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# Tell them about me

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(excerpts)

To avoid getting married at 15, I converted to Pentecostalism<sup>1</sup>. My parents kept telling me it was time, that all girls get married at my age, that everybody would laugh at me and think I'd gone crazy, that I had to start my own family or, the argument most used by the Romanis: 'How much longer do you wanna stay in my house? Isn't it enough how long you've lived here, how long we've raised you?' 'But I don't care, I'm your child, you have to put up with me'. 'We'll kill you, we'll cut you into pieces, get out of our house, you aren't our child anymore!' It's the final argument that makes all Gypsy girls who don't wanna get married hold their tongue.

When I got my first period, I cried all day cos I knew I was finally *chaj bari*, a maiden, as we say it, and that was all they were waiting for to marry me off. That's the signal: if a girl's body is ready to have children, it's the time for her to get married. But I didn't feel ready to become a wife and a mother at 13. So, I didn't tell them. For one year and four months I managed to hide my period until the store clerk ratted on me to my mother that I bought tampons. And only cos I didn't have bills to pay for them, only coins. She said, 'did you steal from the church collection basket, you Gypsy?? And now you give me their donations in small change?' I lost my cool: 'the money's not from the church, Romanian woman, but since you aren't so pious yourself, how would you know?' Well... when Mum found out, all the relatives found out. They believed I was cursed or that someone put a spell on me and that was the reason I didn't start menstruating and become a woman. For over a year, all women in my family drove me nuts with all sorts of prayers, exorcisms, marriage spell-removing rituals, and healing potions, which I had to drink and rub on my body. All that only to become *chaj bari* and get married.

I have an aunt who became a Pentecostal about ten years ago, when she got cancer. Every Saturday she took me with her to their service and gatherings. That's where I'd heard that if you want to remain a Pentecostal, you have to marry a Pentecostal. And immediately I got this idea! There wasn't a Pentecostal boy in any of the *Zlătari* families my father would've married me into. So I thought: 'if I convert, my chances to get married would be nil!' I was so desperate that it seemed the only salvation. Now I'm ashamed I could even think of something like this cos when I went to their gatherings, I soon felt that it was my true place. That's

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<sup>1</sup> Neo-Protestant movements, for example Pentecostalism and Adventism, are based on reading the Bible and renewed the church starting from the United States in the 19th century

where I have to be. That's where I found myself, through God. As for my conversion, I can say it's my biggest achievement.

After I became a Pentecostal, the fight with my family not only didn't end, but became even worse. It was a shock for them. Every time a boy came to ask for my hand, and I said no, we had huge quarrels for days in a row. It was so hard, and I was crying all the time. My inner strength came only from above, from God, cos I was praying all the time: 'Please God, don't leave me, cos if you do that I'll die, God, please don't leave me!' And I even asked other Pentecostals, 'Please pray for me cos I don't know what else to do, how to convince them to give me peace.' And God has truly helped me, now I'm 25 and in the last two or three years they've calmed down, they've given up on trying to marry me, though I know they still hope to be the ones who'll choose my husband when I decide to get married. But it's hard to find single boys of my age. At 25, they're all married with kids and it's even harder to find a Pentecostal Romani man. If I choose a Romanian, then they'll really kick me out of their house! But me, I don't care about ethnicity! All I want is to find a man who thinks... almost like me, not exactly like me cos then he wouldn't know to correct me when I'm wrong. But a changed man, a man in whom God lives.

I thought many times of leaving my family, that I'd have liked to be born somewhere else. I've been frustrated about this for a long time: 'Why, God, was I born here? Why not somewhere else, why not in another family, why in this ethnicity? Why can I only wear traditional clothes? Why can't I go to school?' I've loved school since I was a child, but I only finished grade 4. They didn't let me go after that, but now I'm in grade 8 at a school with reduced attendance. But it's a secret, my family doesn't know. Not letting me go to school brought me a lot of suffering. When the other kids saw me, they asked: 'Roxana, why don't you come to school anymore?' It was always hard to tell them that my parents didn't let me. 'Well, I just can't.' 'Why? You don't have money?' I remember one day I was at the market with Mum and we met my French teacher who started crying: '*Madame*, please let her go to school because she's capable and she's now at the age when she has to study.' Mum was impressed: 'What? A teacher crying for a child? I've never seen such a thing!' But she wasn't impressed for long. The Gypsies already looked suspiciously at me, cos I wasn't like the other girls. This is what they think about a girl who goes to school: 'Over there she'll grow up getting who knows what kind of wrong ideas into her head, then she'll likely fall in love with some *gadjo* boy, run away with him, and we'll never find her again.' On one side, dad

used to tell me: 'Look what the Gypsies say, they're spreading rumours about you,' but when Romanians came to our house, he always praised me to them, that his daughter was smart, that she went to school!

For many years, I've had an issue with being Gypsy. It seemed to me that I was thinking like a Romanian girl and then I didn't know what I was, what was wrong with me. But after I worked on a project as an educational assistant for Romani children, I started seeing things differently. I helped the kids with their homework, we went to museums, we watched movies, we talked about them, and I realised that the Gypsy children are like all other children, just as smart or as kind if someone gives them an education. Once something happened that made me cry. With this project, I was going from school to school to gather the Romani children. And I got to a class where two of the children were Romani. The mother of one of them had just arrived at the school to ask the teacher to move her child from the desk near a window at the back of the class cos he'd just been discharged from the hospital and she wanted to make sure he wouldn't catch a cold again. The teacher answered that she would try, but after the mother left, she turned to me and said: 'I won't move him anywhere. They're tough, they don't die so easily!' I couldn't admit that I was also Gypsy, but I left the school crying, wondering what made that woman believe that Romani people don't feel pain the same way other people do. From that day, I started accepting myself for what I am, and I tell others: 'Yes, I'm a Gypsy, but don't look for the bad side. Look at me as I really am, judge me as a person. If I'm a Gypsy, it doesn't mean I'm automatically something bad. No, I'm a normal human being, I have both good qualities and flaws.' Oh-oh! It's late and I also have to go to the Pentecostal gathering! Mihaela, I wish you good luck with your play, but please don't say it's a play about Romani people – just say it's about human beings.