

Support the Buzas family – Oppose anti-Roma Racism in Hungary and Canada

Tibor and Renata Buzas and their three children, Tibor (13), Mercedesz (11) and Lili (9), arrived in Canada in November 2011. They left behind a pattern of racist violence in their native Hungary, and hoped for a better and safer life in Canada, where they claimed asylum.

The neo-Nazi movement in Hungary, targeting Romas and Jews, has strengthened in the past years. In 2008-2009, a campaign of terror was unleashed, with racists killing at least six Romas, fire-bombing houses and terrorizing Roma villages in north-eastern Hungary. Videos show the Hungarian Guard, a fascist black-uniformed militia openly patrolling Roma neighbourhoods. The extreme right political party Jobbik, closely linked to the Hungarian Guards, gained prominence, becoming the third party nationally in 2010.¹

For the Buzas family, like other Roma families living in the north-eastern province of Nograd, their lives in Hungary became unbearable. At school, the two eldest children were subject to racists insults and marginalization. Tibor and the other Roma boy in his class were beaten up in the school-yard; on one occasion, Tibor's leg was broken. Far from being restrained by teachers, the non-Roma students' attitudes towards the Roma children was encouraged by school staff: Mercedesz' teacher was married to a member of the fascist "Hungarian guards" militia, while Tibor's teacher echoed insults flung at him by other students. Mercedesz was not allowed to enter academic competitions and Tibor not allowed to participate in special school activities alongside the other students.

For Tibor, the environment had a direct impact on his ability to learn. A pediatrician who examined him after his arrival in Canada concluded that, "... Tibor is suffering from an important dysphasia, in his country he did not receive the care and academic adaptation required for the condition of such a child. He consequently developed a 4 to 5 year delay in his learning. In addition his stuttering was not treated and was on the contrary exacerbated by the generalized derision, bullying and mockery to which he was constantly subjected. It seems that in Hungary he did not have access to the services needed for his dysphasia or stuttering because of discrimination/racism."²

Outside school, the rise of racism was directly felt by the family on at least two occasions. Mercedesz' beloved dog was shot and killed by a neighbour, in what the family believed to be a racist attack. Then, in October 2011, Renata was physically assaulted by two members of the Hungarian Guard. Renata was punched several times. Her son Tibor witnessed the assault and ran to find his father. But when Renata and her husband went to report the incident to the police, the police refused to act, stating that the attack wasn't serious enough for them to investigate.

Witnessing the attack on his mother had a traumatizing impact on Tibor. His stuttering worsened, he refused to go to school, couldn't leave his mother, refused to sleep, and more. According to the same doctor, Tibor developed "classic" symptoms of PTSD, including "severe anxiety (he always had to know that his mother was at the school, behind the door of his classroom to agree to stay at the school), nightmares and intensification of his stuttering".³

It was after this incident that the family decided to migrate to Canada, above all to seek a better, safer environment for the children.

However, when the Buzas family arrived in Canada, they did not find the welcome they had hoped for. The government was in the process of establishing Bill C-31, also known as the Refugee Exclusion Act. To overcome public opposition⁴ to the harsh new rules, government officials stirred up anti-migrant sentiment, speaking of "bogus refugees" and "queue-jumpers" and launching several high profile man-hunts for individuals who had defied deportation orders.

¹ See, for example, Wakeup call for Hungary, *The Independent*, 6 August 2013, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/wakeup-call-for-hungary-as-neonazis-jailed-for-attacks-that-killed-six-roma-including-four-year-old-boy-8748945.html; Jobbik Rally against World Jewish Congress, *BBC*, 4 May 2013, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-22413301>

² Letter dated 6 May 2013 from Dr. Sélim Rashed, Clinical Professor, Pediatrics, Hôpital Maisonneuve-Rosemont, affiliated with the Université de Montréal; Adjunct Professor, McGill University

³ Ibid.

⁴ See for example, "Protect Refugees from Bill C-31: Joint Statement", <http://ccrweb.ca/en/protect-refugees-c31-statement>.

Jason Kenney was the Immigration Minister behind the market-friendly, anti-refugee changes to the immigration system. In his media campaign, he singled out Roma asylum-seekers, relying on racist stereotypes to make extravagant claims that the Roma were “abusing” Canada's refugee system and that “virtually none” of their claims were “valid”.⁵

A highly mediatized arrest of 40 Roma asylum-seekers, including children, on 5 December 2012, ushered in the new legislation. They and 45 others were labelled “irregular arrivals” (or “designated foreign nationals”) and subject to new rules which allows the government to jail designated individuals for six months without bail, and would make it more difficult for them to remain in Canada and to achieve stability (permanent residence, family reunification).⁶

In addition, Hungary – the country of origin for many Roma asylum seekers - was among the first countries placed on the Minister's newly created “safe country” list. People from countries on this list (referred to as “designated countries of origin” or DCOs), have shorter timelines to complete their applications, are not allowed to appeal their refugee decisions, and must wait three years after their refugee claim is rejected before they can apply for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA) - which in most cases means they will be deported before they can apply. Despite these considerable barriers and despite a climate encouraging IRB commissioners to view Roma claims with suspicion, in the first half of 2013, Hungary was still the third country by number of refugees accepted in Canada, with 183 Hungarian nationals accepted.⁷ This gives the lie to the Minister's claims that Hungary is a safe country.

The new refugee regime came into effect on 15 December 2012. The impact was immediate: the first half of 2013 had the lowest acceptance rate for refugees in the history of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), 33% nationally.⁸

It was in this context that the Buzas family appeared for their hearing in January 2013 before IRB Commissioner Harry Dortelus, a new Conservative appointee. On 12 March 2013, Dortelus issued his ruling, refusing the Buzas family. The family asked the Federal Court to review Dortelus' decision. The Court refused to review the decision, giving no reasons.

Renata, Tibor and their children Tibor, Mercedesz and Lili are now facing imminent deportation. They applied for permanent residence on humanitarian and compassionate grounds in December 2013, because the best interests of the children require that they remain in Canada. Although it has been more than six months, there has been no response to the application.

Tibor, Mercedesz and Lili are all enrolled in school and learning French. According to his pediatrician, Tibor's PTSD symptoms only began to relent and he only began to feel safe and appreciate school since he began to receive help and was followed properly in his school.⁹ Both Lili and Tibor have been diagnosed with language acquisition difficulties and have received special help. Tibor is in a special class and has specifically adapted tools; his latest evaluation shows that he has been making good progress despite the challenges. Lili, who could not read when she arrived in Canada, received intensive reading classes and is now progressing well in her French reading skills. Mercedesz excels at school and, unlike in Hungary, is allowed to enter all the academic competitions. All three children have made friends and feel confident and comfortable in their Montreal North schools.

Solidarity Across Borders
solidaritesansfrontieres@gmail.com
www.solidarityacrossborders.org

⁵See for example, “Efforts to keep bogus Roma refugees out have failed: Jason Kenney”, *National Post*, April 22nd, 2004 <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/04/22/efforts-to-keep-bogus-roma-refugees-out-have-failed-jason-kenney/>; “Federal Government considers detaining Roma refugee claimants report suggests”, *Globe and Mail*, 18 August 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/federal-government-considers-detaining-roma-refugee-claimants-report-suggests/article4487855/>; or “Kenney assertive on Roma refugees but critics argue the details”, *Macleans*, 14 December 2012, www2.macleans.ca/2012/12/14/kenney-assertive-on-roma-refugees-but-critics-argue-the-details/.

⁶“Romanian Human Smuggling Ring Busted,” CBC, 5 December 2012, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/romanian-human-smuggling-ring-busted-in-ontario-1.1292783>

⁷ IRB statistics for the Refugee Protection Division (RPD) for the first half of 2013, analysis by the Canadian Council for Refugees.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Letter dated 20 December 2012 from Dr. Sélim Rashed, Clinical Professor, Pediatrics, Hôpital Maisonneuve-Rosemont, affiliated with the Université de Montréal; Adjunct Professor, McGill University.