

Australia and Romanies

This book is a fascinating read about Yvonne Slee, a determined Romani woman, who is part of an international team of Romani rights advocates, endeavoring to educate the Australian public about her Romani culture. It includes stories about Romanies from all over Australia who Yvonne danced with, ate with and shared thoughts with as she and her family journeyed on long road trips across the vast continent to set up Romani exhibitions, give interviews on radio stations and conduct presentations on Romani culture in primary schools. Yvonne and her husband even ran a Romani café in Melbourne for a while where they gave out Romani literature and sold books alongside the coffees and food.

Yvonne and her family lived in the UK and Europe for 16 years before moving back to Brisbane, Australia in 2004. The book begins with a Romani gathering at a caravan park in Byron Bay in NSW where she met a number of Romanies from all sorts of backgrounds. The family lived in Brisbane for 18 months then moved to Melbourne to open the Romani café. The café went well for a while with regulars popping in for the tasty food and coffee, then strangers started making rude remarks. "There are people out there that don't want Romanies in their street," one local told them. "They either like you or they don't. Bridge Road will decide and you'll soon know." Friendly people however, still came to the cafe, including Sharma, the owner of the Indian Tandoori restaurant next door. While having a quiet drink with him one evening after closing, Sharma got up and opened the café door for some fresh air. As they sat chatting, Mario, the Italian restaurant owner from up the road, walked in. He was very rude and called Sharma a Paki before announcing as he left that they would all be gone soon. Sharma said that word gets around quickly when a business is having a hard time, especially with Mario running his blog on the web. It doesn't take long on Bridge Road for the vultures to start circling. A couple of months later the café closed down.

Yvonne and her family then moved to Adelaide where she enrolled her eldest son in a Romani school where he was to learn dancing and music alongside the normal school subjects. She writes in her book that on the evening of one performance, the three girls from the Romani School dressed up in lovely sparkling tops and dance skirts that were so colorful, just like the colors in Indian saris. The skirts were layered and flew out like butterfly wings. MM's daughter-in-law, a Roma woman originally from Serbia, who was the mum of the two pretty girls with long black hair, had worked for weeks designing the brilliant outfits and sewing them together on her sewing machine. She was a real dressmaker. The boys wore striking green, satin pants that billowed like Indian boy's trousers and crisp white shirts with traditional embroidery. All the kids looked very nice. When the performance ended, everyone in the hall applauded loudly and the children were rewarded with a performance certificate and a trophy badge.

However, it became evident that the Romani School placed a lot of emphasis on teaching dance and music and not much on Maths and English. These subjects were important for getting a job in Australia. Also, the Romani language that was supposed to be taught had fallen by the wayside. Yvonne writes further that it appears there isn't any real Romani school in Australia where Romani history, language, dance and music, together with the state's curriculum, are taught, which is a shame. But she writes, "I teach them (her children) the meaning of their cultural heritage, our traditions and history and this I do every day. To live in peace and harmony is important. I don't bring them up to fight, but to talk, think and use their heads when they speak up about Romanies. They must have a voice out there, a Romani voice."

Yvonne strongly believes that staying invisible doesn't help at all and if Romanies don't speak up and educate the public about Romani history and culture, then it will be a never ending, bumpy road for them to navigate.

'Don't be silent!' she tells other Romanies. 'Don't be assimilated, be yourself, being Romani is in your blood and soul. We are of Indian roots and that we can be proud of. We were once Indian Hindus a 1000 years ago, before the conqueror, Mahmud of Ghazni took our Indian forefathers away from India.

She writes in her book that he invaded areas of Northern India and took everything he could get his hands on; gold and rubies from the temples, elephants, men, women and children, even priests and holy dancers from the temples and of course, warriors and soldiers. Mahmud and his army of raiders ambushed, kidnapped and enslaved many people of North West India and took them to Afghanistan, where he created his empire and made these people work for him and his army. If they didn't he'd kill them. His invasions happened over 20 times in quick succession. The people he took never went back, as is written in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Romani historians, like Professor Ian Hancock and lecturer Ronald Lee, have stated that when Mahmud's army was defeated by the Seljuks, the Romani forefathers became misplaced and eventually ended up in Anatolia where they stayed for 200 years and crystallized into the Romani culture. When the Ottoman Empire expanded, Romanies were given a choice to stay and become Muslims or leave and go on further into Europe. Many chose to leave and the ones who stayed followed the Islamic faith and settled in what is now Turkey. The Romanies that moved on into Europe endured an existence full of persecution, slavery, the holocaust, forced sterilizations, racist attacks and branding. They were totally misunderstood in Europe and the Romanies of today are still fighting for their rights in countries where they have lived for hundreds of years.

After living in Adelaide and country Victoria, Yvonne and her family moved to Cairns in north Queensland where they spoke to the director of the local historical museum about a display on Romani culture. The director happily agreed to display a Romani exhibit and to their surprise, his assistant, a professor at the James Cook University who was going to help co-ordinate the exhibit, was also a Romani. Yvonne and her husband researched local Romani stories in the library and found an old newspaper article on Romani musicians coming to Cairns early in the 1900s to play their squeeze boxes and some old photos of Romanies working in the cane fields and livery stables around the local area. The museum combined all this with the Romani history and the holocaust, as over 1.5 million Romanies died in WW2. There were other display boards featuring Romani music and food, as well as a display cabinet with Romani ornaments and artifacts. There was even a mannequin dressed in traditional Romani clothes and Romani music playing in the background. It was such a popular exhibit, the director left it in the museum for six months, instead of the two he had intended.

While living in Cairns, Yvonne was contacted by a man from the Romani community in Perth, WA. He told her it would be good for the Romani cause if they could work together. Yvonne thought, no more plugging away alone as was so often the case. He also spoke of getting a Romani school started and teaching Romani, as the young Romanies would not know their language otherwise. Here again was an opportunity for her children to learn and for her to work alongside the other Roma, so the intrepid family set off, yet again, on another trip for the Romani cause. Perth was a mixture of successes and disappointments for Yvonne. Even though she managed to organize a three day Romani exhibit and co hosted a weekly Romani radio program, it became evident to her that the Romanies she had come all the way across Australia to work with had little interest in what Yvonne was trying to achieve for the Romanies. There was a lot of in-fighting between the different Romani communities and nothing had been done by them to actually promote Romani culture and

history to the public. There was a lot of talking but no action. Yvonne and family eventually moved back to the east coast of Australia where she continues to educate the public about her culture.

Yvonne tells her readers that as more and more people understand Romani culture, then things will slowly improve for them. She hopes other Romanies will do the same and speak up about their culture.

'We've survived for a 1000 years,' she says, and to her, that means time is our friend. 'It's on our side, we are still here, but we can't sit and rest. We must keep educating the public in any way we can.'

Yvonne believes that persistence will pay off and that one day, her culture won't be victimized anymore. 'Tell them who you are. Don't be afraid,' is her motto.

Take time out to read this warrior-like Romani woman's book. It's thought provoking, enjoyable and gets the message across with passion in an entertaining way, without sounding 'preachy'

Review by Geoff Bryan