in agriculture, but rather that he was not of Roma origin. The Hungarian Roma use the words "gádczó" (peasant) or "inas" (servant) for people of non-Roma origin. The term "getting married" doesn't reveal whether she officially married the man, or whether they just lived together. The Hungarian Roma use the term "getting married" when a girl spends the night at a man's place for the first time, and from that point on their society sees them as a married couple – despite the fact that they are not officially married.

these skills in real-life situations, as her name revealed her Roma origin. When she called a company with a vacancy, she was often turned down by being told that they had already found somebody for the position²⁰. Mária was convinced that this had to do with her Roma background.

By the end of the summer Mária's son sometimes helped her: he did the shopping, or took care of his sister. For a few weeks he worked undeclared²¹ at a construction-site, which did him good. He felt like an adult because adults accepted him and he also earned some money, with which

he bought a second-hand computer. Mária was angry at him at first for not giving her the money, but then she calmed down realising that he needed the computer for his education.

When the children started the new school year in September, they were still living in the women's shelter. By the end of the month however she had saved HUF 70,000, possibly enough for renting a flat, so Mária wanted to move. With her mentor's help they found a place which accepted this sum as a deposit.

Part 5: The Third Six Months

(October – March, Looking for a Job and Finding One)

They moved into their rented flat in October. The landlord, although he generously decreased the sum of the two months' deposit by HUF 10,000, did not really trust a Roma woman with two children. He was worried that they might not be able to pay their rent and that then he would not be able to get rid of them, so he did not allow them to register there. Therefore Mária did not get the rent support from the local authorities, which she was eligible for on the basis of her income. Furthermore, because of her income she did not receive other benefits either. With the help of her mentor, she applied for child-care benefit from the local authorities²² where she was registered on the basis of her last permanent address. This helped her a little, although she was still having financial difficulties.

In October Mária started working in another shop of the same supermarket chain where she did her internship. Her job was officially to stock the shelves but she mostly had to clean. She was not satisfied with this, because she could not use her newly acquired qualifications that she was very proud of. She constantly tried to find a new job. Due to her dissatisfaction – she found the job “beneath her skill level and humiliating” – she was constantly in conflict with her boss and sometimes with her colleagues. Most of the other employees still liked her because she was funny, self-confident and assertive. She was dismissed at the end of October, before the end of her probationary period.

Mária was quite convinced that this had to do with her background. She went to her mentor immediately and said:

“...They promised me that I would be a sales assistant. But they only give me the dirty work, wherever I go. Well, if they talk to me at all, if they don't send me away immediately, because I am a gypsy. In this shop the boss said, that I would stock shelves because he heard that I am good at this and that there was no vacancy to become a sales assistant. I said ok to that, although that's not what I learned. And then when I got there, the supervisor said to me: 'Mária, go and clean the restrooms'. Who do they think I am? I told them I did not take this job on to become a cleaning lady, but to put the stock out. 'But what can we do, if there is no stock to be put out at the moment?' – he said – 'you can put the stock on the shelf when it is delivered'. Am I a slave? Is that what I studied for? Tell me, honestly, would you have put up with this quietly? Or is a gypsy only good for this? To scrub shit? So, he never made me scrub shit again. But from that moment on, nothing I did was good enough for him...”

After that first conflict, Mária had several heated debates with the shift supervisor. It was only after several sessions with her mentor that she started realising that this might have been the main reason why she had lost her job.

²²This address was the address of the house where they lived together with her daughter's father in the suburbs.

At this time Mária and her mentor met more often than usual—even if just for a few minutes, but several times a week. This was mostly because she was worried that being unemployed, she would soon lose her flat and her mentor was concerned that if this happened she would give up on everything. When her mentor encouraged her to look for a new job she said: *“You keep telling me that everything will be fine. Nothing will be fine... they will not employ me anywhere. All they see is that I am a gypsy. You know very well how many applications I have made. The holidays are coming up, by that time I will be under the bridge with my children. Probably it would be better to die, because I will not let them take my children away. Only over my dead body!...”*

The mentor argued that as long the employment support helped her, she could always find a new job. They calculated Mária’s income and expenditure, so that she could prioritise her spending. They also revised what she learned in her training – how to look for a job, how to present oneself and act at an interview. Her mentor also got in touch with the psychologist at the Family-support Agency and told them that they should have a few sessions with Mária too, not only her son.

By this time her children were doing well: her daughter’s performance improved in third grade, her reading skills got better as a result of the summer-school she had attended, and her son also started the new school year well. Although her son did not invest a lot of energy into learning, he was not too bad either, and he made new friends quickly in his new school. At home he was trying to play the role of the “adult male family member”: by protecting and helping the others and he became more patient and willing to help. He still visited a psychologist, who felt it was necessary for a few weeks, to help him settle down in his new school.

After about a month, at the end of November, Mária found a job with the help of the employment support. It was a temporary job with a contract up until 24th of December, selling presents at the Christmas market. She liked the job and she only complained on cold days. She enjoyed selling and chatting with the customers, and this was what the owner of the shop liked about her. He offered her a job in his shop in Szentendre from January on. She was

enthusiastic about it, but was also worried that travelling one and a half hours twice a day would make her life harder. She left this option open as a last resort— she did not say no immediately, although that was her initial instinct.

In January the owner of the shop did not call. Mária could not find a job with her qualifications. She was either turned down on the phone after her introduction, or when she got to the interview she regularly found that the vacancy “had been filled”. After numerous refusals on the phone or in person, she accepted a job she was over qualified for: she became a cleaning lady at a grocery store. She had learned from her mistake: this time she did not complain about how humiliating job was. But this caused her to become introverted again, even slightly shy.

Her mentor recommended that she turn to the Equal Treatment Authority, or ask the National Law Office for Ethnic Minorities to represent her in a racial discrimination lawsuit. But Mária did not want to go through a lawsuit, she had the feeling that she would not be able to deal with it. So she did not fight for her rights—even though her mentor tried to persuade her to do so in several long discussions.²³

Mária’s colleagues were distant with her at first, but her self-confidence and willingness to help made them open up to her. Her hard work and distant attitude toward the supervisors also convinced them to open up to her. In the second half of March she was offered the position of sales assistant, when one of the other employees was retiring. She signed a new contract, because the probationary period in the old one was just about to expire. So she began a probationary period in her new position. Mária was pleased and enthusiastic, and she hoped to fulfill everyone’s expectations as a sales assistant too.

Paying for her rented flat had not been a problem for her since the end of November. Thus, her mentor encouraged her to talk to the landlord as maybe by now he trusted her more and would let her register the address. The mentor also recommended that she try and find the fathers of her children in order to get child support from them— this would make her life much easier financially.

²³The EBH (Equal Treatment Authority) conducts proceedings if the principle of equal treatment may have been violated, either at the request of the injured party or upon its own initiative. In the proceedings the party charged with discrimination has to prove that no discrimination occurred. If discrimination is proven, there can be several sanctions, starting with stopping the discriminatory circumstances and extending to paying major fines (up to HUF 6 million). This sum is not paid to the discriminated person, but the decisions of the EBH are accepted by the Employment Court as evidence, so compensation can be claimed. The “Nemzeti Etnikai Kisebbségi Jogvédő Iroda” (National Law for Ethnic Minorities) is a non-profit organisation which, among others, represents victims of discrimination. More information on the work of the EBH and the NEKI is to be found in the section on equal opportunity in the chapter “Background”.

Part 6: Follow-up (March – March)

Mária contacted her mentor after two months and told him that she had asked for help to find the fathers of her children in order to get child support. A social worker and a lawyer from the Child Welfare Services were supporting Mária in this.

With the help of the police her son's father was found. He lived on irregular undeclared work (cash in hand), so Mária had no real hope of getting any money from him. But she hoped that if she went to court, the state would pay part of the sum in advance²⁴. At the end of this process no concrete results had been achieved.

Her daughter's father got in touch with her at the end of September through the help of relatives. He told her on the phone how much he missed her and his daughter. He was working abroad and offered some irregular financial help. Mária thought that he hoped one day she would take him back. And she was actually considering this, because he was a good person, but she did not want to end up living on the streets again because of him. He claimed to have stopped gambling. In fact, at the end of September the first sum of money arrived, and from that point on, another HUF 20-25,000 each month. This was still the case at the end of the follow-up period.

Mária was able to keep her job as her employer was satisfied with her work. After the probationary period she got a permanent contract, so now she was sure she could pay her rent. However she was still in constant financial difficulties because of her low pay.

With Mária's agreement her mentor contacted the NEKI (National Law Office for Ethnic Minorities), which offered legal representation for Mária free of charge if she wanted to sue her past or future employers before the EBH (Equal Treatment Authority) in an employment lawsuit. Mária had not made a decision regarding this by the end of the follow-up period.

Her daughter finished the third grade and started the fourth. Her son was in his first year in vocational school and was getting average results. He was not required to go to a psychologist from autumn on, but still liked attending the drama group. The family was still in touch with the Family Welfare Services. Mária rarely talked to her father, but she visited her sister regularly with her children, even if only for a few days. Her sister's family invited both children to stay with them for the summer holidays and they offered her son some pocket money for helping in the fields. Her son went there with great enthusiasm, met some local friends, and decided to take the test for a motorbike driving license with the money he earned. He also dreamed of building a motorbike with his new friends the following summer.

In February Mária was informed that her daughter had a gluten allergy. She was worried that she would not be able to pay for the medication and the special diet she required. Her mentor contacted a non-profit organisation²⁵, and recommended that Mária contact the local nurse and try to get some financial support from a foundation for the special diet.

²⁴The state pays HUF 14,500 Ft in advance– which is approximately EUR 50/month – to the parent who has custody, which the authorities then later try to recover from the other parent.

²⁵National Association of People with Gluten-Allergy

THE GUIDE

PROJECT

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MetropolisNet EEIG

www.metropolisnet.eu

MetropolisNet EEIG

MetropolisNet EEIG

Kronenstraße 6

10117 Berlin

PH 0049 - (0) 30 - 28409 - 223

FAX 0049 - (0) 30 - 28409 - 210

Managing director

Dr. Reiner Aster

reiner.aster@metropolisnet.eu

Contact Person

Jasmin Zouizi

jasmin.zouizi@metropolisnet.eu

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