

Petr Torak 0:00  
Good morning Artur, and.

Artur Conka 0:06  
Good morning

Petr Torak 0:07  
Thank you very much for taking part in this short interview for motivation kind of platform for young people to access it and to see the positive Roma role models living in the UK.

Artur Conka 0:20  
Pleasure

Petr Torak 0:21  
Thank you, so to start having this interview, could you please tell us a little bit about yourself where you're from and what was your experience? Like, from back home?

Artur Conka 0:32  
Yeah, sure. Um, so I'm originally from Slovakia. I was born in eastern part of Slovakia Kosice. I was born in I lived in a community called Lunik 9 one of the largest Roma communities in in Europe at the time. So we were brought up with, you know, I mean, for my for my experience in poverty. However, my parents generation, they lived in luxury, because there was communism, and they had work and everything like that. So it's a very different time. So I was I was born, I was born in a different decade, where there was a lot of poverty. So it was like a favour split for them for their experience, you know, between having, having everything and then not having a lot when, when the Velvet Revolution happened, and subsequently communism broke up. So yeah, so basically, I was born there. And I remember for it to be quite as a child really, feral. I did go to school, although not very long. Because then my father and my mother decided to move to Germany, from there, and have a better life. So then we moved to Germany when I was about about 4 or 5. And then my brother was born there, was born in Germany. And were living there for about two years. And then we decided then to move to the Netherlands for a year. And from there, we then moved to France. And then Belgium, because our extended families were kind of moving as well. So we were following, and then eventually settling in the UK in 1998. And then we we come, I was seven, eight years old when I arrived in UK. So our first place we actually stayed was in was in Tottenham, funny enough in a bed and breakfast before then we were before we were then moved by the Council to Turnpike lane in North London, which we then stayed with our, with our uncle for about six months. And so yeah, and and then yeah, and since then, you know, I've been here for 20 was 23 years now? God has been 23 years. Yeah. And you have come to school here. I did my degree here. I've travelled all over the world with my work. So it's been it's been a very progressive 23 years so far. Yeah.

Petr Torak 3:16  
Wow, it's a very amazing journey. And you're well travelled then. So going back to Slovakia, let's say you said you were very young when you were a small when you left the Slovakia but have you or your family actually talks stopped spoken to about any difficulties that they have faced back there?

Artur Conka 3:35  
Oh yeah, they did. I mean, they faced employment, insecurity, discrimination, racism, the whole lot, even even. I mean, I didn't at the time when I was a kid, because I didn't realise what what institutional discrimination was in education. But later on, in life, I realised it was because we were separated from the rest of the kids. So all the Roma kids were in the separate classes. So their life was a bit a lot difficult after communism, and developed revolution happen. So everything was fine. Because before before communism, so during the communist era, they had worked, they had jobs, that livelihoods, they had, you know, good housing, you know, they were well off. My dad had his own business, and he was employing 20 people during the communist era. So he was, you know, there he was making a lot of money. I think I think it then kind of started collapsing off for after that. So as I say, it's a very different experience for them because they had both of they had two experiences of the both of both

coins. You know, one being in having everything and the other for not.

Petr Torak 4:46  
Yeah, I see very,

Artur Conka 4:48  
For my experience as a kid though I you know, I didn't know what poverty was. I didn't know what's living in in a block of flats with no windows and, and in sheer squalor and damp, and then having garbage and human waste and the other side, you know, on the opposite side of the building, I didn't know what poverty was until I got older.

Petr Torak 5:17  
Okay. And so then you to moved eventually into the UK.

Artur Conka 5:22  
Yeah

Petr Torak 5:22  
So you went through this in order primary, secondary school.

Artur Conka 5:26  
Yeah

Petr Torak 5:26  
And then you said, you've also done your degree, can you tell me more about your what was it to like study at university?

Artur Conka 5:35  
Studying at university was great, because it really well give you independence, which is the most important thing. Because I think it's really important for young adults to actually go and leave the nest and have their own independence, because it allows you to kind of develop as a human being. It allows you to explore different things, it gives you opportunities to make good friends, lifelong friends, you know, allows you to expand your knowledge about the rest of the world. So my experience has always been positive, it was hard work. Because, you know, studying, I took studying very seriously because, you know, I wouldn't have been given the chance, I don't think if I'd still lived in Slovakia, of study that is degree level, or going to university. So, you know, the part that the opportunities were really, you know, I didn't take that for granted. And, yeah, and then, through my education system in to my degree, it was, it was hard, but it was good. I mean, I studied photography, and the knowledge and filmmaking and allowed me to kind of do what I'm doing now. You know, there was a lot of support as well, I mean, the great thing is with with studying in the UK, is you're not, per se discriminated because of your ethnicity or gender, you really don't have that. You know, you don't, you don't really see it. You know, there's a lot of mixed cultural mixing in universities, which is really important. For example, I'm now lecturing at university. And we've got students who work is within the teams are all from different parts of the world. You know, but they've all got this very common goal is to study this degree that they all want to do, and they want to work as a team. So I think, I think that's what university gave me gave me, it gave me the not just a practical skill and educational skills, they gave me the life skills that I needed. So I would highly recommend it. I always recommend anyone to go to university. But you know, the great thing about this country is that, you know, there are so many opportunities that you don't realise until you get older, as no petard, that there is so many opportunities that I could have done differently. You know, I could have done my apprenticeship, I could have done a what skill based qualification, I wouldn't have to have done a degree at university. And I just don't think that would have been the case. If I still lived in Slovakia. I don't think they would have had that programme in place. I could be wrong. No, but I think this country really prioritising people giving opportunities in whatever they want to do. Surprisingly, because it you know, be must be most people think, well, the UK is very institutionally hierarchical class based system by in some cases it is because you know, if you have money, but that's anywhere in the world, isn't that? Right?

So I think I think from an from a private, you know, state educational perspective, I think you have always have opportunities to do whatever you want. There's no way there's no barriers. You know, if you fail, your GCSE can retake it. If you fail your a levels, you can retake it. Where else in the world that you have the opportunity, not money, money, right? And if you think okay, well, I don't want to do my animals, but I want to do electrical engineering, for example, I can go to college and do it, isn't it? There's so many opportunities. And and I think young students really need to understand that. Because there's no other opportunities either anywhere else in the world. I know.

Petr Torak 9:08

Absolutely. I completely agree with you. And what about your family? How have they perceived the fact that you are going into uni?

Artur Conka 9:15

And we're very happy and I'm very proud and happy. I'm the only ones who have done in that degree in my family. So they're very happy, yeah, I mean, I mean, Now obviously, my, my cousins and my nephews have all gone to universities and nieces. So but from Yeah, I mean, from my perspective, I think were very proud of me going to university there is they've always been open mind that education has always been the most important thing. That's it because in some families there isn't, you know, some families don't have that priority, their priorities for the kids to do their basic level of education and go to work and make money, which is understandable. Right. You know, if you, you know, there's opportunities in terms of entrepreneurship and able to set up your own business to make money. Definitely. And I support that. But I also think that it's important for children to, to actually complete it at least complete their GCSEs that's the most important thing, complete your GCSE, then you can know 16, 17 your world is your oyster, go out and do whatever you want.

Petr Torak 10:19

Absolutely and as you said, the beauty is that in the UK the opportunity is you can study University in the later stage as well. So you don't have to be 18.

Artur Conka 10:26

Of Course

Petr Torak 10:26

You can you can do it at the age of 60. You know, so there's always this open window of opportunity.

Artur Conka 10:34

Yeah right.

Petr Torak 10:35

Okay, so you've completed your degree? And what about your work? How has your degree lead you to?

Artur Conka 10:42

Well, as I said, it's led me to travel around the world. It's led me to be working in my field as a director, and a commercial producer. So I get commercials now. And with big name clients, I also direct as well and film. So it's led me to to what I'm doing now. But I mean, it's hard work, you know, it's not it's not easy. Being what I do. Now, it's taken me a long time to get where I am. And I'm still still trying to get where I need to go. I think studying any art form of degree, it's, it's a real challenge, because I think it takes a lot longer to go up the pay scale the ladder, the career success than you are, if you are studying to be an engineer or a doctor or whatever, you know, I think it would be a lot easier for people to climb up that sort of social economic ladder than it is for for artists, basically. So it's been hard. But it's been a it's been a good challenge. However, there are there were days and weeks and months, I thought, well, I don't think I should have done a degree. I think I should have just done something different. But I stuck at it. Because I realised that I spent 10 years of my life working towards where I am, why should I waste and just start all over again.

Petr Torak 12:03

Absolutely perseverance is important thing.

Petr Torak 12:06

Yeah, quite right

Petr Torak 12:06

So that's what I tell our young people, so. So you mentioned that you've travelled through your work, what was the most exciting destination that you visited?

Artur Conka 12:17

Ah, well, before COVID, it was probably Boston, in the United States at Harvard University. I was invited to do a presentation on the role of media, with my colleague at the time, George Ely. So we presented this this case about the importance of representation within us with us within the media. So that was really exciting. And then, and then, like, a year, and then, as well as that year, I didn't want to put a pestilence, to century opinion, diversity for a summer course, and a presentation as well. And so yeah, I mean, I go back and forth, basically, this year, we would have meant I was meant to have been gone back to Budapest. And I was meant to have gone back to Berlin, from the for the film festivals as well. But that again, that got cancelled. So I mean, with my work, yeah, I do travel. But I like to travel more. I like to visit the Asian South Asian countries be would be amazing. And go back to United States now. Because it's, you know, the new president and everything. I think, I think I'll be going back next year, probably I will, I want to go to probably go to LA, Los Angeles first, as well, to kind of build my career there. At least a year to kind of like build my clients and career, I think that would be really good for my progress.

Petr Torak 13:55

And this is, I think, so amazing, you know, that I always try to also show the young people that we work with that, you know, the our mind and reward has opened so much. You know, I remember when I was a young kid, you know, for me to go from liberec when I grew up to Prague, which is about an hour drive, most like, wow, you know, like, that was the end of the world. You know, for me, that was the most exciting thing I imagine. And now suddenly, young people have gotten to appreciate and I see it's changing, you know, on social media, I see young people travelling to Turkey and Egypt and all the lots of exciting countries. So it is changing, but the world will open to all those opportunities.

Artur Conka 14:33

I agree. I agree. The world is open to so many opportunities because it's more you know, it's not we're not living in a totalitarian society anymore. The borders are open so we're allowed to travel anywhere we want. You know, that's the thing I tried to say to students is like, you know, you, you have a passport and you know, you can travel anywhere you want to just, you know, just Do it go and do it really do it safely. That's the most important thing. But you know, yo go do it and travel.

Petr Torak 15:09

Few questions about kind of the Roma aspect. So you are Roma from Slovakia? What, what does it mean to you to be a Roma?

Artur Conka 15:23

Well, from a cultural perspective is really interesting, ethnically as well, because it is a, you know, a very niche, interesting, fascinating group of people that have travelled from, from India into Europe and around the world. The language is very unique, it's mixed between so many different languages. It's relatively being written down recently. So that the, there's still a lot to learn about our language. It's almost like a Yeah, it's like, it's like a group of anthropologists have just found a new species of human beings in a sense, you know, they just want to study it and get an understand the cultural diversity of it, and it's pretty much like that. The the academia is very, very new. And, you know, it's only been in, in the last sort of 10, 15 years, 20 years of academia that people have started to write about, Ian Hancock, Dr. Adrian Marsh, God so many that have now we have recently talked about our

culture, and how diverse it is and how intricate it is within the European and Eastern European, South, Western or whatever it wherever in the world how intricate we are. An example is, there was a study done that there were a group of Japanese Roma living in Japan that immigrated. So, so that's that's how diverse our culture is. But then obviously, there's also the flip side of it, that the whole racism stigmatisation, etc, which has been built around for the last five, 600 years by Europeans. So I think that still needs to be worked on. And unfortunately, that's always been the case for any minority in that era of time. Because, you know, predominantly, at that period of time, slave trade was very prominent in cultural society. So white Westerners would always see below anyone that wasn't that colour and cultural, ethnicity, etc. So so but in a sense, we are also quite a very close community, I think, because there isn't that many of us around the world. Right? So I think it's important to kind of stick together and share each other's knowledge, friendship, etc. So yeah, so I can I guess that's what what's this? What I feel like to be a Roma however, you know, I've been here for so long. I also feel I'm not really Slovak anymore. Which is, which is interesting, because I've never really been back enough to feel like it's my country anymore.

Petr Torak 18:25

Hmm, yeah, I guess. Many people talk about this split identity between, you know, being British ,Roma ,slovak. Yeah, it's all part of our identity. But yes, some are more prominent than the others.

Artur Conka 18:41

I think for me, it's more Germany's my home because I lived there when I was a kid. So I've got very good memories of it. It's still I think I consider that to be my home because I again, I travelled there that often as well. So, yeah.

Petr Torak 18:56

I see. Okay. And do you still speak Romanos?

Artur Conka 19:00

Yeah, yes. So, Speaker thoroughly.

Petr Torak 19:05

Okay, so last question. You've already obviously had, you know, many kind of inspiration kind of tips for young people in terms of education. But what would be your last kind of recommendation to all those young people that will be listening to this video?

Artur Conka 19:23

Work hard. That's what I'll say work hard and study hard. Doesn't matter if you want to go to university and I still have to work hard. Have that goal and just always think about that goal.

Petr Torak 19:37

Absolutely, I completely agree with you. And it's a very powerful message because that's, that's exactly what we say to young people, you know, get, you know, think of your goal, where you want to be and, you know, and then just follow the way you know, and if you don't, if there are friends that will tell you, Oh, don't do this or if there's if there are different obstacles, you will just concentrate On your goal.

Artur Conka 20:00

Yeah, quite right

Petr Torak 20:03

So completely agree, Artur thank you very much and hope to see you again soon

Petr Torak 20:11

You will