

The Last of the Dyancheros

[This text originally appeared in the Czech web-magazine Transitions Online in June 2004]

"I got married the first time when I was 13," boasts Igzo.

"That's nothing, I did it at 11," replies Samson.

Tarzan looks away, almost ashamed. He's 17 already, with an eye on a bride, but no cash, and even worse, no car keys in his pockets.

On the outskirts of Belgrade, Roma displaced from Kosovo make ends meet by recycling cast-off goods in diverse ways. But Adem, Imer, Touche, and Tarzan have found a much more efficient way to make cash from trash: They buy up abandoned Citroen 2cv and Dyane cars at 100-300 euros apiece, only to transform them into cardboard-collecting pick-ups which they fondly call their "Dyanas."

Nobody knows where they learned it, but the fact is that they appreciate perfectly well the qualities that made the "2cv" and its older brother "Dyane" classic collectors' automobiles worldwide (over 6 million sold between 1948 and 1990; thousands of passionate fan clubs): cool looks, reliability, durability, and above all, the capacity for metamorphosis.

But while other proud 2cv owners invest small fortunes for accessories and metallic paint jobs, Belgrade Roma are breaking them into pieces, because this is one of the rare cars where you can remove the outer shell without damaging the chassis. This leaves a lot of room in the back to construct a voluminous bin, while up front, they leave the engine hoodless to fool the cops into thinking they are driving an agricultural machine.

The Dyancheros, as I call them, can thus collect several tons of recyclables in a day, easily outperforming the cart-pushing competition. Even better, they manage to get away with having no papers for their Mad Max mobiles. Dozens of these unlicensed Mad Max mobiles patrol the suburbs of Belgrade, assuming the role of the only recycling service in the local infrastructure.

I filmed them for months and spent much more time befriending them. It was easy. I live nearby, I see them everyday and I wanted to make a first film. Their wittiness, charisma, energy, and spirits were the perfect cover for my moviemaking amateurism. I toured "Pretty Dyana" to many film festivals and everywhere audiences were intrigued by their apparently carefree, day by day, meal by meal psychology. By barefoot kids playing in the dust and laughing all the time. By gold made from garbage. By illiterates setting a roaring example of sustainable activism. By contagiously proud and happy people.

But life has never been easy on these Roma. Nearly all have fled Kosovo during or after the 1999 NATO bombing of Serbia. In their previous lives, most were small traveling salesmen, peacefully trading cattle and kitchenware. Adem, who's in his early 30s, was a musician as well, playing the big goat-skin drum along with two clarinet players at Albanian weddings.

But the war put a brutal end to those inter-ethnic business links. Eternal victims of prejudice, most of the 200,000 Kosovo Roma were expelled by ethnic Albanian extremists on suspicions of collaborating with the

Serbs, or at least for not joining the separatist guerillas. A friend warned Adem that he was on a death list; Imer had fled even before. Both lost every material possession they had.

About 50 Roma, many from the Klina region, near Peć in western Kosovo, settled in Belgrade on a barren strip of land opposite a construction site where a massive Orthodox church was being built, surrounded by apartment blocks. They knew this site beforehand, having spotted it during one of their earlier business trips to Belgrade.

Adem couldn't keep playing here because he lost his instrument back home and because wedding parties in Belgrade don't burn on oriental drum rhythms. He claims it's impossible for him to enter any of the famous family-run Roma bands, so he turned back to reselling goods, but the competition in destitute Serbia was so great that he had to come up with another idea.

When he met a local mechanic who was fixing a Dyane, it was love at first sight. "I've had three so far," he says.

"I sold the first one two years ago when my wife had a Caesarian operation, and I really regret selling it. Then I sold the second one when my mother drowned off the coast of Montenegro, on a boat to Italy. She died I don't know how. I went there, I spent all the money, but I found nothing. When I came back I bought a motorcycle and when I saved some money, I bought this new Dyana. And I am not going to sell it, ever!"

It turned out to be a smart idea. As Imer, also in his early 30s, says, "We have to work, we're not asking anything from anybody. Since there are so many trash collectors [pushing carts], we thought we needed to go much faster, to improve business figures, so to speak."

There are 50 or so Kosovo Roma families trundling around Belgrade in Citroens, a tiny fraction of the Roma refugees in Serbia. Roma organizations estimate that central Serbia is home to some half-million Roma, most of them being refugees or "internally displaced persons." They don't get harassed by authorities, but they don't get much help either. The overall sentiment of the local population is one of silent sympathy, but give or take a meager welfare check or a couple of bags of flour or some oil, little is done to assist them, as social security funds are already depleted by almost one million serb refugees and massive post-privatization layoffs. Add to that chronic disputes among the Roma settlements (186 in Belgrade, for a total population of 80,000), voracious organizations meant to help the Roma but who instead pocket most of their Western donors' funds, manipulative politicians, and several natural enemies: the weather, the police, and the competition.

It goes without saying that they have ordinary problems too, like all of us. Adem constantly worries about the birthdays of his seven children and the cost of the circumcision celebration for his youngest son. Imer has a toothache, so he stays home and watches too much politics on TV. His favorite "101 Dalmatians" t-shirt is stained with motor oil. Touche's fishing rod is broken and he hasn't caught a single pheasant or rabbit in the last two weeks.

But all that's nothing compared to Tarzan's heartache. A side-character in my documentary, he is the only over-14 "adult" in the settlement who doesn't own a Dyane -- a great drama given that he's facing imminent marriage, and everybody knows that without a Dyane, there's no point trying to show up in front of your parents-in-law.

Roaming through parking lots, he finds four Dyanes, but none is for sale, at least not cheaply. He has trouble understanding why an old couple of traveling booksellers chases him away for simply asking the price of their old 2cv caravan.

Finally, a retired basketball player decides to part with her 2cv after 25 years of loyal service. It's been four years since the car moved from the parking lot, ever since her husband passed away. Tarzan tricks her, saying the car is garbage anyway and that she will eventually end up having to pay to have the old wreck towed away.

He buys it for 100 euros borrowed from friends, planning to pay them back on the earnings from the cardboard he'll pick up with his new Dyane. Provided, of course, that he manages to repair the engine.

He pushes the car home and immediately gets down to it. With no electric tools, using barbaric methods that would shock any 2cv fan--a hammer, karate kicks, and a pocket saw--he manages to remove the hood and doors. The cargo bin is knocked together from wood and tin plates. With a washing machine's drum belt string he found in his yard, he attaches the clutch pedal to the steering wheel for smoother leverage. With a piece of antenna cable he cut on the roof of his house, he connects the brake pedal to the handbrake lever. Two more electric cables are left bare for easier hotwiring.

After swallowing a cocktail of chemicals, the engine finally starts coughing, to the great joy of Tarzan, who redoubles his efforts. He hooks up a two-liter Sprite bottle as a fuel reservoir, attaches several lights and rearview mirrors, then splashes on a few dabs of color with some spray paints he found in my car.

"At first it was cool," remembers 15-year-old Touche. "Everybody gave us friendly looks, they clapped, they gave us tips. But with these new traffic rules, we barely dare to come out on the streets."

Admittedly, these Dyanes are hardly legal: no papers, no insurance, no technical certificate. At first, the police would let them go, more amused than anything. Recently, however, stricter traffic laws came in and fines are hitting hard: "No technical certificate--50 euros. Bad tires--20 euros. No lights--20 euros. They have no mercy. I paid them everything I earned in the last two months!" Imer complains, before adding, "But I still prefer to pay fines than lose my strength [pushing a cart]. I'll keep driving, no matter what!"

Adem favors a more cunning strategy. "We try to avoid them as much as possible by taking different shortcuts. Sometimes we even hide our Dyanas in the forest for a few days. If I really need to go downtown, I take my wife with me. She's eight months pregnant--if they stop me, I say I'm taking her to the hospital ..."

When the day's work is done, the Dyanes come in handy in other ways. The settlement has no electricity, so car batteries become mini-generators for lights, radios, or to recharge their mobile phones.

At night, it's family dinner time in front of the Dyane-powered TV. In the winter, since the settlement Roma are not allowed to cut wood from the nearby forest, they feed the stove with cardboard collected during the day. "It's a bit like throwing money into the fire," they say, "but the kids have to eat warm and stay warm."

When it rains, the ground around their shacks becomes a swamp. The Dyanes get a day off, covered in plastic bags. If it rains for a long time, the women, who otherwise don't leave the house or speak out much, are obliged to go beg on the streets. The men wait, powerless. The kids try to sleep to kill time.

They go to school, irregularly. Sometimes they help sort the day's recyclables or do household chores. But mostly they just play around. They play with the Dyanes too, since you're never too young to learn the secrets of the craft.

Sultan, Imer's 8-year-old son, ties a brick to his shoe to reach the gas pedal. Adem's eldest, Emran, 9, practices reverse driving, laughing even harder than the roar of the engine. Touche is not much older, but he's already got respectable mileage and years of car-fixing experience under his belt. He doesn't attend school, but dreams of being a car salesman, or at least a car mechanic.

The car-loving Roma help each other keep their vehicles on the road, but everyone works for himself. For Touche, the math is simple: "It's 2 dinars a bottle ; 50 dinars for a kilo iron ; 65 for for a kilo of copper. Cardboard goes for 3000 dinars per ton You never know how much you can make, but anyway, each trip at least pays for gas and cigarettes."

Once a month, trucks from the recycling factory come to collect the gain. The Dyancheros water the cardboard to make it heavier; the factory balance is rigged to show under weight. In the end, everyone's happy.

On her last drive out, little Ademina found a pair of boots and she's pleased. But not her father. Adem's in debt, his Dyane is out of order, and parts are scarce and repairs costly.

The shops are all out of stock and the 2cv clubs don't much appreciate the Dyancheros, amid more or less justified rumors that some Roma were behind the recent theft of several collectable 2cvs.

So Adem has no choice but to improvise, but that doesn't stop him from overdoing it sometimes.

"I put in a carburetor from a Fiat 600, because it uses only half the gas," he explains. "I got this used radio-cassette player at the flea market for five euros and I also added in this alarm that a police inspector gave me. I even put a cigarette lighter, out of pure pleasure."

When sunny days are over, they install the winter gear: a washing machine case to protect the engine while still letting the fan breathe, an exhaust pipe extension from an old vacuum cleaner, a tin roof, plastic mud-guards, brandy cup holders and so on.

Each Dyane is thus unique and polyform, and everyone pretends his baby is the prettiest and the fastest. The only catch is that these life-giving machines are slowly disappearing.

"It's harder and harder to find Dyanas in parking lots, since we bought up most of them already," Imer says. "But we're not very worried. I think we'll be able do something similar with the Renault 4 or old Wartburgs."

Adem stands by his Citroen, broken down though it may be.

"It's a damned good machine. I wouldn't change it for anything in the world," he says. "Even if they kick me out of here, I can always put my whole family inside, two mattresses and some blankets, and go wherever I want."

The debate warms up around the presumed country of origin of the Dyane: some think it's Chinese, others

are convinced it's Russian. Then Tarzan roars in at full speed in his ace of hearts. In less than 24 hours he's transformed a dying 2cv into the hottest honeymoon limousine in the settlement.

And so the story goes, a nice little love affair between Kosovo-Belgrade Roma and their Dyanes, a tale of alchemical survival, improvisation and fighting spirit, directed by the rules of the street, of daily politics, and of weather forecast. Who cares, really, where these machines come from. The most important thing is that they crank up hope, style, prestige, and the vital feeling of freedom.

I still see them regularly. A friendship that started lending them my bicycle continues to this day with bailing them out of jail, digitally retouching their yellowed family photos or driving them to the dervish in the middle of the night to "cast away the spell" on their sexual problems ... And since I sent copies of the film to the local police, they get arrested much less frequently. Maybe there is still hope for the survival of the breed.

Boris Mitic is a Belgrade-based documentary filmmaker. His works include PRETTY DYANA and UNMIK TITANIK [www.dribblingpictures.com]