

TRADITIONAL VALUES

For journalist and photographer **Sebastian Hesse-Kastein**, minority groups hold a fascination. When he discovered the Irish Travellers, with their unique culture and traditions, he knew he had to document their lives. Elizabeth Roberts reports



At dawn on 19 October 2011 police and bailiffs moved in on the Dale Farm site in Essex. The eviction of around 80 families of Travellers who had lived there for the past 10 years was swift and successful and attracted considerable media attention. One journalist, Sebastian Hesse-Kastein, had a particular interest in the event.

For the past two and a half years he had followed the fate of the Irish Travellers, getting to know and relate to them and documenting their lives with his camera. 'When I first came across the news story, I had no idea that this group of people existed,' he explains. 'I just went along, quite naively, to check it out. And I was really astonished to find a nomadic group of people that hadn't merged with the Roma

and other better known nomads in Europe. They had maintained their traditional culture and language – they speak Irish, a very old fashioned type of Gallic. I became completely fascinated by this parallel world to modern society. They were resistant to technology, such as mobile phones and computers, and lived their lives as they had done for generations. Of course, that has its downside in that there are people who can't read or write.'

His relationship with the Irish Travellers took time to build up but it began with a lucky break. On his first visit he was standing outside the camp wondering how he could get to speak to someone, when the police drove up in a van. They wanted to know who he was, and when he explained his purpose they told him to hop in the van and they would take him to a key person on the site who would talk to him. >





As a highly experienced journalist – he was at the time foreign correspondent for a leading German newspaper, seconded in the UK – he knew that trust would not be immediately forthcoming and would take time to build up. ‘I knew I had to be patient, talk to people and gain their trust,’ he says. ‘I didn’t take my camera at this stage – it was about my tenth visit when I first took it.’

Along with this careful approach, Sebastian found an ally in the Gypsy Council of England who were very helpful and supportive of what he was doing. ‘They’re an important group, not ideological at all, but very realistic and down to earth people,’ he says.

As he got to know the Travellers and their culture he followed them to the horse fairs that are central to their society. ‘The Irish Travellers are a relatively large group who migrated from Ireland some time ago and the vast majority now live in the UK, which is why the horse fairs like Appleby in Yorkshire and Stow in the Wold are in England not in Ireland,’ he explains.

He soon discovered other, smaller, horse fairs such as Barnet in London, which has had a Royal Charter since 1588, and which is held, virtually unnoticed by the settled community. He also found that, while horse trading was the focus of the fair, it also gave the Travellers a chance to meet up and socialise – particularly the young ones.

Gradually they got used to him photographing them and individuals often asked him to take their picture. He would later return with a print for them. ‘I always ask,’ he says, ‘I never take an image without asking. When I first starting going to the fairs, I had no idea what to expect – would they mind, would they be friendly? But the word soon spread and I had lots of requests.’

Using a Leica and black & white film, he could work quickly and

unobtrusively, keeping mostly to a 35mm lens, with occasional back-up from a 28 or 50mm. He later scanned the negs and edited heavily. ‘If I went to a horse fair for the day and got four or five good shots, that was good,’ he says. ‘I try to record what I see and get close to the community and learn as much as I can about them. I hope this is reflected in my pictures.’

By Christmas 2012 he was close to ending the project. His secondment in the UK was over and he was leaving for a three-month stay in Spain to work on an exhibition and book, which will be out in the summer. ‘I have to work with what I have,’ he says. ‘But that doesn’t mean I can’t come back. The Dale Farm story is over but it would be interesting to see what happens to the Travellers in years to come, whether they survive. They are convinced they will – they say: “We’ll always be around”. Things might change – the women and children no longer travel but stay at the sites, but the men do jobs all over Europe – they go to Spain to do maintenance work, to Germany to sell horses, or Norway to do odd jobs. They’re not stupid, they have professions – they’re good handymen, and some are even lawyers and doctors.’

For Sebastian, this project has been part of his wider interest in minority groups. ‘Everywhere there are these pockets of people. I find it fascinating in a world where if you’re in Cape Town, Buenos Aires or London, everything seems the same, our cultural diversity is disappearing – we’re losing something.’

But, as a journalist and photographer, Sebastian is aware that he is in a privileged position, with access to many places and people that most would not have. Through his news reporting and through his photography he believes he can make a small difference, a contribution to a greater understand of the world we live in. >







▣ *No Place to Call Home: Gypsies, Travellers and the Road Beyond Dale Farm* by Katharine Quarmby, with images by Sebastian Hess-Kastein, will be published this summer by Oneworld Publications.

B+W