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## Ways of Looking at Roma<sup>1</sup> : The Case of Czechoslovakia (1975)

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### THE IMPORTANCE OF A HISTORICAL APPROACH

#### *The Relevance of Historical Experience*

Class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from and usually opposed to theirs.... Class-consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.<sup>2</sup>

What Thompson writes about class is equally relevant to minority communities if the positions of being a minority and also a dominated stratum or class coincide, as they so often do. If anything, historical experience can often play an even more crucial role for such minorities in helping them understand their present situation.

The situation of Roma in what is now Czechoslovakia has long been that of a dominated minority. Being a Rom meant for many centuries seeing the world as hostile; as a place where gaining a livelihood was a precarious business, where you were always liable to be beaten up and driven away, where perhaps you and your family might even be drowned, hanged at the crossroads, or burned alive in your hut. It didn't happen all the time, of course, but it had happened in the not too distant past and might happen again perhaps quite soon – who could know?

Even in “good times,” being a Rom meant seeing perhaps half of your children die young, of hunger and disease. To spare a weak child the prolonged agony of an inevitable death, nomadic Roma in Czechoslovakia used to plunge their newborn babies into icy water. If they could survive that, they had a chance on the road.

All this must have been given these people a rather special way of looking at the world.

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<sup>1</sup> “Rom“ (plural “Roma” is the name used by these people to refer to themselves. Names like the more familiar “Gypsy” and so on were coined by non-Roma.

<sup>2</sup> Thompson 1968: 9, 10.

#### *Nomadism and Persecution*

When writing about Roma in general; two central problems always arise and are, of course, linked – nomadism and persecution.

Despite presenting a wealth of comparative historical data, Jean-Paul Clébert is still able to write that “the Gypsy is primarily and above all else a nomad. His dispersion throughout the world is due less to historical or political necessities than to his own nature.”<sup>3</sup>

Where settling has occurred, it is explained as being due to degeneration.

The sedentary Gypsies are generally “excluded” people, groups or families or couples who have founded a family and who have been banned from the clans or made “marimé,” that is, “unclean,” because of serious violations of the Tradition.<sup>4</sup>

When you realize that the countries with the largest numbers of Roma are in Eastern Europe and that the majority there are “sedentary” and therefore that Clébert’s “groups or families or couples” in fact number hundreds of thousands of people, you begin to feel a little uneasy with this explanation. Was it really like that? Who is excluding who? Perhaps Clébert is more a self appointed custodian of the “authentic Gypsy culture” as he conceives of it rather than a chronicler of choices actually made by Roma in concrete historical situations?

In his careful assessment of the problems facing Europe’s Roma today, Grattan Puxon writes of anti-Romani prejudice as “a Europe-wide phenomenon which permeates all strata of society, regardless of political, ethical or religious systems.”<sup>5</sup> As a way of stressing the extent and continuity of anti-Roman hostility this is excellent, but it also carries the suggestion that persecution of Roma is somehow undifferentiated and consequently inexplicable in historical terms. If no matter what the conditions, the situation, it was always there, how can you start trying to understand it? And what would be the point anyway, for perhaps it will always be there?

A more fruitful approach to both these problems would seem to be to probe rather the variety of Romani experience in specific historical situations rather than stressing its universal nature. For example: Under what conditions did Roma settle? In what circumstances were Roma persecuted in certain ways?

General answers are difficult to provide but even particular answers are not easy to give, largely because of the way in which much previous data have been presented. Writers on history almost invariably, and understandably, ignore Roma. Writers on Roma frequently, and unforgivably, ignored history. They wrote myopically about

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<sup>3</sup> Clébert 1967: 246.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Puxon 1973.

these people almost as if the Roma were the sole arbiters of their fate whereas, as a small and vulnerable minority, it was far more likely that their history would be more a tale of what was done to them than of what they themselves had done. Even the tale of what was done to them must be seen in a broad context, for most authorities had far more pressing problems to deal with than complaints against a few Roma, so when they did act against the Roma perhaps they were playing a deeper game. The possibility is worth bearing in mind.

In an important sense the study of Roma is worthwhile not so much, for its own sake but for what it reveals about the nature of the societies in which they lived and still live.

To take just one example, the romantic stereotype of the Gypsy, as an exotic and noble primitive, wandering unconstrained as the mood takes her or him, tells us very little about the ways Roma managed to exist in England during the nineteenth century. Yet it comes as a shock to realize that this stereotype was cherished by members of a class which collectively owed its comfortable existence (including the leisure to fantasize about “Gypsy freedom”) to the systematic imposition of long hours of daily, repetitive, soul-destroying factory labor on other human beings. This was not perceived as a contradiction.

Fanon (a Black) commented aptly on a comparable romanticizing of Blacks:

To us, the man who adores the Negro is as “sick” as the man who abominates him. ... In the absolute, the black is no more to be loved than the Czech, and truly what is to be done is to set man free.<sup>6</sup>

#### *The Important Case of Czechoslovakia*

The territory now known as Czechoslovakia should be significant for those interested in Romani history for at least four main reasons. First, it straddles the frontiers of what might be termed the “Western” and “Eastern” areas of Romani development in Europe.

In the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia, the development pattern is similar to those of Germany, France, and England, where Roma were more usually seen as useless pests by the authorities, who ignored them or legislated savagely to expel them and deter new immigration. In these areas the Roma remained largely nomadic.

In Slovakia, however, which until 1918 was part of the Hungarian lands, the pattern resembles those of the Danube lands and the Balkans, where Roma were often seen as useful and from their first appearance were permitted, encouraged, and even forced to settle. They were also taxed by local authorities or the state. It is these countries that have the larger Romani populations.

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<sup>6</sup> Fanon 1970: 8.

It is not suggested of course that all Roma or all authorities always conformed to these patterns, but that as a model these rough generalizations prove helpful in understanding the varied trends of Romani history in Europe, including developments in particular countries since the Second World War. For this reason a fairly detailed account is given of Romani history in Czech lands and especially Slovakia, the homeland of virtually all of contemporary Czechoslovakia’s adult Roma.

Probably the general differences between “Western” and “Eastern” development are related to more fundamental modes of economic development (capitalist industrialization feudal ruralism) and related methods of state formation (nation-states/multinational states), but this would need careful demonstration.

Second, on this territory were made probably two of the most widespread and systematic attempts to assimilate Roma – by the Hapsburg monarchs Maria Theresa and Joseph II in the second half of the eighteenth century, and by the government of socialist Czechoslovakia from 1958 onward.

Third, we are fortunate in having fairly full documentation of both these attempts as well as having a number of general studies of Romani history in Czechoslovakia. At present the most outstanding work is Emília Horváthová’s excellent and painstaking *Cigáni na Slovensku*,<sup>7</sup> which the following section is greatly indebted.

Finally, Roma are relatively well integrated into Czechoslovak society, especially in comparison with the capitalist countries of Western Europe. For those interested in speculating on possible future developments of Romani communities, the situation in Czechoslovakia, where the majority of Roma participate in the labor market and where there is a small but growing Romani intelligentsia who still see themselves as Roma, should prove stimulating.

## **THE HISTORY OF ROMA ON CZECHOSLOVAK TERRITORY UNTIL 1945**

### *Roma in the Czech Lands before 1918*

Shortly after the first undisputed reference to Roma in the Czech lands (1399), a large group arrived from the east in 1417 who were later to arouse the attention of Western Europe partly because of their numbers, novelty, and apparent nobility of their leaders but also since they had been granted impressive letters of safe-conduct. After passing through Bohemia<sup>8</sup> they divided and various subgroups traveled to north Germany, Bavaria, Rome, Paris, and Barcelona. They were magicians, fortune-tellers, horse dealers, and apparently petty thieves – occupations compatible with, or even requiring, nomadism.

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<sup>7</sup> Horváthová 1964.

<sup>8</sup> Hence the French term “bohémien” for Roma.

Their obvious difference from Roma previously settled in Eastern Europe has usually prompted the explanation that they were simply a different tribe of Roma. Štampach, a noted Czech Gypsologist, believed that they had not come from the Balkans but directly from Asia Minor with the Turks. However, a straightforward account of their appearance as the unplanned intrusion of a primitive nomadic tribe practising their traditional occupations is inadequate, as Horváthová has convincingly argued, because the newcomers seem more, rather than less, sophisticated than most Roma in the Balkans at that time.

It almost appears as if they made a careful market survey before their arrival, for they knew Western European languages and soon possessed accurate maps and almanacs indicating fairs<sup>9</sup> and they included craftsmen who could make seals and write official letters. Even more remarkable was their initial success in obtaining powerful letters from such rulers as the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund<sup>10</sup> and Pope Martin V by means of an explanation of their origin and nomadism which was not only plausible but even meritorious in terms of current European values: they claimed to be religious penitents.

Poissonier<sup>11</sup> even suggested that the apparent great difference in wealth between Romani leaders and followers was not so much a reflection of internal social divisions but a collective tactic to give these groups a better negotiating position. Although highly speculative, this view is partially supported by the fact that in France at least Roma imitated aspects of the beggars' guilds, which were, in turn, a parody of feudal society, having their own courts, kings, social divisions, and systems of justice.

Whatever the origin of these Roma, it is important to recognize that in any case contemporary conditions in Western Europe probably would not have permitted them to follow the pattern of Roma in Eastern Europe. In particular the more developed craft industries were better organized to resist penetration by intruders. Likewise, prospects for settling would have been bleak during a period when hordes of beggars, discharged soldiers, and peddlers often wandered the roads.<sup>12</sup>

Although legislation expelling Roma as alleged Turkish spies had been enacted at the end of the fifteenth century in neighboring German lands, it was not until the mid-sixteenth century that similar measures were taken in the Czech lands, when Roma were accused of aiding the Turks by starting the fires which broke out in Prague in 1541. Official lethargy in implementing such laws is evident from their frequent renewal and despite a not unrealistic fear of hired incendiaries, it is probable that the legislation was intended largely as a sop to public fears, a convenient way of demonstrating that the authorities were taking some positive action against the growing Turkish threat. At times popular feeling must have been extreme, for in 1556

it was necessary to forbid the drowning of Romani women and children, yet during the same period there are records of alms and letters of commendation granted to Roma by town councils. Although some Roma were killed or driven out, others continued to travel the Czech lands supplying their usual services of horse trading, fortune-telling, and the like.

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century is known as the "Age of Darkness" to the Czechs, for the devastation of the Thirty Years War had left the country depopulated, plague-ridden, starving, and continually troubled by serf uprisings and robber bands recruited from discharged soldiers. Meanwhile the Turks (and French) mounted new and more menacing attacks. It was a terrible period for Roma.

Once more the activities of foreign-paid incendiaries, including Roma, in Prague led to the expulsion of Roma, but this time they were accompanied by mass killings. Whole groups were hanged, shot, or drowned and to discourage further immigration scores of Romani bodies hung from trees along frontier roads. Later, signs were erected depicting gallows and bearing the inscription: "This is the penalty for Gypsies entering Bohemia."<sup>13</sup> Youths and girls under eighteen were mutilated; in Bohemia the right ear was cut off, in Moravia and Silesia, the left.

This period of savage persecution came to an end some time after the accession of Maria Theresa to the Hapsburg throne. Starting in 1761 she and her successor, Joseph II, made a systematic attempt to assimilate all Roma by settling them throughout the Hapsburg lands and making serfs of them by prohibiting them from nomadism, horse dealing, having their own leaders, and even from speaking their own language. Probably the most drastic measure was the forcible removal of children from their parents, fostering them with non-Roma to ensure a Christian upbringing.

Compared with what had gone before, these measures were enlightened, being based on the principle that integration would succeed only by settling, employing, and educating the Roma, or, as they were officially renamed, *Neubauern* (new farmers) or *Ujmagyar* (new Hungarians). In the Czech lands several colonies were founded to provide adequate accommodation, with apparently little enduring effect, although one colony in South Moravia remained until the 1930s. But in any case the total number of Roma involved was relatively small; in Slovakia, however, the situation was quite different.

The nineteenth century, like the fifteenth, is remarkable for its lack of reports of Roma. Attempts to assimilate them lapsed with Joseph II's death in 1790, and they were left to wander around the rapidly industrializing Czech lands, apparently causing little more than occasional local aggravation.

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<sup>9</sup> Clébert 1967: 68.

<sup>10</sup> At Spiš castle in Slovakia.

<sup>11</sup> Poissonier 1855, quoted in Horváthová 1964: 48.

<sup>12</sup> Clébert 1967: 63, 134.

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<sup>13</sup> Jamnická-Šmerglová 1955: 50, 51. Similar treatment was sometimes given to vagrants (Horváthová 1964: 57).

Gypsies often visited the villages, the men selling chains, axes and gimlets, the women telling the fortunes of senseless women from cards or palms and casting spells.<sup>14</sup>

In 1887, however, a “modern” policy of official registration and harassment was introduced. Similar measures were adopted by other Western European countries (for example, Bavaria and France).

#### *Roma in Slovakia before 1918*

Many early Romani immigrants to the Balkans (for example, Serbia) managed to integrate themselves into the wider society, often forming their own quarters in towns and specializing in a limited number of occupations like other ethnic minorities. The commonest early settlement pattern in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Slovakia, however, was around feudal castles. There are frequent references to Roma as castle musicians and metalworkers, but an even more common occupation was that of soldier, and Hungarian kings commented favorably on Romani troops in 1476, 1487, 1492, and 1496.

Not all Roma settled, for fifteenth-century sources refer to nomadic bands who lived by fortune-telling, magical healing, and theft. Social differentiation was therefore extreme among Roma from their first appearance in Slovakia, for while some lived the precarious life of robbers in the woods, others sought service and protection with the ruling nobility and were fortunate that conditions permitted their skills to be utilized. However, the isolation of each newly settled group of Roma from the Slovak and Hungarian peasantry made them vulnerable to manipulation by their protectors, a situation which feudal lords were not slow to exploit.

In 1514 a major Hungarian peasant uprising was crushed by the Palatine Ján Zápolský. The peasant leader was gruesomely executed by being seated on a heated iron throne and having a red-hot iron crown placed on his head. These torture implements were forged by a group of Romani smiths.

Zápolský was later (1526) an unsuccessful contender for the throne of Hungary and to revenge himself on the Slovak towns which had supported his opponent, he used Roma to set fire (in 1534) to four important East Slovak towns. Some of the Romani incendiaries were caught and confessed that they had orders to burn a further nine Slovak towns.

Such manipulations of Roma in class struggles must have worsened relations with peasants and burghers, but evidently not to the extent of preventing further settlement during the sixteenth century. Roma were generally granted permission to settle beyond the outskirts of towns and villages, where they often made simple implements for local farmers, weapons for night watchmen, and so forth. Larger-scale and more profitable metalworking was monopolized by non-Romani craftsmen.

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<sup>14</sup> Drobil, quoted in Horváthová 1964: 73.

As in the Czech lands conditions rapidly deteriorated during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as a consequence of the Thirty Years War. There was an influx of vagrants and nomadic Roma fleeing the savage measures of the Czech lands, which in turn provoked retaliatory legislation in Slovakia. Regional authorities passed numerous measures which although referring formally to all Roma, were usually only enforced against “foreign” nomadic groups. The difference between the Czech lands and Slovakia is well illustrated by the signs erected on the borders depicting the execution of Roma. In the Czech lands this fate awaited any Rom who entered the country, while in Slovakia the threat was to “all nomadic Gypsies who did not settle within three weeks.”<sup>15</sup>

This differential treatment of Roma cannot be explained by greater devastation in the Czech lands, for Slovakia too was a battleground in the strange triangular struggle between Turks, Hungarians, and Hapsburgs, further complicated by peasant uprisings. However, an economic explanation is strongly supported by contemporary documents showing the extensive taxation of Roma in Slovakia would have meant a loss of revenue; this deterrent did not apply in the Czech lands.

The accession of Maria Theresa did not lead to any dramatic change in policy toward Roma in the Hungarian lands but rather to an intensification of efforts to assimilate them by settling and employing them under an altered administrative structure. In 1758 the Imperial Council made local Diets of gentry responsible for Roma in their area, reserving a coordinating function for itself.

In spite of a wealth of statistics, it is difficult to assess the success of the policy for, as J. H. Schwicker demonstrated, Diets deliberately falsified their progress reports in the safe knowledge that the Imperial Council had no way of independently evaluating their work.<sup>16</sup>

In any case they enjoyed considerable autonomy, for “Hungary, even in periods of absolutism, was administered by elected committees [Diets] of the country gentry, and these would never operate measures which ran against their privileges.”<sup>17</sup>

There is good reason to suppose that the policy was not entirely welcome to the gentry, for although it might appear advantageous to landowners to gain new labor power and feudal rent, this would only be the case if nomadic Roma could be successfully settled and put to work. The initial prohibitively high costs (new housing and training as well as regular payments to foster parents of young Romani children) were to be met entirely by the landowner, while the first rewards went to the Imperial coffers in the form of tax. In view of these factors it is likely that many gentry made a careful assessment of investment prospects before trying to settle groups of nomadic Roma; those who appeared a bad risk were simply moved on, despite Council instructions to admit them to serfs’ villages.

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<sup>15</sup> Horváthová 1964: 113.

<sup>16</sup> Schwicker 1883: 69, quoted in Horváthová 1964: 100.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor 1964: 17.

Nor is it likely that many Roma were enthusiastic about the policy, for while it is probable that some nomads would have welcomed the opportunity to settle (as they had previously), the harsh conditions, such as losing their children, would have been quite unacceptable. In fact Schwicker found statistical evidence of movement of Roma from regions where the policy was more vigorously enforced to those which were more lax. As well as the nomads, however, those Roma already settled opposed the policy since they probably saw any increase of their numbers in a particular place as a threat to their precarious social position and also to their livelihood through increased competition. They occasionally petitioned Diets to move bands of nomadic Roma from the district, usually with justifying accusations of theft.

The simplistic assessment that “Maria Theresa had very good feelings [but]...a complete lack of understanding in regard to Gypsies and their way of life,”<sup>18</sup> fails to appreciate that many Roma were not at all opposed to settling per se, but, more important, overlooks the practical considerations behind the policy. Allowing Maria Theresa her “good feelings,” her efforts must also be seen on a different level, as yet another move in the continuous struggle by the Hapsburgs to extract money from their wayward Hungarian lands. As an important part of their jealously guarded autonomy, the gentry paid no direct imperial taxes, although their serfs and the commoners did. To raise money from these lands, therefore, Maria Theresa was forced to use a variety of indirect means, including the imposition of heavy taxes on imports to Hungary. To maximize these taxes Hungarian home industry was intentionally neglected.<sup>19</sup>

While the gentry were prepared to sacrifice the economic development of their country to maintain their own privileged position, they actively resisted more direct ways of raising imperial revenues, and therefore a failure of the policy toward Roma was probably as much nomadic Roma.

As in the industrializing Czech lands, the nineteenth century is remarkable for the lack of official attention paid to Roma in Slovakia. The country remained predominantly rural under the control of the gentry, but there was a little industrialization (mainly mining) in the east, although not enough to create much hope of a better life among the Slovak peasantry. “Over half a million Slovaks, nearly one-fourth of the population, emigrated to the United States in the quarter-century preceding the First World War. Others streamed to Canada, South America and Russia.”<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, the numbers of Roma had greatly increased and an 1893 census revealed 36,000 Roma in Slovakia, of whom 2,000 were seminomadic and only 600 nomadic (less than 2 percent). Even though a certain number of nomads must have

escaped the census, it is clear that by this time the vast majority of Roma were already settled.

#### *Roma in Czechoslovakia 1918-1945*

Although Roma were recognized as a nationality in 1921, little was done to alleviate their poverty. This is hardly surprising, since Slovakia and Ruthenia (now part of Ukraine), where most of them lived, were left undeveloped and in general “were regarded more or less like colonies”<sup>21</sup> during the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1939).

In 1924 a Slovak local authority complained: “The penalty of imprisonment has no effect on them, because imprisonment only improves their living conditions. It often happens that a Gypsy without resources commits a crime only to escape the pangs of hunger.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet the situation of many peasants was often little better, especially in Slovakia where some were forced to become itinerant peddlers and artisans, often working for food, not cash, and sometimes simply bartering fruit for grain. It was against such itinerants, as well as against nomadic Roma, that the 1927 law controlling nomadism was directed. This was based on the old 1887 regulations and required all officially permitted nomads to be registered and carry a nomad’s pass, which could be withdrawn at any time. Apparently 36,696 such passes were issued up to 1940<sup>23</sup> although a 1927 census of Roma in Slovakia had shown 60,315 to be settled and 1,877 nomadic.

Some newspapers justified the law as a new and humane approach, but a more reliable picture of the situation of Roma in these times of general unemployment and hunger is given by other contemporary events such as the 1928 Povedim pogrom where, in reprisal for pilfering crops from the fields, Slovak villagers wounded eighteen and killed six Roma-including two young children. Commenting on this massacre, the influential daily *Slovák* wrote, “the Povedim case can be characterized as a citizens’ revolt against Gypsy life. In this there are the roots of democracy.”<sup>24</sup>

A year later a Romani robber band was accused of murder and cannibalism. The second charge was eventually dropped but not before the press had inflamed public opinion with sensational and inaccurate coverage reminiscent of its role at a 1782 trial where forty Roma were tortured and executed, being accused of identical crimes, before an investigation ordered by Joseph II discovered that all of the supposed victims were still alive.

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<sup>18</sup> Clébert 1967: 102.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor 1964: 19.

<sup>20</sup> Straka 1964: 77.

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<sup>21</sup> Nováček 1968: 22.

<sup>22</sup> Horváthová 1964: 155.

<sup>23</sup> Jamnická-Šmerglová 1955: 65.

<sup>24</sup> Nováček 1968: 25.

While there is no evidence to suggest that the hostility against Roma was deliberately fomented by the government, nevertheless there appeared little official resistance to such developments and perhaps even some elements within the government welcomed them to divert some of the acute public bitterness over social and economic conditions. It is important to notice that since 1926 the dominant party in the bourgeois coalition had been the A P which eventually took office in 1932. Since this party represented the interests of predominantly landowners and farmers, it was unlikely to have had much sympathy for Roma.

It is a commonplace to point to the manipulation of minorities as scapegoats in times of severe crisis. As might be expected, therefore, pogroms against Roma were not limited to Czechoslovakia during this period but occurred also in Austria, France, and Germany.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the generally bleak outlook it would be wrong to see the situation as entirely hopeless during this period for remarkable, if isolated, efforts were made to integrate Roma, especially in the field of education. After 1925 special schools for Roma were established in several towns in Ruthenia and East Slovakia, and in 1929 a group of Slovak doctors founded what was later known as the “Society for the Study and Solutions of the Gypsy Problem.” As well as concerning itself with health matters, the society organized theatrical and musical performances by Roma in principal regional theatres in Slovakia and inspired the formation of a flourishing Romani football club which toured abroad.

The events of the Second World War are simple to relate, but less easy to forget for the Roma.

Soon after the start of the war, a register of Roma (1940) showed 60,000 in Slovakia, while only 6,500 (about 11 percent) lived in the Czech lands.<sup>26</sup> Although some Roma in the Czech lands managed to escape the register, these figures reflect the overwhelming prewar concentration of Roma in Slovakia.<sup>27</sup>

Of those 6,500 “Czech” Roma only a few hundred returned from the Nazi concentration camps to which they were sent,<sup>28</sup> while under the puppet Slovak state Roma had been more fortunate. Some had been sent to labor camps; there had been occasional pogroms, burning Roma alive in their huts and machine-gunning them as they burst out with their clothes aflame; fascist Slovak Hlinka Guards had delighted in beating them up – but there had been no mass extermination. The war had ended too soon for that.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>26</sup> Jamnická-Šmergllová 1955: 80.

<sup>27</sup> However, a 1939 police report estimates this figure at 13,000. (Kenrick and Puxon 1972: 135).

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

## ROMANI EQUALITY-BY ASSIMILATION OR INTEGRATION

### *The “Gypsy Problem” and the 1958 Assimilation Campaign*

Immediately after the war what can only be described as a mass migration began as thousands of Roma, often as families, left their isolated settlements in rural Slovakia for the Czech lands. There they settled mainly in the industrial conurbations of north Moravia and north Bohemia, in the larger towns, and in the border areas from which the former inhabitants, Sudeten Germans, had been expelled in 1946. For the first time Roma were participating in the general labor market on a mass scale, usually as unskilled factory or construction workers.

By 1947 of a total Romani population of 101,190, there were 16,752 in the Czech lands. They comprised over 16 percent, a marked increase over the prewar proportion, although for an obvious reason they were virtually all migrants from Slovakia. It was noted that these new migrants were forming Romani concentrations, or even minor ghettos, in the Czech towns rather than dispersing among non-Roma. Probably this was more the result of Councils’ policy in allocating houses than anything else.

Also there was considerable re-migration to home settlements in Slovakia where conditions began to improve dramatically as migrants invested their earnings in new brick-built family houses.

Meanwhile, an estimated 6,000<sup>29</sup> nomadic Olach Roma (who regarded themselves and were regarded by other Roma as ethnically distinct) still traveled the republic with horses, carts, and tents.

The migration was viewed officially with mixed feelings. On the one hand, it was acknowledged that it was partially a positive response to new opportunities “which they made use of... by taking regular employment and settling permanently,”<sup>30</sup> but on the other hand there were fears that a concentration of Roma, both in their home settlements and in towns, would “perpetuate the backward Gypsy way of life.”

Eventually it was decided in 1958 to mount a massive national campaign to raise the socioeconomic level of the Roma by assimilating them into wider Czechoslovak society. To accelerate this process, a policy aim of maximum dispersal was adopted. However, this could only be achieved by adequate control of migration, and for this reason most major measures there after related directly to population movement.

The timing of the campaign can be explained partly by the fact that the government was previously preoccupied with more important problems, partly by the fact that in the late 1950s Czechoslovakia was preparing for the transition from a People’s Republic to a Socialist Republic (declared in 1960), which entailed, among other things, a cultural revolution. Yet “we would not be able to talk of achieving a

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<sup>29</sup> 1958 estimate.

<sup>30</sup> *Práce mezi cikánským obyvatelstvem* (Prague ÚJPV, 1959) (hereafter cited as “Handbook”).

cultural revolution., if we left the group of our Gypsy citizens with low cultural and living standards.”<sup>31</sup>

To make matters more embarrassing, Roma were becoming increasingly visible largely as a result of migration but also because of their rapid population growth. In 1966 the first really reliable census of Roma showed 221,526 (1.55 percent of the whole population). Another census in the following year showed an annual increase of Third World proportions in the Romani population of between 2.6 and 2.8 percent in contrast to the overall national rate of 0.4 percent, itself one of the lowest rates in the world. Stated another way, in 1967 every eleventh baby born in Czechoslovakia was a Rom.

The campaign started with “Law 74/1958 on the permanent settlement of nomads.” Although this appeared nominally to be aimed at the 6,000 nomadic Olach Roma, a register of nomads compiled in 1959 also included those non-Olach Roma judged by local authorities to be “seminomads” as well as a few non-Roma. Paragraph one of the law stated that

local authorities shall provide comprehensive assistance to persons who lead a nomadic life to enable them to adopt a settled way of life; in particular they are obliged to help such persons in finding suitable employment and accommodation and by educational means to aim at making them orderly working citizens. (Law 74)

This was clearly different from the 1927 laws where the livelihoods of Roma were often removed at a stroke without any alternative being offered.

Registered “nomads,” who numbered between 20,000 and 27,000, had their identity cards stamped and were to be refused employment in any place other than where registered, unless by mutual agreement between local authorities. If they moved without permission, therefore, they were subject to up to three years’ imprisonment as parasites.

The elimination of Olach nomadism appears to have been remarkably effective, although some officials were unprepared for the quick-witted Roma. “What do the comrades from Nitra report?” asked a handbook for local authorities. Nitra reported:

In solving how to settle nomads, we came up against the question of horses. Horses enabled Gypsies to move easily from place to place. We bought them but soon afterwards... [some Gypsies] used this money to acquire new horses from agricultural cooperatives that had a surplus as a result of increased mechanization and were selling them off cheaply. We learned a lesson from this.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> “Handbook,” 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

In a few years, however, it was obvious that Law 74 was singularly ineffective in controlling the movement of “seminomads.” This was because employers needing labor usually turned a blind eye to the regulations but more importantly because nonregistered Roma migrated too. Local authorities were usually unwilling to use their powers to register them, since this involved supervising them and providing them with jobs and accommodation. It was simpler to ignore them.

#### *Postwar Romani Population Movement: Nomadism or Migration?*

“The Gypsy is primarily and above all else a nomad,” we are told. Clébert’s view appears to have been shared by many Czechoslovak administrators, although since the key terms “nomadic” and “wandering” were used without any precise discussion of their meaning,<sup>33</sup> it is difficult to impute any firm theory underlying their use.

The 1958 classification of Roma into “nomadic,” “seminomadic,” and “sedentary” suggests a historical, evolutionary model—a set of progressive stages through which sections of Romani society passed on their road to “ultimate assimilation.” Yet the study of Romani history in Slovakia suggests that many Roma settled as long ago as the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In any case, most Roma appear to have been settled by the time of Maria Theresa, and the 1893 census showed less than 2 percent of Slovakia’s 36,000 Roma to be in any way nomadic—and this at a time when nearly a quarter of all Slovaks were emigrating to the United States!

Given this historical development it is absurd to need to discuss “Romani nomadism” any further, but official and popular beliefs about Roma as incorrigible nomads linger on, despite historical evidence to the contrary. It is true that after 1965 government and ministry documents replaced the term “nomadic” with “migrating,” and one major 1965 Government Committee report clearly recognized Romani population movement as rural to urban migration.<sup>34</sup> However, this frank treatment was exceptional and as recently as 1971 a Federal Ministry of Labor report explained Romani population movement by the “historically rooted proneness to nomadism in Gypsies.”

Local government documents are often little better, although a firm grasp of local history might have been expected. Some list Romani settlements in Slovakia allegedly founded in the 1930s yet which local informants, both Romani and non-Romani, remember as already long established in the 1890s and which parish records show to be at least one hundred fifty years old. There they are in the records, the same Romani family names as nowadays. As for the Roma themselves—you ask them: “When did you first settle here?” Shrugs and puzzled looks. “I don’t know – we’ve always been here.”

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<sup>33</sup> Law 74’s definition is little help here: “§2. A nomadic life is led by someone who, whether in a group or individually, wanders from place to place and avoids honest work or makes his living in some disputable way...”

<sup>34</sup> “The departure of the Rom population to industrial centers is an objective process.”

When-after how many years of being settled-do you cease to be “sedentary” and just become “normal”? If you are a Rom, the answer seems to be-Never!

A leading sociologist of migration wrote:

A social group at rest, or a social group in motion (e.g., nomads) tends to remain so unless impelled to change; for with any viable pattern of life a value system is developed to support that pattern. To analyse the migration of Gypsies, for example, in terms of push and pull is entirely inadequate-no better, in fact, than to explain modern western migration, as Herbert Spencer did, in terms of “the restlessness inherited from ancestral nomads.”<sup>35</sup>

Accepting Petersen’s point, if it can be shown that certain Roma have been settled for a long period, the positions are reversed, and it is as inadequate to explain their subsequent movement as “ancestral nomadism” as it is to explain anyone else’s.

In addition to the historical evidence, data from fieldwork strongly support the idea that postwar Romani population movement in Czechoslovakia is a fairly typical case of rural-to-urban migration rather than any resurgence of nomadism.

Particularly relevant is the prominent feature of chain migration, although official documents (and popular opinions) sometimes give the impression that Romani population movement is an aimless swirling over the face of Czechoslovakia, where any destination is as good as any other. This is well illustrated in a joke told about Roma.

<i>Gypsy</i> (buying train tickets)	“Two to Bohemia.”
<i>Booking office clerk</i>	“To where?”
<i>Gypsy</i>	“To Bohemia!”
<i>Clerk</i> (now irritated)	“Yes-but to where exactly?”
<i>Gypsy</i> (turning resignedly to wife)	“You see how stupid these Slovaks are-they haven’t even heard of Bohemia!”

In a recent study of Romani migrants in a Czech city<sup>36</sup> it was clearly demonstrated that certain areas in East Slovakia were heavily overrepresented. Similarly, fieldwork in Romani settlements in Slovakia revealed that for each village there were only two or three main destination areas and that outmigrants originally migrated with relatives and later usually to destinations where relatives were already established.

In fact, there is nothing unique about such migrations and to give one example of this point, much of an account of the migration of Kentucky mountaineers (in no

sense nomads) is equally true of Czechoslovak Roma. In both cases there was chain migration of relatives and considerable movement between source and destination areas.

Many...families facilitate and encourage migration and provide in crises “havens of safety.” Furthermore “branch families” in the new communities provide a socio-psychological “cushion” for the migrant during the transitional phase.<sup>37</sup>

Other comparable factors are that:

(i) The pattern of extended families in the home area is related to the social isolation of these people from wider society.

(ii) Migrants travel direct to industrial centers, avoiding intervening farming areas, and perform unskilled labor.

(iii) Although not a pariah group to the same extent as Roma, Kentucky mountaineers are denigrated as ignorant rural primitives beset with social problems (for example, drunkenness, illiteracy).

(iv) This continued although lessened social isolation in towns has tended to broaden bonds among these migrants, gradually replacing extended family networks by wider regional-based ones.

If this categorization of Romani population movement is correct, the implications are profound, for characteristically the main motive for such migration has been the desire for improved economic and social status. Here emphasis must be placed on the migrants’ comprehension of their previous poor conditions, their perception of the possibility of changing them, and their desire to better themselves, all concretely expressed in the fact of migration, Petersen explained the puzzling paradox that in certain periods few migrants to the United States came from those European countries where conditions were objectively the worst by stressing that poor conditions, in themselves, are insufficient to trigger off migration. Also necessary is some improvement in conditions in the source country to awaken hope in the would-be migrant of something better.<sup>38</sup>

As has been indicated, the history of Roma in Slovakia shows them not so much as nomadic tribes fiercely defending their independence and “tradition” as settled immigrants seeking a securer place in wider society. What happened in Czechoslovakia, then, to change the objective conditions and to raise the hopes of Roma?

The simple answer is the postwar dominance of the Communist Party. This is not theoretic population, it is what many Roma have said – and it makes good sense. In 1927 the Party had opposed the law on nomads and already recruited Romani

<sup>35</sup> Petersen 1970: 50.

<sup>36</sup> Davidová 1970a.

<sup>37</sup> Brown, Schwarzweiler, and Mangalm 1970: 116.

<sup>38</sup> Petersen 1968: 287.



members during the First Republic. Later Roma fought alongside Communist partisans, and the arrival of the Red Army is still remembered with affection – the open friendliness of the soldiers toward them and especially their children. These things are important – the Slovak Hlinka guards had beaten them. A Romani woman expressed it all charmingly: “In the castle nearby lived a miserly lord who treated Roma badly. So God sent the Russian army to punish him and drive him out. I think he lives in Vienna now with his rich relatives.”

The 1944 Košice government program proclaimed that there would be no more discrimination and while the Roma still preserved their deep suspicion, they felt it was worth taking a chance. When Gottwald (the first Communist president) took power in 1948, the main Romani settlement studied in Slovakia almost emptied as migrating families set off for the Czech lands and a new life.

### *The 1965 “Dispersal and Transfer” Scheme and Its Aftermath*

In 1965 a new “Dispersal and Transfer” scheme was introduced to speed up the stagnant dispersal of what were termed “undesirable Gypsy concentrations.” The aim was to replace the continuing “natural migration” by a system of planned population transfers from Romani settlements in Slovakia to parts of the Czech lands with a low density of Roma, that is, to spread them as thinly as possible throughout the Republic. To coordinate the whole operation and Romani affairs in general, a special government committee was established, although it had no powers to control local authorities, only to report to the government on the basis of information supplied to it by local authorities.

Quotas were agreed upon and transfers began. As a Romani spokesperson later expressed it: “They plan how many there should be in each village: horses, cows, and Gypsies.”<sup>39</sup> In practice the plan proved difficult to operate and ground to a virtual standstill by the end of 1968. In 1966 the transfer plan was 85 percent fulfilled, in 1967 51 percent, and in 1968 only 20 percent. In all only 494 Gypsy families were transferred from Slovakia to the Czech lands in the period 1966-1968. Meanwhile, control of natural migration had again proved inadequate, for in the same period, 1,096 unplanned family migrations took place.<sup>40</sup>

There had been an attempt to modify Law 74 to make unplanned migration virtually illegal, but the Parliamentary Committee for Constitutional Law had decided: “the proposed solution of restricting the movement of the Gypsy population in fact limits their freedom of residence and therefore is not in harmony with article 31 of the Constitution.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Hübschmannová 1968.

<sup>40</sup> Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs 1969.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Davidová 1970a: 306.

Despite this hostile ruling, the government committee’s 1996 “Principles for Organizing Dispersal and Transfer” instructed local authorities that “every unplanned, unorganized, unconfirmed transfer of a Gypsy person or family should be considered as undesirable migration of Gypsy persons and consequently refused. The person or county who arranged the transfer should be charged the costs of returning the Gypsy person or family to the original place of residence.”<sup>42</sup> Or in other words, if you were a Rom and not among those 494 families transferred as part of planned quotas, you could not move at all between the Czech lands and Slovakia-in theory anyway.

Little more than a year later, the same government committee reported critically that “local authorities protect themselves . . . by refusing to register these citizens [that is, Romani migrants as permanent residents. However, the Home Office directive on Law 54/1959Sb. about population registration specifically states that registration as a permanent resident may not be made dependent on any other conditions, especially accommodation, economic, financial, and so forth.”<sup>43</sup> Yet these local authorities were only following government committee instructions in refusing unplanned migrants; the committee seemed unaware that it was its own “Principles for Organizing Dispersal and Transfer” which were in conflict with the Home Office directive.

The collapse of the “Dispersal and Transfer” scheme is difficult to explain-not because of the lack of causes but rather their abundance. However, comparison with the previous Hapsburg assimilation attempt is instructive, for then, as now, the main opposition probably came not from the Roma but from local authorities.

Many Roma were eager to exchange their overcrowded wooden houses in Slovakia for houses and flats in the Czech lands. Although they wanted to move to an industrial center where they had relatives and not to some bureaucratically decided agricultural area where they knew no one, these Romani misgivings were not the determining factor. Crucial to the scheme were the Czech local authorities, for they were to provide accommodation for the incoming Roma. Usually skeptical to begin with and soon further discouraged by the cynical way in which some Slovak local authorities unloaded their most troublesome Roma onto them, these authorities began to refuse transfers, pleading lack of adequate accommodation. They often had some justification, for the overall transfer plan had been prepared with little regard for the national building program, but in any case the government committee, like its Hapsburg predecessor, did not have the resources to evaluate independently such reports or the power to control the reporting local authorities.

With the ending of transfers in 1968, the government committee was disbanded and the whole policy toward Roma reconsidered. As a result permission was given for Roma to form their own sociocultural associations and organize economic

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*: 296.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*: 295.

cooperatives. This was a complete reversal of the 1958 position that socioeconomic equality could only be achieved by assimilating Roma and instead “recognised Romani national consciousness as a valid motivation for self help along the new socialist path.”<sup>44</sup> For a time Roma were treated virtually as a national minority, although never formally recognized as such, but the experiment was short-lived, and in April 1973 all Romani mass organizations were dissolved.

### ***Rom Identity and the “Gypsy Way of Life”***

From 1958 onward official documents frequently referred to “the Gypsy way of life” as a mixture of undesirable remnants of previous social orders, including such elements as nomadism, tribalism, animism, and blood feuds. The 1959 handbook for local authorities declared: “The heavy heritage of the past still stretches like a black cloud over the majority of our Gypsy citizens,” or more prosaically:

As a result of oppression and persecution by the ruling classes, Gypsies were stamped with characteristic features of a way of life and psychological nature which are nowadays an anachronism and must be removed by a process of socialist education.<sup>45</sup>

The argument was that the “Gypsy way of life” (embodying traditions, value systems, and attitudes) which had been formed, or rather deformed, by bitter historical experience, had been carried over into a period and form of society where it had no relevance. Resistance to change was perpetuated merely by the fact that Roma usually lived with other Roma in “undesirable concentrations.” The “Gypsy way of life” was no more than a contagious disease and the remedy was isolation from other sufferers.

Looking at Roma in this way, the authorities naturally saw little point in preserving a separate identity for these people. In any case it was felt to be in their own best interest to assimilate, for:

experience shows that all forms which revive Gypsy national [sic] consciousness, their own special organization and autonomy, preserve the present isolation and separation of Gypsies from the remainder of the population, prevent the penetration of everything progressive from our environment to the life of Gypsies and help conserve the old primitive Gypsy way of life with all its bad habits.<sup>46</sup>

This was the rationale behind the dispersal policy. Yet a theoretical justification was also necessary, for what sort of group were these people?

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<sup>44</sup> Puxon 1973: 13.

<sup>45</sup> “Handbook,” 6.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

How Roma should be characterized is a basic problem that faces all administrators and researchers concerned with them. The former tend to describe them as a social rather than an ethnic group as this gives them a freer hand with policy—they are less likely to be accused of discrimination.<sup>47</sup> In this they are aided by the theoretical confusion of the latter, especially social anthropologists who have pursued an inconclusive search for definitive objective criteria of the ethnic group. Fredrik Barth has recently attacked this whole approach, arguing that the ascriptive aspect is logically prior to any objective characteristics of the ethnic group which, for him, consists in “a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order.”<sup>48</sup>

To some extent the drafting of Law 74 on nomadism could be interpreted as such an administrative attempt to define Czechoslovak Roma (or at least those who migrated) as a social group, for great care was taken to specify a way of life and avoid mentioning the word “Gypsy.” However, the associated ministry directives on implementing the law were not so oblique and soon a solution was found to the problem of designating Roma without referring to them directly in the general adoption of the formula “citizen of Gypsy origin,” which enshrined the contradiction in the official attitude toward them. While Rom or Gypsy was no longer to exist as a valid identity, nevertheless a series of measures were enacted which were directed specifically at Roma.

However, little was at stake in conceding Roma ethnic group status; the real problem was whether they could be seen as a national minority, thus qualifying for guaranteed group rights under Marxist-Leninist theory.

Writing of Roma in 1961, Jaroslav Sus, a Czech theorist, explained that

the assimilation of ethnic communities is one of the pre-conditions which hasten the elimination of class society.... Marxism still recognizes at present the necessary existence of the most developed ethnic units-nations... Marxism-Leninism recognizes as correct those actions which consciously accelerate the naturally continuing assimilation process.<sup>49</sup>

Sus claimed that since Roma lacked one or more of Stalin’s four defining characteristics of a nation—common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture—Roma were not a nationality but only an ethnic group and should therefore be assimilated. In any case, he argued, they were assimilating naturally.

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<sup>47</sup> For example, in English law Gypsies are defined as a social group, whereas researchers see them as an ethnic group.

<sup>48</sup> Barth 1970:11.

<sup>49</sup> Sus 1961: 98.

Although claiming the full authority of Marxism-Leninism, Sus did not give a single quotation or reference from any of the Marxist-Leninist classics to corroborate his analysis. A more important omission was his failure to point out that Stalin differentiated between nation and national minority, the second being a far more flexible category not requiring all four defining characteristics. Nor did he mention the awkward fact that Roma had long been considered a nationality in the Soviet Union, or consider the arguments of Soviet theorists such as Dzunusov, whose position is close to that of Barth.

Not surprisingly, some Roma in Czechoslovakia remained unconvinced by Sus-type reasoning.

If the Gypsies have not been recognized yet as a nationality, the main cause has been fears of the results of granting various rights to the Gypsies as a nationality. Arguments-like the lack of several characteristics (territory, and so forth)-which were employed according to the precepts valid until now, were only a means to prevent recognition of the Gypsies as a nationality.<sup>50</sup>

Their membership in Romani associations was in itself a refutation of Sus, for these Roma were often officially regarded as “assimilated,” the successes of the policy. Yet rather than seek to conceal their origin, they believed that the best way to solve the social problems of Roma was to strengthen the positive aspects of Romani identity by what amounted to a “Black Is Beautiful” campaign, led by their own socialist-inspired organizations.

The need for such a campaign may puzzle some people, for it is commonly believed that Roma are unequivocally proud of their identity. In *Stigma*, Goffman accepts that while it is difficult for minorities to maintain positive self-evaluations in the face of denigratory judgments of them by dominant minorities, the Rom might be “protected by identity beliefs of his own, he feels that he is a full-fledged normal human being and that we are the ones who are not quite human.”<sup>51</sup>

Fieldwork among Roma in Czechoslovakia does not confirm this; rather one encounters the same deep ambivalence toward their identity that Fanon chronicled for Blacks and Sartre for Jews. Roma are at the same time proud *and* ashamed of being Roma. Proud of their music and dancing into which they pour their pain and joy; ashamed of their drinking and fighting – other ways of coping with the same feelings and the situations that arouse them.

Righteously angry at the hostile stereotypes others hold of them: “We’re not the only ones who drink! The council chairman used to lie drunk in the street, pissing in his pants.”

“They say we’re always in prison but we read the papers. We see what terrible crimes other people do. Gypsies don’t do anything like that.”

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<sup>50</sup> Svaz Cikánů-Romů 1969.

<sup>51</sup> Hoffman 1968: 17.

Unable to resist this stereotype:

“She’s so white and beautiful you’d never think she was a Gypsy.” “We’re not going to tell lies like Gypsies, are we?”<sup>52</sup>

”I’m not drunk, you understand just in a good mood” (said by a Rom after collapsing into a snowdrift on his way home from a wedding).

As Sartre put it:

They have allowed themselves to be poisoned by the stereotype that others have of them, and they live in fear that their acts will correspond to this stereotype....We may say that their conduct is perpetually overdetermined from the inside.<sup>53</sup>

These ambivalent attitudes of pride and self hatred are the theme of many of their songs.

You were born, my brothers,  
Of a black mother.  
What are you ashamed of?  
Perhaps that you’re not white?

You play at being *gaje*,  
Your own blood isn’t good enough.  
Couldn’t pride grow then  
In a Gypsy heart?

People don’t treat people  
Just by what they’re called.  
The blood of blacks and whites  
Is red just the same.<sup>54</sup>

### ***Understanding Romani Social Organization***

The Romani population in Czechoslovakia is known to differ from non-Roma in many ways. Some of these differences have been studied in detail, but no account has

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<sup>52</sup> The colloquial verb “to tell lies” in Slovak is *cigánit* (literally “to Gypsy”).

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Fanon 1970: 82.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Hübschmannová 1960: 65.

yet been given of Romani social organization and its relation to their historical experience within the territory of Czechoslovakia.

This short section is not an account of Romani social organization but an example of the misunderstanding that can occur if Roma are simply seen as a closed community, whose social isolation has led to the preservation of a static, “traditional” social organization. In fact this is usually how they have been seen and also how I thought of them when starting my fieldwork. The plan was to look first at a Romani community and see how it functioned as a whole, then look at an associated non-Romani community and finally ask: What are the relations between the two? How are they connected?

The first thing to look for was the formal power structure, having read about Romani chiefs (*vajda* in Slovak and *čibalo* in Romanes). Yet things didn't seem to work that way at all and questions to Roma met with puzzled looks. Eventually someone remembered:

Oh yes, the Slovaks chose a *vajda* during the war. They sat him on a ladder, put a red sash around him, and we had to carry him around the settlement.

Not too promising, but perhaps there would be better luck with tribalism and blood feuds. They were there all right!

The main settlement studied in Slovakia was split into two hostile lineage groups—their houses mostly faced each other across the track which served as a main street and the Roma talked of “our side” and “their side.” Why was there this hostility? — “We’ve always hated each other.”

An old Slovak told with relish of an incident soon after the war, when the balance of power was upset by migration. The lineage temporarily in the majority attacked their enemies, breaking someone's arm. Immediately a telegram was sent to the Czech lands and the next day the trans-Republic express disgorged returning relatives of the defeated lineage—enough to fill two “war-taxis.” The Slovak villagers knew what was coming but they didn't tell the police—they were looking forward to it. The battle raged all night and the next day ambulances were eventually sent in to pick up the casualties.

So after reading *Tribes Without Rulers*<sup>55</sup> by Middleton and Tait, I wrote the following:

Preliminary findings indicate that in formal organisation the Roma have something resembling a segmentary political system: that is, “lacking ranked and specialised holders of political authority that relations of local groups to one another are seen as a balance of power maintained by competition between them.”<sup>56</sup> This has important

consequences for understanding certain aspects of Romani behaviour, currently defined as social problems. For example, the prevalence of fights among Roma could be seen as an integral feature of social systems where violence is a form of self-help and indeed may be “the recognized means of maintaining law in default of a superior judicial authority.”<sup>57</sup> Although fighting is often between individuals, it appears from local accounts that conflicts can often escalate into group warfare, where the original participants can call on kinsmen to support them. Detailed study of such conflicts should provide revealing evidence of Romani social organisation.

All that was needed to complete the picture was a leopard-skin chief.

Yet despite the similarities between Romani social organization and rulerless political systems, the crucial point was that the studies in Africa had been made of “indigenous systems, unaffected by European contact.”<sup>58</sup> Roma however have never been known as anything other than a pariah minority, so perhaps this should be the starting point, not something to be considered later. As Mick Lineton put it, writing of Travellers:

“Being a Traveller” does not consist simply in having been brought up and living among Travellers, but also in a relationship to settled people... An approach which began with an ethnography of Travellers as a minority group and then related the internal workings and conceptions of the minority group to the outside world would miss the way in which those very “internal” workings and conceptions and the “outside” were part of a single situation, interpenetrating in many ways, as mutual reactions, reflections and relationships. Yet many studies of minority groups do start as if they were dealing with cultural or social entities instead of relationships, and while there may be areas in which the context of the total situation can be ignored or added afterwards... the situation of Travellers is [not] one that permits such an approach without loss and distortion. We would therefore shift the focus from the minority as such to the point of articulation between the minority and others.<sup>59</sup>

Looking at things from this vantage point, it is clear that these initial explanations artificially limited the total situation of the Roma as they perceived it. So what about chiefs, tribalism, and feuds, bearing in mind the actual historical experience of Roma in Slovakia as a dominated minority?

Horváthová suggests that while an elected *vajda* was important among nomadic Roma, this institution took a changed form among settled Roma. “The *vajda* of a Gypsy settlement... was above all an assistant to the village authorities in matters of local Gypsies.”<sup>60</sup> The non-Roma needed someone through whom to exercise control.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 20-1.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>59</sup> Lineton 1973.

<sup>60</sup> Horváthová 1964: 239.

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<sup>55</sup> Middleton and Tait 1958.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 6.

Tribalism must be discussed on two levels. Ethnographically Czechoslovak Roma are usually divided into four groups (*Slovak* [Slovak],<sup>61</sup> *Olach* [nomadic], *Sinti* [German], and *Hungarian*), each having its own dialect of Romanes.<sup>62</sup> While these groups see themselves as distinct, this differentiation seems closely linked to the various non-Romani majority groups among whom they lived. This is true of other countries, for example, Britain.

"Tribal" settlements in Slovakia, where perhaps three hundred Roma share a handful of family names, are far more obviously the direct product of their historical situation rather than an age-old Romani tradition. A 1781 census in the region studied showed only one or two Romani families settled near each Slovak village, the men generally working as smiths, the women and children as servants. As described in the historical section above, both Roma and non-Roma would have usually discouraged any influx of new Romani families, and so numbers grew by natural population alone to present levels. It is ironic that these artificially highly immobile communities should later have been characterized as inherently nomadic.

Even today in Slovakia the situation has similarities to that of Maria Theresa's time. For example it is extremely difficult for a Rom to move from one settlement to another unless by marriage, and the reasons are more or less the same.

*Rural Local Official:* "There are lots of empty Gypsy houses here but if we were to start accepting Gypsies that aren't ours, we'd soon be swamped."

*A Rom:* "We don't want any 'foreign' Gypsies here it would only make things worse. It's better when there are less of us."

The Slovak villagers don't want too many Roma (a painful fact of which the Roma are well aware), although some are useful for odd jobs-shoveling coal or housecleaning. Patron-client relationships still exist as they did formerly, although progressively weakening as the continuing industrialization of Slovakia makes alternative employment available, especially for Romani women.

Feuds possibly arose from competition between families for the desperately scarce resources doled out by their employers. The "colonial" experience of the Roma in Slovakia, however, suggests that such conflicts should not be interpreted as an institutionalized "means of maintaining law" but as expressions of frustration in an unbearable yet insoluble situation. "In a colonial society all violence is turned inward; the natives kill each other rather than the settlers."<sup>63</sup>

This approach is also relevant to contemporary disputes where previous direct exploitation has been replaced by subtler forms of discrimination, justified by hostile stereotyping. Roma often see this quite clearly. They don't need to read sociology books to understand how stereotyping works; they have more direct ways of learning.

*Romani member of rural council:* "I've been round the village making a register (of cattle, and so forth) and some of those outlying Slovak cabins-you should have smelled them! But the whites keep quiet about their own bad examples-yet if any Gypsy is dirty, they point to him and say to us: "That's what you're like, you Gypsies!"

Understanding doesn't seem to help much, though; not if you can't do anything effective to change things. So what you do is silly things, despairing things-and the whites laugh at you all the more. The same man took part in a Romani petition to demand the removal from the settlement of the three families the Roma were most ashamed of. It was senseless, of course; who else would have them? The outcome was predictable-a fight-two Roma got six months in jail and the families still live in the same settlement. And the stereotype was confirmed once more.

While this approach sees the "Gypsy way of life" as a product of their past experience, it also throws some doubt on the claim that in a socialist society like Czechoslovakia this way of life is nowadays entirely an anachronism.

In 1958 there were predictions of a speedy assimilation of Roma, but when these hopes were disappointed the "Gypsy problem" was reported to need several generations for its solution. The slow rate of progress was attributed simply to a cultural time lag, an undynamic view of how traditions, value systems, and so forth, are transmitted. However, with class consciousness, young people do not automatically adopt patterns simply because they are their parents, but also because they find the patterns of their parents relevant to their own experience, they realize their own situation is comparable to that of their parents.

The possibility must therefore be faced that within the socialist framework, which undoubtedly offers better opportunities for Romani integration than have ever been known, there nevertheless may be features which serve to perpetuate the deep-rooted hostility of Roma toward non-Roma, such as continuing discrimination against Roma.

On a local level Roma sometimes encountered severe difficulties in trying to realize their ambitions to buy flats in town or build new family houses, as Sus frankly admitted.

Frequently either entire local authorities or their individual members... try to prevent Gypsy families from moving into empty flats among non-Gypsies. By means of bureaucratic methods they make it difficult for Gypsies to build a family house outside

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<sup>61</sup> The vast majority and the subject of this essay.

<sup>62</sup> Davidová 1970b.

<sup>63</sup> Geismar 1971: 191.

of the Gypsy settlement . . . and often make it impossible for them to obtain a building plot.<sup>64</sup>

Although many complaints were made of such flagrant violations of the official policy, little was done to punish offenders.

More seriously, despite the good intentions of its formulators, certain aspects of the 1958 policy were unwittingly discriminatory. While Roma welcomed the possibility of better houses, they resented the restrictions on their movements. When a recent national census of the whole population was made, the immediate assumption of the Roma in the settlement studied was that it was another “nomads’ register” aimed at controlling them. As the Gypsy-Rom Associations pointed out, decisions were made about Roma but never by them.

Similarly, the outright rejection of Romani identity as completely worthless can have done little to help these people to resolve their identity crisis but served to undermine further their self-respect.

The situation in Czechoslovakia today is consequently a paradox. In some important respects the aim of socioeconomic equality has almost been achieved. In 1970 the male employment rate for Roma in the Czech lands equaled the national rate and since, as heavy manual workers in a socialist state their wages are generally above average, a recent study showed them to be one of the wealthier ethnic groups in Czechoslovakia.<sup>65</sup> Yet at the same time their rate of criminal convictions was four times the national average (1967 figures) and their alcoholism was comparable.

Some still sing about their experiences—new songs as well as traditional ones—migrant and prison blues to comfort themselves, not for customers. Perhaps they say more than statistics.

I don't beg for bread  
Even though I'm hungry.  
Just give the Gypsy  
A little respect.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Sus 1961: 111.

<sup>65</sup> Machonin et al. 1969: 537.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted in Hübschmannová 1960 and in a different translation in Penrick and Puxon 1972: 209.

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## Afterword 1996:

### A Brave New World

It is now over twenty years since I first wrote about the experience of the Roma in Czechoslovakia. Then I had argued in favor of writing about Roma in specific historical contexts since "as a small and vulnerable minority, it was far more likely that their history would be more a tale of what was done to them than of what they themselves had done" (above, page 15). Developments since that time confirm the validity of this approach since this is the only way the changing fortunes of Roma can be fully understood.

At the time of my original article only a limited amount of attention had been paid to Roma by Czechoslovak sociologists and social anthropologists, although some carefully researched historical and ethnographic studies had been published. Meanwhile these people had long been scrutinized by ministry and local authority officials, assiduously compiling statistics about population numbers, housing conditions, level of assimilation and, most important, migratory movements. This almost frenzied activity was driven partly by the fear that one day, in the not too distant future, parts of their beloved country would be overwhelmed by the unruly, dark-skinned Roma, who were seen as a foreign and alien race in spite of the fact that they had been settled on the territory of the Republic for over half a millennium.

Since then the world has changed unimaginably for Czechs and Slovaks with the almost miraculous collapse of Communist rule without bloodshed in what they called the "Velvet Revolution" of 1989. For Roma, too, life changed dramatically after the fall of communism for, as so often in their past, they found themselves the pawns of powerful political processes beyond their control. As the new, fledgling states exposed their cumbersome inherited economic structures to the unsentimental forces of market pressures in pursuit of the holy grail of a "market economy" and eventual incorporation into the European Union, the impact on Roma was immediate.

Like their fellow citizens Roma had welcomed the democratic principles of post-communism, but for them the first tangible experience of this brave new world was not of a sudden expansion of civic liberties but of harsh economic realities as many were flung out of their predominantly manual jobs in the now virtually redundant heavy industries. As part of the same broad process some Romani women were driven to take up prostitution, joining the growing numbers of women offering themselves for sale on city streets or at the roadside of main routes leading to the West-the first visible advertisement to tourists and truck drivers of the new freedoms on offer.

It seems ironic that formerly I saw my writing about Roma as bearing witness to the worthily intentioned yet oppressive Communist policy toward Roma and yet now I find myself looking back to this era with a certain measure of nostalgia. This is in spite of the fact that formerly many of the administrative measures were blatantly

discriminatory and demonstrably illegal. At times they breached not just the Czechoslovak constitution but amounted to a denial of basic human rights.

But what would the new freedoms bring? An intelligent and highly articulate Rom in his early thirties felt, in 1991, that he could see the writing on the wall, even though he and his wife still had their jobs. "I am going to vote Communist at the next elections," he declared, "and so are all my family and friends. The Communists are the only people who ever cared about the Roma" (Guy 1991). He had not forgotten what had preceded the often forcible attempts to control Romani migratory movement during the years of communism. While Czechs fondly remember the interwar republic as a period of humane liberalism, for most Roma these had been years of grinding poverty, sharpened by the terror of unpredictable racist beatings which occasionally escalated into pogroms. The eventual culmination had been the holocaust when almost all Roma living in the Czech lands had been annihilated.

### **The Final Years of Communism**

Unlike other reforms during the Prague Spring of 1968, the strengthened position of Slovakia survived the reimposition of strict Party control (or "normalization") after the Soviet-led military invasion in August that year. To some extent it was a matter of divide and rule. In this case the devolution of federal powers actually worked directly against Slovak interests for the likelihood of pursuing any nationwide policy toward Roma almost vanished.

Since 1965 a main policy aim of federal officials dealing with the Romani population had been to lighten Slovakia's load by the planned dispersal of families to the Czech lands. Now the Czech government was able to take advantage of the new arrangements. First it dismantled the existing administrative structure and then canceled the previous policy by revoking, unilaterally, a major federal government directive intended to apply to the whole territory of the Czechoslovak state (Czech Socialist Republic 1969 & 1970). The Slovaks protested impotently as these new arrangements were being drafted, regarding them as legitimation at national level of the earlier, near-illegal resistance by Czech local authorities to the dispersal program and, more ominously, as a statement of intent that the Czechs would refuse in future to take equal responsibility for a problem of whole-state dimensions.

[These changes] . . . perhaps suit the Czech regions where there are about 40,000 Gypsies. In Slovakia, where today we have 170,000 (of which perhaps 100,000 live in quite inhuman conditions), the latest administrative structure for solving the Gypsy question is utterly unsuitable. (Slovak Socialist Republic 1968)

The administrative division of Slovakia from the Czech lands had the further effects of weakening central control over local authorities and disrupting the systematic collection of nationwide statistics. In spite of these developments, attempts were still made to coordinate policy toward Roma in the now separate parts

of the Republic under the leadership, in the Czech lands, of the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and, in Slovakia, of a special Government Commission for Questions of Gypsy Inhabitants (Komise vlády SSR pre otázky cigánských obyvateľov). Slovakia, indeed, returned to the administrative system which had overseen federal policy from 1965 to 1968. Consequently the treatment of Roma in the twenty years of normalization up to the end of Communist rule is a partially chronicled story of sporadic and uneven development—often dependent on local initiatives rather than stemming from directives sent from the capital cities of Prague and Bratislava.

On reflection, the actual differences that official policy made to the lives of Roma during the two decades between 1969 and 1989, compared with the decade that preceded them, are less distinct than might be thought. Although there was a concerted campaign to disperse and assimilate Roma in the earlier years, these sweeping nationwide policies had been largely ineffectual in achieving their aims, bringing a mixture of benefits, frustrations, and occasionally worse to the Roma caught up in them. The later, more piecemeal approach, due to more disjointed administrative structures, resulted in a pattern of patchy development that matched the reality of the earlier period.

It can also be argued that throughout the years of Communist rule much of the gradual improvement in the living conditions of Roma was due largely to their own efforts in taking advantage of the opportunities provided by economic expansion. Rather than conforming to the Czech and Slovak stereotype of them as passive recipients of state aid, many Roma used their initiative in moving to places where their labor was needed, putting aside much of their earnings and investing these savings in new family houses or flats. In this endeavor they were often opposed by local authorities and reaped the usual bitter rewards of migrant workers (Guy 1975).

In the late 1970s another organization took a keen interest in the situation of Roma in Czechoslovakia and published a report on their conditions. However, this was no official body but Charter 77, a dissident group established in 1977 to bear witness to violations of human rights safeguarded by the 1975 Helsinki Accords to which Czechoslovakia was a signatory. This major report (Charter 77 1979) took a caustic view of the whole of Communist policy toward Roma as well as listing specific aspects of human rights abuses. It maintained that the denial of national minority status to Roma, which underpinned the policy's rationale, "was dictated by the desire of the ruling powers to reduce the size of the minority problem, and subordinate its handling to the alleged interests of the whole of society" (Charter 77 1979a&b).

Most of the contemporary official measures condemned by the report were not new but rather a perpetuation of long-established practices. The illegitimacy of using the 1958 law on nomadism to control the movement of Roma, "who, while not nomads, are forced to migrate on account of living conditions not of their own making" was branded as "racist repression" (Charter 77 1979a:7). In practice this law



had failed to stem the continuing flow of economic migrants, although the consequences of being registered as a “nomad” were certainly unpleasant for the 20,000 or more Roma wrongly identified in this way. The most pressing problem for migrants to the Czech lands remained the frequent and illegal refusal of local authorities to register them as residents, debarring them from eligibility for municipal housing and forcing them either to squat in derelict buildings or crowd in with relatives already established in the town (Guy 1975; Charier 77 1979a:7-8).

In Slovakia the perennial problem was that of the primitive living conditions in the many segregated and isolated settlements. The plan had been to eliminate them all by 1990 but there was no hope of this goal being achieved. In the meantime many Slovak councils continued to refuse permission for Roma either to buy existing Slovak-owned village houses or build their own among the Slovaks (Guy 1975).

One dramatic and innovative housing initiative in the 1970s and 1980s was the “experiment” of moving Roma from their previous concentrations in dilapidated urban ghettos or in overcrowded, unsanitary settlements on the edge of town directly into brand-new housing projects. The motivation behind the initiative was to rid the towns concerned of their aggravating eyesores at a stroke, but there had been little practical planning or consultation before the move. Those relocated had little choice in the matter and were often combined in ways that soon led to friction and disillusionment. Although the new blocks of town flats were often spacious and of high quality, the new developments were intended to maintain the segregation of Roma and consequently remained ghettos.

[Many] of these housing projects, among them Chanov in Most (Northern Bohemia), Lunik 9 in Kosice (Eastern Slovakia), and Duzavska Cesta (also called “Black City”) in Rimavska Sobota, were demolished by some inhabitants and have become highly publicized examples used by non-Roma to justify initiatives to prevent Roma from moving into non-Romani neighborhoods. (Tritt 1992:56)

Some of the fiercest condemnation in the report was directed against the growing practice of sterilizing Romani women which it characterized as a “planned administrative policy” (Charter 77 1979b:22). There is considerable evidence that during the 1970s and 1980s Romani women were either offered financial inducements to undergo sterilization, or were pressured into agreeing to this procedure, or were even sterilized without their knowledge or consent after giving birth by cesarean section or when having an abortion. While Romani women with several children were the most frequent victims, this was by no means always the case (Tritt 1992:19-32).

A 1972 Decree on Sterilization, issued by the Ministries of Health of the Czech and Slovak Socialist Republics, was careful not to mention Roma by name, but other evidence makes it clear that this ethnic group was a prime target. A 1977 briefing paper for the Slovakian Government Commission referred to what it called the “high

unhealthy” level of the Romani population and urged increased grants for sterilization to counterbalance the income from child benefits, since “even a backward Gypsy woman is able to calculate that, from an economic point of view, it is more advantageous for her to give birth every year” (quoted in Tritt 1992:20). In the East Slovakia Region the proportion of all sterilizations involving Roma rose from 25.8 percent in 1983 to 36.6 percent by 1987, while in the Czech lands 25 percent of all sterilization grants in the late 1980s were made to Roma, even though this group constituted only 2 or 3 percent of the total population. The fullest discussion of this topic is in the 1992 Helsinki Watch Report (Tritt 1992) and in a 1990 report investigating Charter 77 charges for the Lau Mazeril Foundation in Amsterdam (Pellar and Andrs 1990).

As with official attempts to control migration, sterilizations were not a new occurrence – but from the early 1970s they did appear to have become more widespread and readily sanctioned. The same was true of other practices condemned by Charter 77. Romani children continued to be transferred to special schools intended for those with severe learning difficulties, creating for many what amounted to an educational ghetto which complemented the physical segregation of their dwellings. An official report revealed that by 1990/91 of all children at such schools in Czechoslovakia 40.7 percent were Roma, while in Slovakia this proportion was a massive 65.3 percent—two out of three (Institute for Educational Information 1991). In Slovakia, even when Romani children attended ordinary schools, they were often seated separately from Slovaks (Tritt 1992:42-44). Meanwhile, in a process familiar in the West, “black” Roma were more likely than “whites” to be sent to prison for the same offense and their prison sentence was likely to be longer (Charter 77 1979b:22; Tritt 1992:91-93).

In spite of well-documented evidence of discrimination against Roma at every level during the period of normalization, this was flatly denied by *Rudé právo*, the Communist party daily (21 June 1986). In language reminiscent of the strident tones of earlier assimilationism, the newspaper dismissed Roma unwilling to adapt to socialist society as “victims of capitalist ways of thinking and vestiges of the past” (Kalvoda 1992: 103). The main purpose of the article, however, was to support the government’s rejection of the appeal of the World Romani Congress for Roma to be recognized as a national minority as had happened long before in the Soviet Union and more recently in Yugoslavia (1981). At this time Hungary, too, was taking cautious steps in this direction (Puxon 1987:9-12).

Such intransigence was not to last for within little more than a year there were signs, emanating from the higher political ranks, of a more relaxed approach to “questions of Gypsy inhabitants.” As it turned out these encouraging signs were irrelevant. Slight shifts in official policy were soon to be overwhelmed by far more momentous changes, which would transform the political map of Central and Eastern Europe and pose a whole new set of problems for the Roma of Czechoslovakia.

### The Early Years of Post-Communism

At first the omens seemed promising for Roma when the demoralized Communist leadership relinquished power without a struggle in the face of determined popular resistance. This time, unlike 1968, the hard-liners knew that no help would come from Moscow to shore up their unloved regime.

Roma played an active part in bringing about the changes by joining the mass demonstrations of the 1989 Revolution and the newly formed Romani Civic Initiative Party (ROI) was a partner in the coalition parties which swept to victory in the first post-Communist elections-Civic Forum (OF) in the Czech lands and Public against Violence (VPN) in Slovakia. In 1990 Romani deputies were elected to Federal, Czech, and Slovak Parliaments – and not only as candidates for ROI but for other parties as well. These parties included the Communist party, and it is worth remembering that there had been Rom deputies during the Communist period.

Matching their new political representation the formal status of Roma was reconsidered, and in April 1991 the Slovak government passed resolution 153 “to acknowledge the Roma to be a nationality in the contemporary terminology and to guarantee their political and legal equality of rights” (Tritt 1992:14-16). The Czech and Federal authorities, while moving some way in the same direction, were more hesitant about making such a forthright declaration. At the same time there was a flowering of Romani culture. Newspapers and magazines in the Romani language soon appeared and throughout the Republic over thirty cultural organizations applied for official registration. A museum of Romani culture was founded in Brno, the capital of Moravia, while in East Slovakia a Romani theater opened its doors in Prešov, and an innovatory department of Romani music was established as part of an existing conservatory in Košice. This new beginning was celebrated in Brno, in July 1990, by staging the first World Romani Festival, attended by President Václav Havel.

The election of Havel to the presidency to wide popular acclaim at the end of 1989 was another hopeful sign that life would be better for Roma after the Revolution. Havel had been the leading figure in the Charter 77 movement and soon reaffirmed his earlier commitment to the plight of Roma by speaking out on TV at this festival. Yet Havel’s scrupulous adherence to moral principles, which had made him the conscience of the nation during the last decade of communism, now seemed strangely at odds with the thrusting, devil-take-the-hindmost atmosphere of post-communism where his credo of “living in truth” had little place.

Havel’s compassionate attitude to Roma was deeply unpopular since the rapid growth of this minority was perceived as an ever encroaching threat. In 1991 a comparative international poll found that 91 percent of Czechoslovaks held unfavorable views of Roma, a far higher degree of antipathy toward an ethnic group than was expressed by any other European nation included in the survey (Times Mirror 1991). This widespread dislike found public expression in many ways, even

emerging in the unlikely context of a beauty contest. When asked on national TV about her ambitions in life, a contestant for the title of Miss Czech-Slovak 1993 replied simply: “I want to become a public prosecutor so that I can cleanse my town of all its brown-skinned inhabitants.” In the storm of publicity which followed, university entrant Magdalena Babicka explained that it had all been just an embarrassing misunderstanding (Stewart 1993).

The antagonism was not limited to verbal assaults. The confused conditions of rapid economic flux and an uncertain legal interregnum encouraged the emergence of neo-fascist groups which had more direct ways of expressing their feelings. These ranged from skinhead gangs to a Ku Klux Klan and a “White League” (*Bílá liga*). Racially motivated attacks and even murders of Roma began to increase-with accusations that the police sometimes looked on as disinterested bystanders (Tritt 1992:93-109). One neo-Nazi skinhead, proud owner of a Wehrmacht helmet, boasted of shooting Roma with a rifle from his Prague balcony-for sport (David and Serotek 1991).

On November 24, 1991, several hundred skinheads marched down Wenceslas Square shouting “Gypsies to the gas chamber!” “Blacks raus!” “Czechs for Czechs!” “Oi, oi, liquidate ROI!” (the Romani Civic Initiative Party), “Sčuka [the chair of ROI] will hang!” Eventually they marched through Žižkov, a neighborhood where many Roma live, shouting “White Žižkov!” As they walked, some non-Romani inhabitants clapped and waved out of their windows. (*Lidové noviny*, 25 November 1991, quoted in Tritt 1992:3)

Apart from the racist attacks the most direct and widespread effect of post-communism for Roma was unemployment. In spite of the relatively low overall unemployment rate in the Czech lands-around 3 percent in 1992-this actually represented a rise of 3 percent from the full-employment economy of communism. This meant real hardship for those who were victims of the shake-out-mainly the old, the young, women, and unskilled workers. Many Romani workers came into these categories and, of all ethnic groups, the Roma undoubtedly suffered worst of all.

The situation was even starker in Slovakia with an unemployment rate up to five times that of the Czech lands (Plichtová 1993: 18). Here, too, Roma were often laid off and formed high proportions of the newly unemployed. At the end of 1991 in the large town of Rimavská Sobota (Central Slovakia) where Roma were in the minority, almost two-thirds of the 6,530 persons known to be unemployed were Roma (Tritt 1992:78).

Apart from being among the first to lose their jobs, Roma suffered major difficulties in restarting work. On the whole Roma were unskilled workers with few qualifications and therefore at a disadvantage in seeking any new employment resulting from restructuring. A more important factor was that they now suffered discrimination on an unprecedented scale when applying for advertised vacancies-

even for unskilled jobs. In spite of regulations forbidding discriminatory hiring practices, many local employment offices openly displayed job details which included stipulations that applicants should not be Roma. This practice was widespread both in the Czech lands and Slovakia (Tritt 1992:76-90; Guy 1991).

These developments had been predicted with chilling accuracy as long ago as 1979 in the Charter 77 report, which accused the Communist administration of deliberately perpetuating the disadvantaged situation of Roma in order to use them as a flexible and compliant reserve pool of industrial labor.

In the current economic situation, the powers-that-be need the Romani minority to remain in the position which it is in now: uneducated, without clear prospects, and ready to move from one end of the republic to the other in search of unskilled work without knowing where they are going to live. The existence of unskilled labor is not, however, a normal or inevitable consequence of economic development.... The demand for unskilled labor will then fall, threatening the Roma with massive unemployment which will expose this ruthlessly urbanized minority to extreme pressures, and fuse their social ostracism and material oppression with a new ethnic consciousness, all the stronger the more cruelly it is today suppressed. (Charter 77 1979b:7)

Political tensions between the two partners in the Republic had been mounting throughout 1992 and were eventually resolved by still further separation in what was dubbed the "Velvet Divorce." On 1 January 1993 the country was divided and Slovakia became a sovereign state for the first time in its history. All too soon these political changes were to have major implications for the life of Roma. In the early 1970s I wrote that Slovakia was "the homeland of virtually all of contemporary Czechoslovakia's adult Roma" (above, page 16) but by the early 1990s Roma had been established in the Czech lands for well over forty years and, in spite of complex patterns of migration, settlement, and remigration, perhaps as many as two-thirds of those living in the Czech lands had been born there (Gross 1994:vi).

The 1991 Census might have thrown light on this matter as Roma were given the right to identify themselves as such for the first time since the interwar republic. As it turned out, less than a third of the estimated 400,000 Roma in Czechoslovakia took this option (Plichtová 1993:17). This small proportion was explained partly by "a low level of ethnic awareness" (ibid.) but, far more plausibly, by the realistic fear that to label themselves in official records as Roma was to invite further bureaucratic repression in the future. Many Roma simply thought it safer to camouflage themselves as Czechs, Slovaks, or Hungarians.

Roma were right to fear more trouble ahead. But, in the event, the strategy of adopting another nationality proved of little help to those living in the Czech lands when a carefully drafted citizenship law came into force with the creation of the new state. As a bizarre consequence of the previous citizenship rules, anyone under forty

whose parents were registered as Slovak, was deemed to be Slovak also. Consequently almost all Roma living in the Czech Republic at the start of 1993 were regarded as Slovak citizens, irrespective of where they were born and even of whether they had ever been to Slovakia in their lives (Gross 1993; Borger 1994:13).

For anyone other than an ethnic Czech it was necessary to make a special application and meet stringent conditions in order to gain Czech citizenship. These requirements included proof of permanent registered residence in the Czech lands for at least two years, no criminal record for the previous five years, no criminal proceedings pending in Slovakia, and no taxes owing in Slovakia. All of these posed considerable problems for Roma. Difficulties in obtaining residence registration had not eased with the ending of communism and many were technically ineligible on this count, even though they had lived in the Czech lands for longer than the required period. Likewise many adult Roma, estimated as up to 50 percent, had convictions—though mostly for minor offences such as pilfering state property—while the last two criteria involved obtaining the relevant documentation from Bratislava. In some cases personal visits were needed and a wearisome trek from office to office to plead with unhelpful officials. This involved process was complicated immeasurably for the Roma by their lack of technical expertise, financial resources and—in many cases—basic literacy (Gross 1993).

This law did attract a limited level of international protest. The CSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities "strongly urged that such legislation be changed," and U.S. Congress members asked the prime minister to alter what they described as "the most extensive revocation of citizenship since the end of the Second World War." Czech Premier Václav Klaus scornfully dismissed these condemnations as "insignificant," and even Havel, now reelected as Czech President, publicly defended the law (Gross 1994).

Reaction to these new measures was very mixed. In Cheb (West Bohemia), where officials were said to be sympathetic, less than 10 percent of the town's Roma appeared to have applied for Czech citizenship seven months after the changes, while in the nearby large industrial town of Plzeň, this figure was estimated to be between 31 and 62 percent (Gross 1993). More important, though, was the response of Czech officials to the many Roma without Czech citizenship. What would happen to them?

Surprisingly, the consequences of national legislation seemed to depend on local interpretation, which varied widely. Shortly before the division of the state a Czech ethnographer, working for the Federal Presidency at the Department of Human Rights and Humanitarian Issues, clearly identified the problem. It stemmed from devolution following the ending of Communist centralism since now "[t]he Federal Government has no legal form by which it can force local authorities to change their decisions, especially in the Czech Republic. Sovereignty of the local government exists in most fields" (quoted in Tritt 1992: 10). In this case the democratic transfer of power to local level had resulted in a situation where the constitutional rights of Romani citizens now depended on the opinions of minor functionaries.

Although no wholesale deportations of Roma back to Slovakia were envisaged, some officials hoped that similar results might be achieved by attrition. Various local authorities throughout the Czech Republic told human rights lawyers that Roma without Czech citizenship “would be treated like foreigners in future and would lose their benefits under the law.” These could include unemployment, health, welfare, and insurance benefits as well as the loss of rights to vote, obtain passports, and purchase privatization coupons (Gross 1993). A later report showed that these threats were being put into practice (Gross 1994:vi).

In parallel with the new citizenship law the Prosecutor General submitted a national “migration law” in December 1992 to protect places “endangered by migration.” This was justified by unsubstantiated reports that month that 2,000 Roma had migrated from Slovakia to beat the deadline for the breakup of Czechoslovakia. The proposed law required visitors to be approved by local councils, to pay a tariff if they stayed for more than five days, and to be subject to police inspection. Unauthorized visitors were liable to eviction and their hosts to imprisonment or fines of more than 2,000. After an outcry from Czech legal experts and accusations of Stalinism, the law was withdrawn, but local authorities still had recourse to their own migration bylaws to carry out evictions. Meanwhile the Minister of the Interior, former dissident Jan Ruml, speculated about reintroducing the previous regulation from Communist times requiring foreigners, now “including Slovaks,” to register with the police if they remained longer than three days in spite of assurances about freedom of movement when the “divorce” was being negotiated (Greenberg 1993a).

I had argued earlier that postwar Romani population movement to the Czech lands was best understood as that of migrant workers flocking to work opportunities (above, pages 28-32). Twenty years later here was the corollary of a developed industrial state which had first encouraged such workers, then had outgrown the need for them, and now was attempting to deny them the right to remain where they had labored, raised families, and, in many cases, had been born. It is sadly appropriate that at a time when the Czech Republic is seeking to emulate and join the European Union, it displays some of the most inhuman yet characteristic features of its leading member states. It is significant that in June 1993, the Council of Europe set no conditions on minority rights for admitting the Czech Republic as a member-but it was otherwise for Slovakia.

In Slovakia the effects of the political division of the country were more muted. But here, although Roma were not faced with immediate withdrawal of state benefits as a consequence of the removal of their citizenship, they remained vulnerable to similar threats to be realized in other ways. In September 1993 the Slovak Premier, Vladimir Meciar, paid a visit to the town of Spišská Nová Ves in East Slovakia, the administrative center of a district with one of the highest proportions of Roma in the whole of Slovakia. There he proposed that family allowances of Roma should be lowered to help cut “extensive reproduction of the socially unadaptable and mentally backward population.” In the furor that followed international Romani organizations

and the Simon Wiesenthal Center accused Meciar of adopting “the thinking and diction of nazism” and called on the Council of Europe to reconsider the membership of Slovakia, its newest member. Meanwhile the Slovak journalist Karel Hirman, who had reported the story for the official Czech news agency (ČTK), was condemned by Meciar as a tool of an international plot to bring about the “disintegration” of Slovakia and threatened with a libel action and two years in prison (Greenberg 1993b).

Since that time Meciar has been more mindful of his public image in the West. In September 1995, for example, he attended a ceremony in the village of Nálepkovo, East Slovakia, where the foundation stone for a new settlement was being laid. Whether such symbolic gestures signify practical intervention to improve the real prospects for Roma is doubtful, as the news report made clear.

The settlement of forty-six wooden houses [at Nálepkovo] is intended for Roma, who make up half of the unemployed in that area, where factories that once employed them have been closing down or turning to labor from Ukraine. The ČTK report did not say whether Romani organizations considered the project to be a welcome relief and sign of support from the government, or to be a segregationist solution. (Lemon 1995)

Nálepkovo lies only seven miles from Spišská Nová Ves and the surrounding district provides good examples of the wide range of conditions that still exists following the uneven development of the Communist era. When I had undertaken my original research in this district in the early 1970s, the settlement at Letanovce had been one of the most remote with a complete lack of basic amenities. In March 1991, twenty years later, things had hardly changed. In spite of a visit by Havel the previous year with promises of improvement, living conditions were appalling. A cluster of about forty ramshackle wooden huts stood isolated in a sea of mud. A rough field track linked the settlement to the Slovak village over a mile away. In the other direction lay an attractive area of wooded hills and ravines called, by a strange irony, the “Slovak Paradise” (Slovenský Raj). There was still no electricity or sanitation and even worse-no safe drinking water. Numbers living in these shantytown conditions had increased in the past year since rising unemployment among Roma in the Czech lands had driven some to remigrate to their original settlements where living was cheaper (Guy 1991).

In contrast two-thirds of the Roma living in the equally dilapidated settlement at nearby Žehra, perched on the steep hillside above the main road, had been resettled in October 1990 into a small estate of attractive low-built blocks of family flats. This development was located on the edge of the Slovak village and even included a cultural center for communal use. The Slovak village officials seemed genuinely pleased with what had been achieved-but pointed out that the estate represented the completion of a phase of an earlier Communist project. Now no new funds were

forthcoming to improve the situation of those families left stranded in the original settlement (Guy 1991).

### Prospects for the Future

One Saturday in May 1995 in the quiet town of Žďár nad Sázavou three youths spent the evening drinking and chatted about trying out a new baseball bat. Soon after they broke into the home of a Romani family and started smashing the furniture. When Tibor Berky, the house owner, tried to intervene they beat him to death in front of his wife and children with repeated blows to the back of the head. In this town, about 70 miles east of Prague, there were only 120 Roma out of a total of 26,000 inhabitants. There was no reason why the victim should have been singled out, other than the fact that he was a Rom and lived nearby. When questioned the attackers told police they supported a right-wing skinhead movement (*Lidové noviny* 1995).

This incident was yet another in the spiraling toll of racially motivated attacks in the Czech Republic, 160 during 1994 alone according to a recent Interior Ministry report. The report stated that “most of the crimes were perpetrated by skinheads or youths affiliated to right-wing movements. Most of the victims were Gypsies” (ibid.). The brutal murder of Tibor Berky was widely reported at home and abroad, prompting Premier Klaus to convene a special meeting of government ministers where he gave vent to his frustration: “The situation is untenable and must not continue.... [This is] the straw that broke the camel’s back.” In response the Justice Minister proposed stiffer penalties-life sentences for racially motivated murders and increased sentences from three to five years for hate attacks (ibid.).

Whether such measures make much of an impact remains to be seen but in any case they deal with only the most extreme manifestations of racism. Attacks on Roma by skinheads and others might be dismissed as aberrations of a small and deviant minority were it not for the extent to which virulently racist views are held and expressed at every level of Czech and Slovak society. The Helsinki Watch report is one of many sources to give a selection of these, often returning to the recurrent theme of gas chambers. In this context the Czech citizenship law and Meciar’s comments about measures to reduce unhealthy overpopulation should be seen as deliberate attempts by both states, sanctioned by the wishes of the majority of their citizens, to use administrative methods to rid themselves of “their” Roma once they had become a burden. Skinhead attacks and the citizenship law are located on the same continuum, and the distance between them is less than might be assumed.

I well remember a conversation in 1986 with the mother of a Czech friend who sharply condemned racism in the West. Fully agreeing with her criticisms I then mentioned discrimination against Roma in Czechoslovakia. Without hesitating for a moment she carefully explained that this was a different matter altogether since “Gypsies are not really human-you only have to see how they behave.” She was no skinhead youth but a well-educated, respectable medical specialist in her fifties and in

other respects a likeable and intelligent person-yet it was not hard to see where her arguments could lead.

The 1979 Charter 77 report had accused the Communists of deliberately preventing the upward social mobility and integration of Roma in order to keep them as a separate, highly vulnerable pool of unskilled labor. According to this view the Communists could be blamed for the predicament of Roma who had been thrown out of employment in post-Communist conditions. While this was undoubtedly the practical outcome of policies ostensibly aimed at assimilation, it is a partial view of Communist intentions. While the Czechoslovak Communists did have a continuing and expanding need for unskilled labor, they had other means of securing this-by attracting labor from less-developed neighboring Communist states and eventually by importing what amounted to indentured workers from Vietnam and Cuba in exchange for arms deals. These dark-skinned workers, too, were to become the target of racist attacks in the new conditions of post-communism (Tritt 1992:2).

The mistake of the Communists was not that they attempted to draw Roma into the labor market, albeit at the lowest level-indeed tens of thousands of Roma were already choosing this path to a better future. The real failure lay in their complete inability to appreciate the extent to which racism at every level of society, including within the Party, was acting to prevent truly effective help reaching the Roma, which alone would enable them to move out of their social and economic ghetto in significant numbers. Even more seriously, in denying any positive value to Romani identity they validated and strengthened existing denigratory attitudes, inflaming the problem rather than sweeping it out of existence as had been the intention. In this way it can be argued that racism lay at the heart of the Communist policy and undermined its many positive achievements.

As in so many other aspects of Communist practice it was felt that going through the motions of building socialism according to correct principles was enough to ensure success while consciousness was left unexamined. Beneath the outward conformity the old pernicious attitudes lay undisturbed and unchallenged, waiting to reemerge into the open with the ending of Communist rule. This was the true legacy of the Communist regime and one which its successors seem equally unfit to resolve.

Legal frameworks and human rights were as much part of the Communist statute books as they are now, enshrined in the new legislation of the democratic Republics. But, as before, the outward semblance of legality is meaningless without the rigorous and conscientious enforcement of constitutional law, combined with an extensive education program to help many Czechs and Slovaks come to an understanding of the endemic racism of their society. Some progress has been made, as in the cessation of coercive sterilizations, but in many other respects the signs are far from reassuring.

As part of this process some protection must be given to the Roma to shield them from the most savage effects of current changes. The danger, already being realized, is that the tumultuous transition to a market economy will reduce many of the most

vulnerable Roma to penury, driving them in ever larger numbers to crime, prostitution, and abject dependency on state benefits. This would only serve to confirm the negative stereotype, setting back the time scale for harmonious coexistence by years. Romani political parties, cultural organizations, and media have a crucial part to play at this decisive moment, but there is a fear that they will continue to be vulnerable to the factionalism that has severely weakened their effect in the past.

Looking to the future the potential outcomes for the Roma are symbolized by two diametrically opposed views—the chilling dismissal of their humanity by the well-educated Prague doctor set against the quiet pride of the unsophisticated Slovak village officials from Žehra, who spoke of how the council had acted to transform immeasurably the conditions of “their” Roma. Perhaps the officials’ attitude betrayed traces of patronizing condescension, but, more important, it acknowledged that, in Žehra, Slovaks and Roma were fellow villagers and—more broadly—showed a clear recognition that somehow the fate of their two peoples was bound up together.

In both republics the demographic time bomb ticks on as Roma continue to grow in numbers at a far faster rate than Czechs and Slovaks. The problems this expanding minority poses for the proud possessors of their newly minted nation-states will not go away by themselves and must be solved one way or other. It is the “other” that is terrifying.

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