

Most of the residents of Cserdi, a Hungarian village, are Roma. **László Bogdán** has led them on a transformation.



TIBOR KRAUSZ

AT WORK: László Bogdán, the mayor of Cserdi, Hungary, meets with villagers in his office. A sign there reads, 'Yes, you're responsible for yourself.'

By Tibor Krausz / Correspondent

LÁSZLÓ BOGDÁN, HUNGARY
 László Bogdán doesn't enjoy his fame much. "I feel like a monkey in a zoo," he says with characteristic bluntness. "I'm like an exotic animal everyone wants to see."

Journalists, politicians, and even foreign diplomats have been flocking to see Mr. Bogdán in Cserdi, a village in southern Hungary where he's the mayor. He's been spearheading a dramatic do-it-yourself transformation among the village's 426 residents, most of whom belong to the ethnic Roma minority.

The "Cserdi miracle," as it's been dubbed, has made the mayor famous nationwide. He is a regular on television shows and gives speeches far and wide, which recently included remarks at the United Nations in New York.

These days Cserdi looks like other villages in Baranya County. Neat brick houses with flowering acacias out front are set among rolling fields of rapeseed and wheat. The village also boasts several sprawling greenhouses where villagers

tend to bell peppers, potatoes, and more.

A decade ago, it was a different picture: tumbledown hovels and other signs of ruinous poverty. Many homes didn't even have bathrooms.

But the worst was the crime. Cserdi was notorious for it, having one of Hungary's highest crime rates. There were some 600 crimes a year: robberies, burglaries,

'My children do better than I did.'

— **Hajnalka Bogdán**, mother of five in Cserdi, Hungary, who has little education, but whose children are all performing well in school

drunken fistfights, cases of domestic abuse. Barely anyone worked.

"No one stopped here," says Gizella Bogdán, a jovial grandmother who works in the greenhouses. (Bogdán is a common surname among Hungary's Roma.) "People just drove through, and the village kids

threw stones at cars."

But when Mr. Bogdán began taking on the mantle of a traditional "voivode" (chief) of sorts more than a decade ago, he started setting a different tone. He's worked to instill a sense of self-worth in the villagers while also countering common prejudices about the Roma. And he's led by example, routinely getting down and dirty in the greenhouses to help with the duties.

Bogdán has his share of critics, owing to his coarse language and his tactics, which include sorting through people's trash to see if they've spent their incomes wisely. But productivity and quality of life have shot up in the village, while crime has plummeted.

Bogdán shares the credit for those successes. "All I do is create expectations [for a better life]," he says. "People can do the rest themselves."

Bogdán himself grew up in grinding poverty in Cserdi. He didn't get a pair of shoes he could call his own until he was 13. He went hungry for days, often feeling faint.

▶ NEXT PAGE

Locals scavenged in carcass disposal pits for meat and stole from neighboring villages. “We might steal 300 chickens in one night. Why should I deny it?” Bogdán says. “But we felt ashamed when we ate them. When you live like that, you’re full of fear and shame. People hated us.”

But it wasn’t the sideways glances from ethnic Hungarians that troubled him. It was their refusal to accept him. “For a while I didn’t even realize I wasn’t a ‘real’ Hungarian,” he recounts. “People called us names, but I didn’t know what they meant.”

In Hungary, where “Gypsy” is used as a casual term of abuse, being one can be a social death sentence. The Roma make up as much as a tenth of the nation’s population, but they continue to be viewed by many Hungarians as permanent outsiders.

“When Gábor Vona says he loves this country, many people cheer,” Bogdán observes, referring to the leader of a populist far-right party known for strident anti-Gypsy rhetoric. “When I say it, they jeer.”

That, more than anything, has motivated him: He wants to show that people’s worth isn’t in their skin color. He also wants to show Roma everywhere that they can improve their lot on their own. “Yes, you’re responsible for yourself” declares a sign pinned to a doorway in his office.

Upon being elected mayor in 2006, Bogdán, who completed only three years of formal schooling but is a restless autodidact, set about helping villagers understand the power of that dictum. Once he settled in, he closed down the village pub. Then he took the bars off the windows of local government offices to show people he trusted them not to break in. “We haven’t had a single burglary since,” he says.

When two local heavies confronted him over shutting down the pub, he handled them the “Gypsy way.” “I tied them to a tree,” Bogdán says. “I’m not that strong, but I never back down.”

Last year there were only six burglaries in Cserdi, and doors can now safely be left unlocked. “If I learn a local Gypsy commits a crime, I’ll take him to the police station myself,” Bogdán insists. Once he turned in his own aunt for shoplifting.

To show teenage boys what lay in store if they pursued a life of crime, he took them on visits to prisons. “We went in all tough,” he says. “We came out all meek.”

The mayor also runs summer schools and camps to keep youngsters from loitering. He’s launched a campaign to warn local girls against teenage pregnancy and

introduced initiatives to keep them from dropping out of school.

“My children do better than I did,” attests Hajnalka Bogdán, a mother of five who first gave birth at 16. She has little education, but all her children are doing well in school. Two of them are among the 17 local youths who are studying in high schools. There were once none.

Buoyed by such successes, Mr. Bogdán, who lives alone and sleeps only a few hours a night, remains relentless. Sometimes cajoling villagers like a friend, other times badgering them like a martinet, he gets them to find jobs, help renovate each other’s houses, and build bathrooms for those without one.

Cserdi is now thriving. The villagers, who used to pilfer wood from forests, have now planted a 42-acre forest, and they’ve launched a small pickling business called Lasipe (“goodness” in the Romani language). They’re also selling Gypsy-style “romburgers,” made with a traditional vegetable ragout.

Bogdán encourages them to give to other poor people, which they do regularly in other communities by distributing vegetables from Cserdi’s greenhouses. “It feels good to give,” says Ms. Bogdán, the grandmother. The mayor adds: “Once we stole from people. Now we want to give to them.”

Politically, he’s remained fiercely independent and refuses to accept financial help. “I won’t be anyone’s doll and shake my behind at them,” he says.



His penchant for such earthy expressions has opened him up to charges of misogyny, anti-gay prejudice, and racism. He shrugs it off. “I don’t mean to insult anyone,” he says. “But I have to speak bluntly so my people will understand.”

Bogdán hasn’t endeared himself to many Roma leaders, either. He’s accused them of embezzling European Union development

How to take action

UniversalGiving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects are vetted by UniversalGiving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause. Below are links to three groups aiding children:

■ **Globe Aware** (<http://bit.ly/AwareSustain>) has a mission that includes working with children in slums and other disadvantaged youths. Take action: Help fight poverty in India (<http://bit.ly/PovertyFight>).

■ **Plan International USA** (<http://bit.ly/PlanIntUSA>) is part of a global network working with communities in developing countries to end the cycle of poverty for children. Take action: Aid in providing proof of identity for those without birth certificates (<http://bit.ly/birthcertif>).

■ **Foundation for International Medical Relief of Children** (<http://bit.ly/MedReliefIntl>) aims to improve pediatric and maternal health in the developing world. Take action: Volunteer for this organization in Uganda (<http://bit.ly/VolUganda>).

funds earmarked for impoverished Roma communities. He wants state-sponsored Roma organizations dismantled and grassroots community empowerment projects like his replicated elsewhere. He receives death threats regularly.

But he also has his fans. “He’s an exceptional character,” says András Biró, a veteran Roma rights advocate in Budapest, the Hungarian capital. “What he’s achieved is remarkable, especially because there are no other [Gypsy leaders] like him.” It’s commendable, he adds, that Bogdán not only speaks out against Roma stereotypes but also seeks to address the behaviors among the Roma that fuel those stereotypes.

“We can’t just blame others for our own failures,” Bogdán notes. Yet he’s mindful of the evils of prejudice. Outside his office he’s created a memorial to the Roma victims of the Holocaust.

Bogdán is also mindful of what Cserdi’s villagers want and need. In his office, unspooled rolls of craft paper hang from the ceiling and are pasted on the walls. On each, villagers have penned their answers to questions he’s been asking them.

To the question “What makes you proud?,” one villager has written: “Many Hungarians think we’re incapable of improvement. We’ve proved them wrong.” ■

► **MORE STORIES** NEXT PAGE