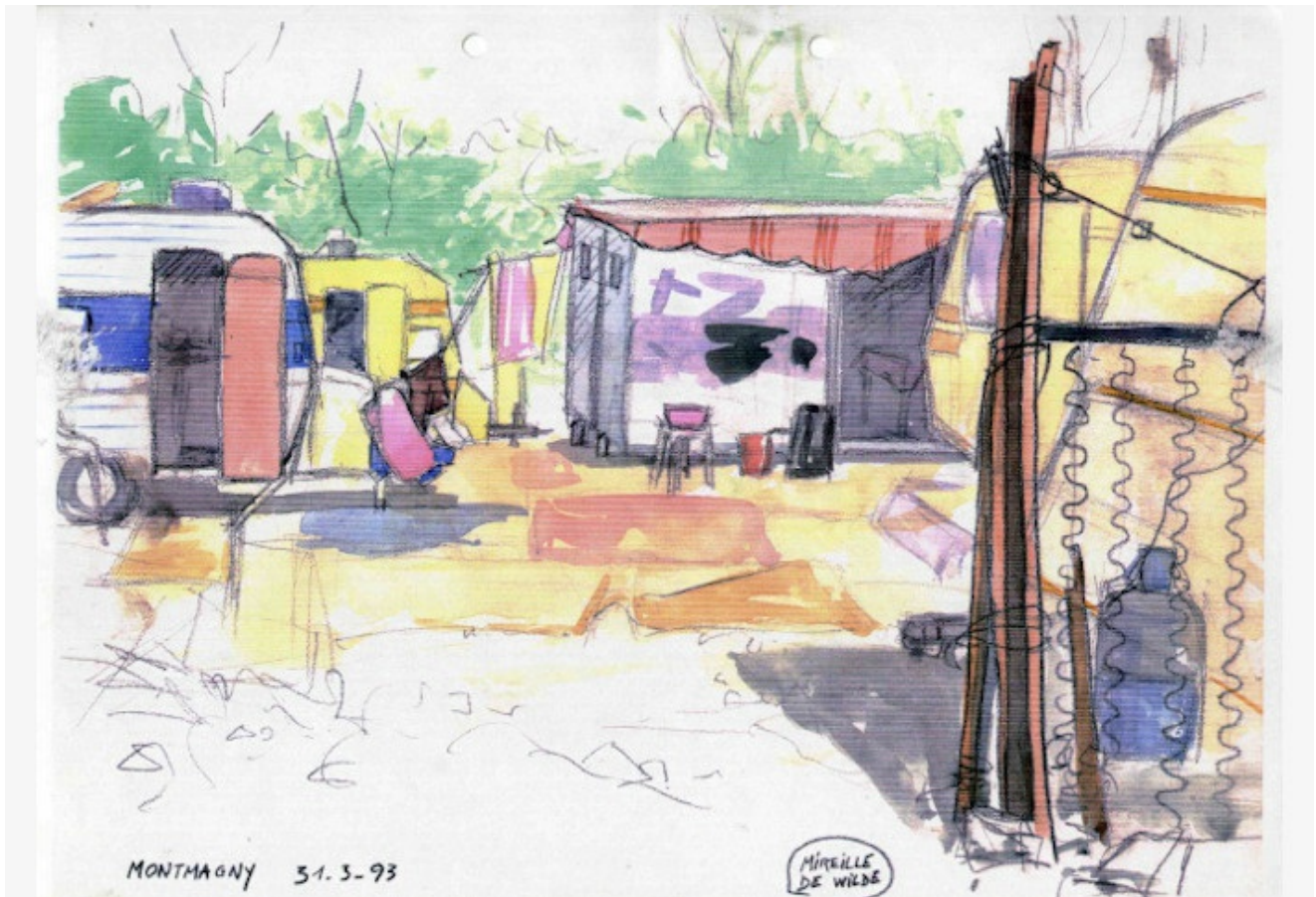


KEEPING YOUR DISTANCE? IT'S NOT ALWAYS EASY!



By Janine Béchet

On March 17 2020, France went into lockdown for two months. Janine Béchet is an [ATD Volunteer Corps member](#) who has been in contact with Romani people for many years. During the lockdown Janine was able to stay in contact with Romani families who had found temporary housing. During this time, she also acted as a link between the Romani families and state and health organizations.

Virus, pandemic, the quarantine declared, meant everyone stayed at home. On Saturday 21st March a doctor calls me, "Mrs Gianina?" [as the Romani families call Janine] Right away he asked:

- "Are you well?"

- "Yes, I am!"

- "You have been in contact with Mrs. Maria Foanari. She has COVID-19, so you need to take all proper precautions."

He starts to tell me the precautions, before catching himself:

- "But you know all of this."

- "Yes, of course."

- "Well, if you have symptoms, call me."

- "Do you think that Mrs. Foanari can be reached?"

- "I don't think, I know!"

At approximately 9 o'clock on March 23rd came a call from Mr. Gérard, director of a local Romani support association. We do not know each other, but I know the association. He tells me that he is mandated by the regional Health Agency to check on Mrs. Foanari and asks me, "Would you come and see her with me?"

That afternoon we went, leaving the car on the side of the road and continuing on a path. When we crossed a field, avoiding the puddles and abandoned objects, all the kids were excited and came running yelling, "Gianina, Gianina!" In front of Maria's house, built of collected odds and ends, a neighbour, with the help of a shovel, was sealing the bottom of their door with mud. "It is for the rats," he said, "they pass here." His wife added, "And there are plenty of rats here! They run around everywhere." At the door, with Mr. Gérard behind, I call out, "Is there anyone home?"

- "Come in, Gianina!"

- "I'm not alone!"

- "Come in, come in!"

I open the door. Inside there is a sofa, a big bed, and a buffet...the home is heated by a stove with a big can mounted on a pipe. In the stove we can see the flames. It is nice outside. The entire family is there, nine people. "Sit down," says a man. "Do you want a coffee?"

I introduce us. Everyone looks at Mr. Gérard, the new person who first asked Mrs. Foanari how she is doing. Mr. Gérard explains the purpose of our visit and reminds everyone about the precautions to take. He then asks about the doctor's prescription. Silence. Everyone watches as he takes the prescription and copies it into his notebook.

Maria is sitting on the bed, legs extended. Her granddaughter of three months is lying on her legs chattering without complaining, and draws smiles from the faces around her.

The director does not lose his seriousness. Calmly, he explains that everyone needs to “keep their distance,” and stay away. “You are contagious for 14 days.” Finally, he finishes with, “the girl on your lap, it’s not very good...”

Cristina, her mother, reacts immediately: “I’ll take her.” With her daughter in her arms, she embraces and cuddles her.

Once the coffee is finished, we are done. Normally there are even more of us together in Maria’s small room. Maria’s sister and her nephew were not here today. How are we supposed to “keep our distance” when there are eleven in less than nine square feet?

Maria finishes by saying: “See, I am the oldest! With all these people, there is only one who is sick. And there have not been any since. A miracle...”