

## THE 100 FACES OF POVERTY

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Illés, Márton (ed.) (2009) *100 legszegényebb* (The Poorest 100) Budapest, Kurt Lewin Alapítvány

Information about our world and society cannot be obtained through numbers only, especially because a significant segment of our current knowledge is conveyed through pictures and other visual signs. These signs complement our verbal codes, and are capable of showing the human face of social realities such as poverty, which is hidden behind a maze of various charts and diagrams.

The concept of “*The Poorest 100*” was inspired by the annually-published list of the 100 richest persons; this unique sociographic report became a rephrasing of that list. If a list can be created for the 100 most affluent persons in Hungary, why shouldn’t a ‘contra-list’ of the 100 poorest be presented? If one can view a list of the 100 most affluent persons in Hungary, why shouldn’t one be able to read about the poorest 100 in another volume? “*Who are they? What made them who they are? How can we show solidarity with them and how can we help them to help themselves?*” These are some of the questions raised by the publisher.

This extraordinary list was published by the Kurt Lewin Foundation, an independent non-profit organisation. Many professional photographers, journalists and support professionals worked on the volume. Ever since its establishment fifteen years ago, the foundation has aimed to promote democracy and tolerance, and combat prejudice and social stereotypes in the areas of education, research, and media.

The original list ranks the richest 100 persons according to the value of their private assets; this volume, however, applies a unique approach toward poverty which moves beyond the usual categories related to this field, such as ‘poverty line’ or ‘relative income position’. In this context, shortage and

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deprivation are the main criteria, as poverty – according to the introduction of a book by Márton Illés – does not simply mean being short of money, but may refer to all kinds of needs, such as material deprivation, physical or cultural defencelessness, addiction, or lack of family relationships. The book aims to draw attention to the similarities between the various faces of poverty, the importance of familiarity, and our common responsibilities concerning poverty.

The book describes typical life paths and social traps, and features socio-photographs which represent various social relationships. The poor student, the penniless, the seller of the body, the disabled, those without family, the convict, the addict, the homeless, and the forgotten – we can read about them all in these 100 pages and can see them in the 100 pictures. They all show their names, faces, poses, and stories with confidence, so we can get to know, through their life stories, the lives of those living under the most difficult circumstances in our society; we can see the countless faces of poverty, and we can see how defenceless and powerless people can become from being caught up in various social traps.

The book goes beyond the strictly understood term of poverty and gives us a look at the various forms of deprivation and exclusion. The chapters are divided by various kinds of situations. The first chapter introduces the lives of disadvantaged pupils, mostly Roma, the victims of segregation in the education system ('Poor Pupils'). The edited interviews printed next to the pictures reveal, among other things, how an alternative theatre group and a school successfully integrate special needs' students into the education system, and provides talented, diligent, and motivated youths, who lack a stable family background, with artistic education.

The following chapters present the hopeless situation of penniless and retired old pensioners ('Penniless'), and the shocking stories of prostitutes and daily labourers selling their bodies ('Body Sellers'). People struggling to survive who live off pensions, benefits, or public work usually skimp on food, and their only sources of happiness are their children and grandchildren. The need to make money makes many people turn to prostitution. For example, Mariann, a young girl, wanted to become a researcher so she could excel among her peers. She studied night and day, but did not win a scholarship at school and could not rely on any support from home, so she decided to sell her body. Not being able to get back into school, she remained on the streets. She said that "no stranger can compensate me with money."

The next chapter, 'The Disabled,' presents the lives of those living with disabilities, and the subsequent chapter, 'The Familyless,' introduces the stories of people living without a family, those living in state care, and those

hoping to adopt a child as part of a gay couple. You can learn from this chapter that young victims of hereditary or acquired diseases have a higher chance of living a full life than older people in the same situation. The latter usually live life trapped in their homes or wheelchairs, while the former will probably work, do sports, and create artistic works. Children growing up without a family, those relegated to foster homes, or those from broken families will suffer from the lack of a home life their entire lives. All it takes is a police report from a neighbour to have a loved and admired father taken away from his son by the public guardianship authority. This kind of trauma caused an alcoholic father who raised his son alone to lose ground and die. Here is a moving statement from the son: *"I loved my father very much, I did not mind that he drank. (...) It would have been good to grow up having my father with me. I don't think he would have died if he had me for him. He was about to kick the habit when I was taken from him"*.

Runaways ('The Runaway') and prisoners ('The Convict') are among the poorest, being most similar to those living without shelter ('The Homeless'), and to those losing ground due to some kind of addiction ('The Addict'). The book ends with the stories of the forgotten, with statements by old persons whose homes were sold by their neighbours against their will, or who are living in homes under care, and for whom nobody is waiting ('The Forgotten' chapter). In this last part the pictures are accompanied by expert interviews with colleagues from the Maltese Charity Service. The interviews reveal that it is possible to improve one's quality of life, even under such circumstances: *"The patients we visited had a connection with the world outside the hospital again. They felt that there was someone thinking about them and for whom they were important. Adélka, for example, had been simply watching the roof above her bed for years. (...) Once, when left alone for just a short time, she stood and followed us on uncertain feet and said: 'I am here.' We could not believe our eyes."*

As the visual elements of the book play a central role, the quality and the symbolic and sociographic power of the pictures is of extreme importance. While the 100 portraits and genre pictures were taken by different photographers and reflect several different approaches, all the pictures bear the characteristics of classic Hungarian socio-photography: they are static pictures with a centrally-aligned composition. The subjects usually assume a pose in front of the camera. Unnatural gestures, closed compositions, and rigid bodies facing the camera are ordinary characteristics of the pictures, thereby making apparent the intentionality behind the deliberate composition, and the cooperation between the subject and the photographer. Several pictures, such as the picture of a dining hall for the disabled, of an empty swing, or

of a baby carriage, indicate the extremes and the mean ratio. The distance of the photographer is apparent, reducing the dynamism and details of the pictures, but enhancing the common “the-way-I-see-it” experience we are all so familiar with, thus making it easier for the viewer to relate to the topic. The photographers did not utilise any artificial lighting: they present common people under normal circumstances in natural light, taking the risk of leaving certain picture details in the shadows.

The apparent unity of the pictures and texts is one of the strengths of the book. The personal stories magnify the effect of the pictures, while taking the pictures and texts separately would not have been as powerful. On the contrary, the editing and fading of borders during the post-processing phase emphasise the editorial concept behind the book: all it takes is a shot of the face to tell an entire story. All the tools serve the purpose of emphasising and generalising the theme, and of rendering the situations timeless in order to send the message that anybody, at anytime, or anywhere, could wind up in the same situation. One-third of the pictures do not show people - rather surroundings and other distinctive objects. Depictions of the surroundings symbolise the dominant power of the respective spaces and situations (e.g., disability, addiction), an effect which is often reached by the photographer taking the picture from an elevated position.

The following pictures deserve special attention due to their sensitivity and symbolic power: the picture of a former student, now a 35-year-old prostitute, in front of a black and white wall which bears painted handprints; the look of an 18-year-old single mother holding her child in her hands at the window of a women’s shelter with the reflection of a huge family house in the window; the picture of a forgotten old woman lying on a bed in the foetal position, photographed without face, look, or name, and the picture of a majestic old lady in a hat, living in a home of the retired.

The professional interpretative and cohesive power of the book is reached through conscious and thematic editing, corresponding detailed interviews, as well as notes from social workers in the field and other short notes such as this one: “*According to Roma human rights groups, there are some four hundred segregated schools in Hungary. (...) The estimated number of prostitutes working in Hungary is 20,000 – and the estimated number of clients is 100,000. (...) Nearly 50% of people with reduced working abilities have jobs in Western Europe. This figure is only 10% in Hungary.*”

This book, as well as the related national series of exhibitions, and the ongoing online photo competition on the same subject, are all aimed at

drawing attention to those living on the periphery of Hungarian society<sup>2</sup>. The travelling exhibition features the visual material from the book – the collection is available – and related workshops cover the difficulties of the visual representation of prejudice and disadvantaged people. At each stage of the exhibitions, one person appearing in the pictures is invited to talk about the various forms of poverty. The whole book is available online. The corresponding website is also running a photo competition entitled “The Poorest 100 – With Your Eyes,” aiming to allow everyone to show the defencelessness of persons living around them. The eligible themes are the members, lives, and surroundings of disadvantaged groups, as well as the various forms of material poverty, and cultural, health, social, and other kinds of deprivation.

Though attempts similar to the aforementioned sociographic photo project have already been made in Hungary<sup>3</sup>, this is designed as a gap-filling project which aims to draw attention to, reveal facts, communicate information, and provide visual materials concerning poverty, while also successfully avoiding the limits of easy gags and populist demagoguery. The sociographic significance of the project is undeniable, and the series of lives presented could be expanded – the tragic current events of economic and natural disasters pushing people to the periphery of society are sad aspects which are missing from the book. The book contains an informative list of civil organisations, but should also include a table of contents of the chapters, as well as a short introduction of the professionals, journalists, and photographers participating in the project. Providing further professional and thematic details, references to facts and recommended sources for expanding the collection would also be advantageous. Nevertheless, the book is a novel, well prepared, effective and exciting work, providing useful information both to professionals and laymen.

<sup>2</sup> [www.100legszegegyebb.hu](http://www.100legszegegyebb.hu) – available on 31 July 2010

<sup>3</sup> *Inside out* (1997–1998) – <http://www.c3.hu/collection/homeless/> – as available on 31 July 2010  
Fodor Káta (ed.): *Menni, menni, muszáj menni...Szegénységről, gyerekekről, romákról* (Go, go, one should go...On poverty, children and Roma), Budapest, Napkút Kiadó, 2010