

---

# WORKING IN ROMANIA FOR THE WELLBEING FOR ALL: IMPLEMENTING POPE FRANCIS' VISION OF A NEW ECONOMY

为所有罗马尼亚人的福祉而奋斗：  
落实教宗方济各的新经济愿景

---

RUTH ZENKERT AND FRIEDHELM HENGSBACH

## ABSTRACT

For many years Ruth Zenkert cooperated with Georg Sporschill in various projects in Vienna and Eastern Europe to reach out to Roma children who have been excluded from society. In four short stories Zenkert describes her experiences in dealing with Roma children while Friedhelm Hengsbach, who is considered as one of the leading social ethicists in Germany, suggests a few key elements of the new vision of the economy of Pope Francis especially in his Encyclical Letters *Evangelii gaudium* (2013) and *Laudato si'* (2015).

## 1. Ruth Zenkert tells about getting kids into the “wood job market”

Young kids hang around at the fountain of the village. They never go to a regular school and are unable to read or use simple arithmetic. They’ve never had any jobs. They are bored, they are smoking, drinking beer, poking fun. A villager needs to give water to his horse, he will be riding to the fields to get water. None of the kids will help him given that this is a tough job, and they would get little money for it. They make their



living from social welfare, from begging and from clothes they receive from abroad, which they sell in the markets of the Roma communities. The young ones live in a village situated 20 kilometres from the provincial capital Sibiu. They all grew up with many siblings in little cottages without water and electricity. The marginalisation of the Roma families is ongoing. Some cottages which have been illegally built at the border of the village have become a ghetto. The other villagers still feel threatened.

There is a job-hunting process for people in that province. However, none of the kids may survive there for more than three days. Because they are unable to read, they don’t have a chance to get a job. They cannot work eight hours a day and are unable to hang on for five days a week. The kids cannot handle conflicts and are often fired for bad behaviour. Typically, they cannot stand criticism; they get upset and run away.

How is it possible to reactivate the energy and talents of these kids? Project Elijah has transformed a barn in the village into a modest workshop: a bench, a planing machine, a saw, small tools. The plan is to teach the kids simple skills for dealing with wood. Andrei the carpenter, our instructor, has spent the first hour in the morning rounding up all the kids, knocking at their cottages, drawing the drowsy kids out and dragging them away, while some need first to take a shower and get into their working uniforms.

Slowly the whole troupe has been getting up to speed and making progress. They had fun with the work and want to do more. The first bunch of kids searched for jobs in the town as they wanted to earn more money. Carpenters are in high demand. Some already did find a job even abroad.

We purchased better machines, and more wood. They received contracts for stools, beds, bookshelves, doors. The whole team improved their know-how and had fun in doing their jobs. Then even better machines were added and now the whole workshop became too small, and a bigger hall is being built. Andrei has even more ambitious plans. Folks from the surrounding areas come and give them contracts. Will the carpentry shop become a profit-making firm and will it become self-supporting?

Our ambitious goal remains to accept kids who cannot work in firms. They should learn to work, to be persistent, to integrate themselves into a team. Those who need a protected working place because they are at first too weak, should participate in carpentry.

Given these circumstances, our workshop will never end up becoming a conventional for-profit business capable of competing successfully

in the market. It may never be self-supporting. If we strive for this goal and become competitive in the marketplace we would lose sight of our first goal, which is to welcome those who don't have any chance in any other place.

We are thus moving between different tracks: on the one hand, trying to help the poorest, on the other hand, helping them to develop their talents and getting them into the job market. Andrei needs to calculate the exact costs of each product which the carpenters produce. However, the most important thing for the kids is that they no longer hang around at the village fountain but discover that they are truly able to deliver. It is not just a matter of producing pieces of furniture but of sustaining themselves and their future families.

#### Ethical reflection by Friedhelm Hengsbach

Two major concerns are apparent in the desperate situation of the young kids who cannot be integrated within the regular labour market. The Pope provocatively calls them the "garbage" who stay outside, while the anger of the journalists of finance and economics is directed against the Pope. The second point is the ideology of a competitive economy with its misleadingly individualistic promises. The "myth of achievement" divides the society. The true intention of the Pope is ignored. His option is clearly for the poor and in his Apostolic exhortation (*Evangelii gaudium*, 2013) he calls for a Church which lives with the poor and which must itself become poor.

#### 2. Story of Angelica by Ruth Zenkert

Angelica cannot remember any childhood home. Her mother was on the street as a prostitute; neither can she remember her father. If the weather was cold, they moved to a larger building. It was always adventurous, as many people were crowded together as in the subway stations and in the railway station. There Angelica

just hung around, met friends, learned how to steal to survive, how to penetrate into a dream world with drugs, how to cut her skin with pieces of broken glass when feeling sad, how to make a quick buck with customers while never losing her sense of humour. She has never learned how to write and read. She managed to get registered and rated within the psychiatric clinic. The worse the rating the better the social security payments. She quickly learned the tricks to do that.

We picked up Angelica among the many children from the railway station. She moved into our children's home, but disappeared again, but later came back and got more settled. Nevertheless, she often broke away and sunk back into her confused past, overwhelmed by abuse and drugs. Totally exhausted she searched again for peace and the intimacy of being at home with us. She followed us to the Roma villages, six hours by train from Bucharest. Here with us is a world without drugs, without threatening men, no "aunts" who welcome her but demand money and belongings from her. She enjoys the peaceful community, participates in household tasks by taking care of children and growing vegetables in the garden. Sometimes when it became too boring for her she provokes a fight and disappears. However, soon she calls asking when she would be allowed to return because she would feel homesick. Days and weeks later she would re-emerge again on the scene.

Once back with us, Angelica did not seek any more the wild freedom but is grateful for her room, our community, security, and the daily work. She is always hard working and clean. I wonder where she acquired this know-how. How could she manage to survive without being able to calculate and read? We gave her an incentive to learn. During the daily morning prayer service, we sing songs from a book. She knows the numbers of the different songs and texts by heart which is obviously an advantage when you cannot read. However, we also take turns in reading the Gospel. When the small children

laughed at her and asked why she would never read she felt embarrassed. Therefore, she started learning during the evening, first the different letters and then words. One day Angelica made a move to be lined up for reading the Gospel. The day before she had read the short text over and over. Trembling she stood up in the chapel



and announced the Good News – the Gospel she now can read. She tried to add each letter by letter until she did recognise them and managed to pronounce “S- C- R- I -B -E- S”.

Angelica is a hard-working staff member. We wanted to give her security by providing her a contract and a salary. However, as soon as she had the contract, she started becoming restless. Did she feel locked up? Suddenly she picked up her stuff, left a note on the table reading “DISMISSAL,” and did run away. However, soon after she called us because she was asked to pay at the place where she ended up. She had already given them everything, so now she decided to go

away. We took Angelica in again. She is now more committed and better than before. Sometimes she asks for a contract but takes it back immediately. She needs to be free. She is covered with the social insurance for disabled people. She receives from us what she needs such as food, clothing, room, medicine, but more than that, she has been given a community, friendship and a perspective on life. And we do have a strong force in our midst. Her big rolling eyes, her joy of life and commitment despite her difficult journey through life.

#### Ethical reflection by Friedhelm Hengsbach

The topic of gender and women is crucial in this story, which shows a positive and successful development from just another “Street Kid” to a young woman who has become an important representative of the social commitment of Project Elijah. Here is the twofold motive: to support the young people and at the same time the common commitment of the key players to self-help. Pope Francis refers in his Easter message to the removal of little stones which prevent a person from walking in an upright manner. The key is not to overwhelm the kids with gifts but to remain guides from outside, inspiring “doubting hearts and souls” to take courageous initiatives in the battle for self-mastery and against exterior roadblocks.

#### 3. Story of the transforming power of music by Ruth Zenkert

The school inspector is coming! The female teachers are trembling. Once a year the inspection takes place. This offers the teachers a chance to be promoted to the city schools. There the schools are more elegant and there are fewer Roma children in the classes. To make sure that they will have calm and disciplined classes, teachers typically ignore the Roma children and their needs.

For many kids we provide the necessary documents allowing them to go to school. At first that sounded wonderful as they found themselves in another village of students! But the enthusiasm quickly faded away. To sit quietly, to listen, to be focused, to learn, to recognise letters with patience is not their strength. The teachers are strict and segregate the Roma children or send them back home, because they fear dirty and difficult kids. The students do not want to sit beside the «smelly gypsies». Thus, it is difficult to motivate our kids to go to school. Nevertheless, they like to go to our Social Centre because they realise that they are welcome. The homework schedule is easier and the instructors do have patience. But it is also, for us, quite difficult to work with these kids. After ten minutes they are unable to pay attention.

How different is our music school! Here the kids flock with great pleasure.



Ionut is an eight-year-old boy. His mother has six children from at least three different partners. Ionut does not know his father. His mother's current boyfriend kicked him out of the home because he cannot feed him. The money can only cover the expenses for his own kids. Ionut thus became a tramp. Wherever he happened to be did he eat or fall asleep under a table. Sometimes they chased him away and then he spent the night in a cellar. He did not go to school as it was more fun to be with his friends. Often, after the first hour of school, he did not come back after the break except when the weather was cold outside. And then he was expelled by the teacher. Even at

nine years old he had yet to master the alphabet.

However, once he joined our class on choir did he enjoy singing. He knows all the songs by heart and belts them out with enthusiasm. He feels completely at ease in the community of singers. He is part of them. If the musicians play songs of the Roma people, Ionut jumps up and the rhythm transforms him entirely. He knows the steps, the movements, and he continues to dance until he is sweating profusely. He grabs a cup of water and returns to the game. He learns from the others, makes friends, commits himself fully and merges entirely with the music. All have become one. They forget their sorrows. The joy of life carries them away and unites them. By doing so they can bear the daily life that overwhelms their mothers, and which is tough for the children.

Ionut is enthusiastic about musicians and the music. He would like to learn saxophone so that he can join the others. The joy he gets from the music gives us a unique opportunity to get him to sit down and learn. This will make it easier for him to learn the alphabet. And the day will come that he will not be required to go home when the school inspector shows up.

Ethical reflection by Friedhelm Hengsbach

The story highlights the rigorous requirements of an outdated system of education which reinforces social status as a barrier to moving up instead of removing it, while also showing the transformative power of music to provoke the students' youthful energy and enthusiasm. Social analysis should focus on the social integration of two completely different worlds of life and work which here are not integrated. When it comes to the Roma people, both the dominant social classes and the European Union reject that integration. Exclusion appears to me a dominant topic highlighted by Pope Francis in reference to social groups, regions, different lifestyles, nations, the EU and its dream of integration, mutual comprehension through processes, a hands-on

approach within the long-term perspective of sustainability, rather than just a narrow minded focus on local, regional and cultural barriers. Most immediately we must confront the exclusion of the Roma people through bourgeois majorities in European countries.

#### 4. The story of the Dance of the Crows by Ruth Zenkert

Once a year there is a huge celebration which is called the Dance of the Crows. Over a thousand people come together from neighbouring villages to experience the performances of the children. These are the parents, siblings and friends of the Roma children who learn singing, dancing, and playing instruments in our music schools. In the first year the mayor did not show up because he was worried that a celebration with Roma people would necessarily cause problems. Because nothing happened in the first year, he has been present ever since and now boasts himself to be the patron for the togetherness of different ethnicities. Representatives of political parties from the district town of Sibiu now come and admire the achievements of kids who before were not trusted, who were written off as rebellious recipients of social welfare or criminals. The Dance of the Crows has become a celebration which cannot be missed in our social life.

Over 200 kids have become students at the music schools of Project Elijah. Each day the kids go to music school. They continue to struggle through hard times when they need to master the technical issues while playing instruments. They need to practice scales, each time a bit faster until the fingers rush automatically over their instrument. The music scores need to be mastered. Here the amazing musical talents of the Roma children come to light. They learn the melodies faster through listening. Once the melodies are performed the kids easily resonate

with them and keep them in their memory. As this is practiced during the whole school year, their repertoire grows steadily.

Now, at the end of the school year, the pieces for the Dance of the Crows are selected and finalised. The selected pieces must be studied carefully with the artistic nuances of the piano, as students learn the required breaks, the precision in playing together. Various groups from the music schools play together, the orchestras accompany the choir and the dancers. While other kids hang around, sunning themselves on the grass and on the streets when the school holidays started, our kids nevertheless come back to school each day. It is very demanding, they struggle through rehearsals, until they cannot concentrate anymore. The teachers invent fresh ideas and tricks to help inspire the kids to carry on. Sometimes one of the older ones complains or leaves because he has no desire to carry on anymore. Some burst out in tears if a piece is removed.

As the celebration approaches, the tension mounts: are we really up to the job? As the mutual support and cohesion increases, the atmosphere intensifies until the big day when the solo players tremble and the kids have great fun mastering a concert for so many people who are carried away by the fire of the Roma music. Due to the big efforts and due to the great mutual support, I believe that this type of work celebrates the most beautiful time in the whole year. After that our kids truly deserve their holidays.

#### Ethical reflection by Friedhelm Hengsbach

Is Pope Francis a music lover? It seems that he cannot quite master singing in public but that he does like music especially modern styles. I have pointed out the contrast dramatised by Francis in *Laudato si'* (2015), on the one hand, between the hegemony of 21st century political paradigms, including economies dominated by

modern technology, finance and multinational corporations as well as the post-democratic regimes and the related abuses of natural resources; and on the other hand, his urgent call for ecological conversion and spirituality in a lifestyle that is empathetic with all living creatures. It seems to me a pity that the liberating blessing of music is not fully appreciated. But music among the Roma people provides hints of the mindfulness for all creatures which are created and loved by God within our “Common Home”. I wonder if there are parallels to this fourth story in the experience of Chinese people....



RUTH ZENKERT AND FRIEDHELM HENGSBACH

## REFERENCES 参考资料

- Francis, *Laudato si'* (On Care for our Common Home), 2015. Retrieved on 27 July 2021 from [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)
- Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, 2013). Retrieved from [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html)