

Marpod, in Lent 2021

*Dear friends,*

*Sokeres* – this is the Romani greeting our friends use, with the accent on the last syllable. A large sign on the door of the community hall in Marpod also reads *Sokeres*. In this town we have established our building yard, including a training farm and a carpentry shop, the pottery shop has begun work, and we have moved here with a small group. The mayor welcomed us with open arms and straightaway offered us a large room in a vacant house on the main street. Here a Social Centre will come into being, a cooperation of Marpod with ELIJAH. The sign on the door asks every passer-by: *Sokeres* – how are you?

Some people in this town are not thriving. They have no real roofs over their heads, or they dwell in small crowded rooms. Our social worker Lili goes to visit them every day. When I accompany her through the „Cartier vesel“ – the Merry Quarter – I am almost overwhelmed by the distress and the many requests. The neighbourhood is called „merry“ because at first sight it makes a jolly and untroubled impression. One can always hear loud music. Many people are at home – not on vacation but because there is no work to be had. Again, our task is to help them fix up their houses. Here the window panes are broken, there the roof is leaky or a room would need to be added to another hut. And all over one has to struggle through ankle-deep mud.

Lili visits the families with children first and foremost. „Get out here, pack your things and come with me!“, she calls into the huts. During the COVID pandemic the school was closed for weeks on end, and even now it only opens for a few hours a day. It is difficult to keep to distancing rules. Instruction was converted to „ollein“, as everyone calls it. How is that supposed to work when you lack a tablet as well as an internet connection? And when the parents do not make sure that their children study because they themselves are illiterate and cannot read the clock?

Lili has succeeded in getting many children to come with her. She leads her flock to the town hall. In the cellar there is a library in which most probably no-one has ever read a book, until we moved in with the children. The mayor put the room at our disposal for the time until the project „Social Centre Sokeres“ is ready.

In the library, we have set up old computers with whose help the children can attend the online instruction. They do homework and lessons together. Afterwards there are games. Emilia, a volunteer from Austria who came to us after graduating from school, is full of ideas for those. Her hobby is football, which especially wows the boys. They have never seen a female centre forward! Emilia had the courage to travel to Romania in spite of COVID and quarantine. Understandably, many other candidates cancelled. I must admire this young woman who fights, cooks and prays with us. She sets a wonderful example for the children, and for future volunteers too, I hope.

By the summer, we will have transformed the community building into our Social Centre. It still requires lavatories and a bathroom, a stove and heating. We will reserve a consulting room for the parents. Thus, we and the young people can take a good step forward together.

*Sokeres?* Our goal is that many Roma children will soon answer: *Mai beschau!* I'm fine! Dear friends, I hope that you too can say the same of yourselves. This year, Easter shall free us of the shackles of the pandemic. I wish that you and your families may experience a resurrection.

With thanks and greetings,

*P. Georg Sporschill SJ*