

# *Pendular Journeys*

## *The Roma in the Heart of Europe*

Photographs by Bruno Amsellem

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In 2007, *Peuple tzigane, le silence et l'oubli* (*Gypsies, silence and oblivion*) retraced the history of the internment of French Gypsies during World War II, based on the photo-journalism and archival work of Mathieu Pernot. Many visitors at that time showed interest in learning more about the living conditions of those who today live in slums on the outskirts, and sometimes in the heart, of cities. These other gypsies, that's to say the Roma, like the tens of thousands of people from Eastern Europe who are looking for work and a better life in the West, have been travelling throughout Europe for the last twenty years. Our lack of knowledge about these people seems to nonetheless condemn them to forever be seen as strange beings, catalysts of endemic fears we face when confronted with otherness.

With *Voyages pendulaires* (*Pendular Journeys*), an exhibit focused on Roma from Romania, Bruno Amsellem gives us the opportunity to learn about the real living conditions of those people who are so often treated with distrust or indifference here. These Roma's journey, from their Romanian villages to our shantytowns and slums here in France, as well as France's policy of help to return, the changes that Romania's entry in the European Union have brought about, and the mechanics of this migration compose the heart of the exhibit. Bruno Amsellem's story recounts three journeys between Lyon and Romania. For each trip, he follows a different family, sometimes leaving by choice, sometimes by obligation.

The point of views of different experts enriches this photographic investigation. An international journalist, Sophie Landin, accompanied Bruno Amsellem twice to Romania. Ethnologists and historians also have put in a word. The individual and familial journeys and the force of the images encountered come with texts which will enable you to put this natural phenomenon into context, that of an intra-European migration, as well as to understand the reasons for the current difficulties and the human consequences it engenders.

This exhibit is organized in partnership with the photography publication company Signatures.

## ► An interior exile

“Reasons for exiles are surely always different. But, they are especially singular in that they reflect each individual and each individual’s personal journey, each human experience.” These words resounded in the exhibition *Tché Tchènes hors sol* that Maryvonne Arnaud presented at the Centre d’Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation in 2009. Bruno Amsellem’s photo-reporting, which shows us the journey and resting points of several Roma families, portrays a different sort of exile, at once interior and permanent, for these men and woman we discover here are European citizens but kept completely apart, like an endemic plague on the roads of Europe. Leaving far away to search for, over there, the tiny bit of money that would allow us to keep living here, this is the harsh logic and fate of these families, of those who are always considered suspicious and fascinating strangers, no matter where they are.

Denouncing rejection, not its mechanics but in the effect it produces on peoples’ lives, is a fundamental part of Bruno Amsellem’s work. This photographer has already created a photo-story about children hidden in Africa because they suffer the Noma disease. Universally expressed, administratively organized, rejection is what all migrants the world over, separated in time and space, nevertheless have each and every one of them experienced. Many have recently attempted to document stories of migration. In each of his attempts, the author is faced with vastly different situations, to understand these departures, often decisive, and yet happening every day, in which people leave hoping for a better life. The photographer Olivier Jobard, in a series of still images, showed the lives of non-European migrants. In *Kingsley, carnet de route d’un immigrant clandestin* (*Kingsley, the road trip of an illegal immigrant*), published in 2004, he presents the story of a young Cameroonian. He crossed Nigeria, the Sahara desert, Algeria, and Morocco with him before boarding a makeshift boat to the Canary Islands.

The migration that Bruno Amsellem shows us is an economic migration, and actually an intra-European one, but his approach is quite similar to Olivier Jobard’s. Feeling a need to understand the motives of Romanian Roma – what drives them to come to France and to accept particularly precarious living conditions – to share their difficulties, but also their hopes, with us, Bruno Amsellem, with the journalist Sophie Landrin left with them to go back “to the source”: their country. They followed the departures, some voluntary, some obligatory, waited with them, and witnessed that the journey was often put off until later. When it was finally undertaken, it was often chaotic, and it brought these families into an uncertain future, from slums to shantytowns.

While Sebastiao Salgado, in his project *Migrations: Humanity in Transition* doesn’t mention the names of the people in his photographs in order to present a universal image of suffering, Bruno Amsellem is attached to the individuals and insists on their singularity. For these internal foreign migrants, that is to say the Roma and Gypsies, globalization has always had a pernicious effect. Henriette Asséo reminds us that it masks situational differences and individual destinies, destinies of individual families, instead shoving them all together in the category of “undesirables.” *Voyages pendulaires* (*Pendular Journeys*) doesn’t express Roma life in general, but rather some precise moments in the lives of two families that the photographer followed.

Everyday images suddenly become troubling when, for instance, the cakes baked in Romania before a departure remind us of the things we ourselves do before we leave on vacation. Putting aside our compassion to reflect that things we are privileged to be able to do are things their difficulties force them to do, “just like some people’s wealth implicates the destitution of others; this task is one that these painful and moving images can only begin,” Susan Sontag says. Bruno Amsellem’s photographs, along with Sophie Landrin’s article, bring us to understand the profoundly unjust nature of the world we live in.

- Interview with Bruno Amsellem  
February 19th, 2010



**How would you define your photographic approach?**

The area of photography that I'm interested in is photojournalism and the two different branches it includes. There are images made to order to accompany breaking news, a picture taken today for tomorrow's paper, and then there are pictures taken as part of long-term coverage of a subject of personal interest, which allows the photographer to tell a story. In my experience as a photographer, 80% of my work is of the first type, creating images to accompany the story of a day, destined to fade away in turn. *Voyages pendulaires (Pendular Journeys)* is my third long-term subject, after a first series among the Palestinians and a second in Africa covering Noma disease. In both cases, what I wanted to do was to show the daily lives of these people, what their lives are like, to point out, for instance, the incredible love of life shown by these children who have Noma, despite the fact that they're treated like outcasts, hidden by their families, and you know that the treatment which they lack would be able to cure them in two weeks. It's a very harsh subject, visually, and I chose to portray it in black and white. Only Photo Magazine would publish it, which it did in its special edition on the Visa festival of images. They're the ones who organized the production. I did it to talk about this disease, to say that it really does exist and that 100,000 children die every year from it, because I'm sick of there being all of these subjects that we just don't talk about.

**How did you become interested in what's happening to Roma people?**

Since 2001 I've been wandering around the shantytowns and squats in the Lyon area as news stories bring me there. At the time, the press was very interested by the arrival of the Roma and the very visible development of their shantytowns. It was just unimaginable; you could see the same conditions right next to our cities as you could in shantytowns in underdeveloped countries. At one point in 2007 I was covering the story of an expulsion at dawn from one such place in Vénissieux. At the end of my coverage, you could see families being bussed out; an immediate departure for Romania had been organized. I wondered what would become of them once they got there and for what reasons would they, in all likelihood, return to France. I called the newspaper office and offered to do a story about this subject with reporter Sophie Landrin and they immediately told me, "Yes, you're right, someone should go see what happens to them there, go back to the source to see what brings them to France." So, I went to Tinka, in the Bihor, in Northwest Romania, near the Hungarian border. And thus, I found myself once again in a shantytown.

**What did you learn about the living conditions of Roma in Romania?**

I'd left with a certain number of assumptions in mind – even though we may have the best of intentions, everybody makes assumptions – of course, I expected to see poverty, but not a situation as difficult as what I found. I very quickly realized that they didn't have enough food to eat every day, that the Romanian population rejected them, that they didn't always have the possibility to send their children to school. After a little while, the families were taken to Oradea, a large city about 50 kilometres away. There, the ANAEM (Agence Nationale de l'Accueil des Etrangers et des Migrations), who was in charge of their return, gave each adult 150 euros and half that for the children, as well as help with a project, sheep-raising, which, by its nature, wasn't adapted to most of the people concerned. Sophie and I realized, then, that there was a more in-depth story waiting to be told about these people, about their connection to France, the two-way trips, and the rejection they constantly face, whether there or here. We thus got the idea to contact some families, whose migration experience would serve as the frame for explaining why they travel back and forth between these two countries.

**The heart of your story, then, is the tale of back-and-forth trips that Roma people make between Romania and France?**

No, not Roma people in general. I can only speak of the journeys and daily lives of the families who let us travel with them. This coverage, I feel very strongly, shouldn't be used to create generalizations. I'm talking about individual journeys here, occurring in specific moments in the life of some families, which might be completely different in the coming years. It's also that I met Tarzan Covaci, first in Lyon, where he lived with his pregnant wife and his young daughter in an abandoned house near Jonage. I simply told him that I was interested in knowing how he lived, in telling his story, not to stigmatize them nor out of pure curiosity, but to understand what their lives were like, to do a "check up" on their situation. He very quickly accepted and when I told him that I hoped to come with them to Romania welcomed me with open arms. We left in April 2009; I then followed him in his return, learned that he would be departing again (he received an OFTQ, Obligation de Quitter le Territoire Français / Obligation to Leave French Territory), then his return and then a new departure for a Parisian shantytown.

**Do you plan to continue this exhibit beyond the Centre d'Histoire?**

There are so many different situations, places, stories, personal and family cultures to tell that this subject is inexhaustible. Of course I'd like to continue, but I also know that this coverage has psychologically exhausted me, that I am revolted by the reject and constant racism faced by the Roma, and weary because I don't really see how their situation can improve.

► Presentation of the exhibit



*Voyages pendulaires (Pendular Journeys)* is presented in the large temporary exhibition room at the CHRD. It is made up of nearly 70 colour images and is preceded by explanations and background information. There is a map showing the route between Lyon and the Bihor region in Romania, as well as interviews illustrating the different points of views of different people and experts on the subject, among them: sociologist professor Jean Pierre Liegeois, anthropologist Thomas Ott, journalist Sophie Landrin, photographer-journalist Bruno Amselem, Traian Covaci, member of one of the families Bruno Amselem followed, and the director of the Centre d'Histoire de la Résistance et de la Déportation. Finally, there are some passages that help to explain the photographs: Tsiganes and Roma – From rejection to extermination – Being Roma in Romania – Being Roma in Lyon.

The exhibit itself is made up of six distinct phases, each one introduced with a bit of text and accompanied by audio testimony from the people in the photographs.

A short history of shantytowns in the Lyon area

Traces of Roma history in Romania

From Vénissieux to Tinca with Return Assistance

Tarzan Covaci and his family

Traian and Pamela Covaci

A new Trip but the same Return Assistance

This exhibit, describing the journey and the daily life of two Roma families, is meant to show and explain to the viewer this cyclically-nomadic lifestyle that brings people to cross national borders in the hope of building a better life back home. It will provide food for thought about the growing part of Europe that is made up of its margins.

► Information and Activities Relating to the Exhibit

**Round Table Discussion**

**Wednesday, October 6 at 2:30 pm**

“Putting Life to the Side” – Roma families between France and Romania

Throughout their history, the Roma people have been forced to move many times, whether because of the persecution they've faced or for social and economic reasons. These migrations have become an integral part of a trans-national gypsy identity for this population, which has been trying, since the early 1990s, to find an alternative to their poverty. Throughout this day of study, ethnologists, historians, and experts in public international law will discuss these circular migrations which bring families motivated by hope into Lyon's shantytowns.

**Journées du Patrimoine**

**Saturday September 18th and Sunday September 19th**

Free entry to the museum and its activities

Projection of photographs from the Marcelle Vallet collection, BM Lyon (traces of migration in the Rhône-Alpes)

Outdoor concert in the Centre Berthelot courtyard

**Visits:**

Self-guided visits from Wednesday to Friday (9 am – 5:30 pm) and Saturday and Sunday (9:30 am – 6 pm.)

Guided visit the first two Sundays of each month, from September to December, at 3 pm.

**Publications**

*Voyages pendulaires. Des Roms au cœur de l'Europe. Photographies de Bruno Amsellem*

A short catalogue of the exhibit, available for 10 euros.