

## **Greetings from Tuula Åkerlund from the 12th IRU Congress in North Macedonia**

The organization of the days was really well managed, the varied program lasted from morning to late evening. Several panels were held during the days. Finnish participants were well taken into account in the program. We all felt good about the trip, we gained new international relations and enthusiasm to continue promoting the status of the Roma on our own. We also understood that Finland has a lot to offer on an international level. Tuula Åkerlund participated in the meeting as a representative of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health/ the National Advisory Board on Romani Affairs.

The journey to the 12th World Congress of the International Romani Union held in Skopje, North Macedonia, began on June 2. on the morning flight first to Frankfurt. There was a few hours of waiting and after that we continued on the next flight to Skopje and arrived in the afternoon. IRU President Zoran Dimov picked us up from the airport in his car and took us to the hotel. In the evening, there was an evening reception, where we got to know each other and shared greetings from the Roma of our country. We were also served a hearty dinner.

The next morning, local Roma delegates and representatives of different countries started coming to the hotel. IRU's extensive international network made a great impression on us. 29 IRU representatives from different countries and continents had come to the congress from abroad. The furthest ones were from Chile and India. It was interesting and satisfying to get to know Roma delegates from different countries and to hear about the situations and conditions of the Roma. There were 5 of us from Finland, Rikhard Långström (Timi) and Ramona Grönstrand from Kajaani, Henry Hedman from Launonen, Anette Åkerlund from Helsinki and me from Vantaa.

The status and life of the Roma in Finland interested the participants. We were interviewed by e.g. Roma journalists Veli Brijani and Adam Parno Szoppe, who work in Sweden at Radio Romano. We heard that Radio Romano makes a lot of programs also in the Romani language and the radio is listened to all over the world. Together with the Finnish participants, we dreamed that there would be a similar Roma radio in Finland. Communication should also be developed internationally, of course in the Romani language, but there would also be a need to make programs partly in English, so that we could get contacts and share information in international Romani networks. Today, we in Finland have many talented, educated Roma youth who speak many languages fluently. They could be inspired to join the activity.

The organization of the days was really well managed; the varied program lasted from morning to late evening. Several panels were held during the days. Finnish participants were well taken into account in the program. Everyone participated in the panels of their own field in English. Rikhard Långström participated in the entrepreneur panel, telling about his experiences in working life and his personal story as an entrepreneur in the construction industry. Henry Hedman and Anette Åkerlund participated in the Romani language, culture, history and religion panel. In his speech, Henry Hedman discussed the Finnish legislation that protects the right to develop and maintain the Romani language and culture. He also told how the teaching of the Romani language and culture is taken into account in institutions under the state administration. In her speech, Anette Åkerlund brought up the study opportunities in Romani language, history, culture and music taught at the University of Helsinki. In her speech, Anette also discussed Romani art and its importance in promoting culture. I myself participated in the panel, which discussed e.g. the rights and status of Roma women.

The IRU's vision and mission is ambitious; unites the world's Roma, informs and promotes their position. The International Romani Union is already extending its network to almost all continents. Henry Hedman was elected at the IRU meeting held at the end of the day as an advisor to IRU leader Zoran together with Finnish IRU delegate Marja Eronen. Ramona, Anette and the undersigned wanted to join international women's organization activities.

We Finnish representatives felt good about the trip, we gained new international relations and enthusiasm to continue promoting the status of the Roma on our own. We also understood that Finland has a lot to offer on an international level.