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Who Were the Czech Roma?

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<i>Dena more denaš</i>	<i>Run boy, run where</i>
<i>o šelune aven</i>	<i>are they taking me</i>
<i>lanci peha anen</i>	<i>the gendarmes are chasing</i>
<i>kehatar man lidžana</i>	<i>you the trees bend</i>
<i>o veša bandona</i>	<i>and the chains jangle</i>
<i>e pratja uštěna</i>	<i>and the fallen leaves rebel</i>
	<i>for I am innocent</i>

(old song of the Czech Roma)

In speaking or writing about the Roma living in the Czech Republic, the words “Czech Roma” are often used; banner headlines ask “Why are Czech Roma emigrating?” or “What do Czech Roma want?” This saddens me a little because the attribute “Czech” is not only used unnecessarily in relation to the Roma, but incorrectly. **For the words Czech Roma do not mean the Roma living in the Czech Lands at any given time, but refer to a specific group whose historical fortunes came to a definitive end some decades ago.** During the Second World War the Roma of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia were interned in specially established camps, and from there were deported to Nazi extermination camps from which the majority of them did not return. **THE TERM CZECH ROMA SHOULD BE RESERVED TO REFER TO THE LINEAGE WHICH CAME TO AN END WITH THE CLOSE OF THAT CHAPTER OF HISTORY– NOT ONLY FOR THE SAKE OF PIETY BUT ALSO FOR THE PRACTICAL PURPOSE OF HISTORICAL CLARITY.**

The so-called Czech Roma are a historical group that was never ethnically uniform. Some Roma families clearly came from the Hungarian Lands, while others came after long sojourns in the countries of western Europe. At any rate, their historical destinies were very similar due to their having ended up here; indeed, at the time of the occupation their fates painfully intersected. After 1945 the last Czech Roma increasingly closed ranks against the new Roma arrivals from Slovakia, where a majority had lived a sedentary existence for centuries, though isolated from the surrounding society in sometimes very large Roma settlements. These we call the

Slovak Roma. Historical circumstances significantly impacted and differentiated the spiritual lives of both Roma groups. The Czech Roma had been trying to integrate into Czech society for no less than a century, while the Slovak Roma, upon arriving in the Czech Lands, stood at the threshold of this long-running process. The Slovak Roma came from rural agrarian areas with a thriving traditional folk culture, an environment far different from life in Czech cities with a long-standing industrial tradition. Furthermore, it was the vagrant Roma, those who had still not established a strong position or permanent place in Slovak society, who came to the Czech Lands in search of a better life. The differences between the two Roma groups were patently clear from their first contact, and it was from that point that **the Roma from Bohemia and Moravia declared themselves to be Czech Roma in order to distinguish themselves from the Slovak Roma.** Almost no one was interested in the internal developments of the Roma groups and their differences at the time, but romists recorded and accepted these fundamental characteristics.

Who do we include in the group called Czech Roma? These are families who first visited our lands in the Middle Ages, who **gradually continued to return to the Czech Lands, who later roamed the Lands in smaller groups and who finally began to settle, chiefly in Moravia.** At the beginning of this history a key role was played by the families of the nobility on whose estates the Roma were allowed to settle. This first occurred sometime after 1698, a time when anti-Roma repression was at a high. In 1697 Emperor Leopold I issued a mandate which proscribed the Roma, who could, as a result, be murdered like animals with no threat of punishment to their murderers. If Roma groups fell into the hands of the law’s executors, the men were to be hanged and women and children were each to have an ear cut off, be tortured and expelled from the land. A repeat offence meant death for the women and children. It was at this time that Count Ondřej Kounic permitted a Roma family of smiths headed by Štěpán Daniel, to move from his Hungarian estate near the city of Gyar to his estate at Uherský Brod where they produced an assortment of blacksmith’s wares to complement the services offered by the local smithy. The Liechtenstein family allowed Roma to settle on its estate at Uherský Ostroh. These rather isolated acts of members of the nobility were undertaken based on individual impulse, and they had no opportunity to initiate a process of mass settlement of the Roma. The government of the “enlightened” rulers Maria Theresa and Josef II, whose attempts to settle and assimilate the Roma are well known, influenced the situation to any appreciable degree only in the Hungarian Lands. Moravia was only marginally affected, and the Czech Lands not at all. Nonetheless, Roma settlement in Moravia continued, initiated primarily by the Roma themselves. Regardless of the endeavours of the nobility or the royal court, the Roma themselves were interested in finding their place in society; in having a permanent home. **The factor of a purposive search for their own home within non-Roma society, which gave rise to a relatively successful process of integration, makes the Czech Roma a somewhat unique case that is in some respects germane to the present day.**

More intensive efforts to settle the Roma in permanent housing estates date to the beginning of the 19th century. It is necessary to bear in mind, however, that this process was frequently carried out against the will of the local populace. Nonetheless, the Roma who ignored the disapprobation of the local populace and persisted in their attempts to settle began slowly to join local village society, and in the period between the two world wars many Roma achieved unprecedented success. However, acceptance of the Roma by the dominant society was hard won and subject to certain conditions. One such case, clearly repeated many times under other circumstances, is the case of the first Roma family officially tolerated in Moravia. The family of Štěpán Daniel had to fulfill certain conditions in order to remain on the territory. This blacksmith family had to promise not to wear traditional Roma clothing, to cease using their mother tongue, to sever contacts with their extended family and to stop wandering. **The integration of the group of Czech Roma (primarily those living in Moravia) often meant not only engagement with society but also, unfortunately, adherence to conditions which soon led to assimilation.** Period photographs of the 19th and early 20th centuries show Moravian Roma “dressed up” in the local costume, Roma musicians in Slovak hats, etc. (see photos 1 and 2).

However, let us not be subject to the illusion that in the inter-war period only settled, integrated Roma existed in the Czech Lands. A number of Roma continued to live a nomadic existence. In Bohemia, owing to a combination of circumstances such as the disfavour of the nobility, local authorities and even the local populace toward Roma settlement, in the second half of the 19th century Roma remained unsettled. Possibly, some of the Roma moving around Bohemia were of the Sinti subethnic group [perhaps the descendants of the group of King Sindel (or Zindel), Panuel, Michal and Ondřej], descendants of Roma who first crossed our lands as early as the 15th century on their way westward principally to Germany and France, and who had then returned home at some later time. Before the war the largest number of Sinti lived in Germany; today they are considered to be German Roma. The Roma clans wandering the Czech Lands could originally have been Sinti who ultimately became naturalised, even taking Czech surnames. Typical surnames of the Roma wandering Bohemia were **Růžička, Serynek, Vrba, Janáček, Chadraba and Petržilka.** (The above assertion regarding the origin of the group of Czech Roma is thus far only a hypothesis, unsupported by professional research.) Nomadism in Bohemia was also connected with the offering of certain typical services to the populace such as knife sharpening, door-to-door selling, collection of waste materials, or the cleaning of duvet feathers. Roma also put on various attractions and entertainments such as circuses, shooting galleries, and carousels. There were even nomadic theatre troupes. Over time, Roma families joined with the family of the founder of Czech puppetry, Matěj Kopecký, as well as with other circus and entertainment families such as the Berouseks. These nomadic families, even if they were not considered equal to the rest of the population and were to some degree

despised, had their own, if clearly circumscribed, place in society. The populace counted on their offerings and ultimately came to express demand for their services. **Thus even the Roma in Bohemia had a place in pre-war society though somewhat different from that of the Roma living in Moravia.**

However, no picture of the Czech Roma would be complete and objective if it did not state that some Roma in Moravia and Bohemia neither performed nomadic trades nor attempted to become settled, but engaged in aimless vagrancy, frequently combined with petty theft, games of hazard and similar objectionable activities.

The fertility of Moravia has long attracted Roma settlers, many of whom sought permanent homes at least for the frozen winter months. Understandably, however, their efforts were thwarted by local populations who did not want Roma neighbours. The reason was clear: fear of systematic petty theft (chiefly of fowl) and of trespass on forests and fields. Village committees feared their eventual obligation to provide social support to indigent Roma. Some pioneering families of Moravian Roma were forced to exert ongoing pressure, as this represented their sole chance to succeed in winning a permanent, though unofficial, home, albeit at a deferential distance from “gadjo” dwellings. Hence arose the Roma camps, of which several dozen existed in Moravia in the second half of the 19th century. **The “Gypsy camp” or more correctly the *romano gav* — Roma village, as these colonies of small, irregularly-situated Roma houses were called, were isolated, established at a deferential distance from non-Roma communities at the outskirts of villages and peripheries of towns, only as close to townships and villages as the local population would allow.** Nevertheless it was these Roma, who managed to settle near or (in exceptional cases) within a village, who had far greater opportunities to engage in society. Long-term settlement led the Roma to the search for a permanent place in the greater society and led them to recognise the benefits and comforts for themselves and their children of conflict-free engagement. Thus, a majority of Roma with purpose and natural intelligence reached the decision to settle and change their way of life in the interests of their children.

The Roma settling in Moravia most probably came from the Hungarian Lands proper or from their Slovak parts. This group primarily comprised two extensive clans bearing the names of **Daniel** and **Holomek.** The names **Herák, Malík, Murka, Vašek, Kubík, Kýr** and others appear less frequently.

Before the Second World War, the lives of many Roma in Moravia did not differ greatly from those of the non-Roma population. These included the small Roma families settled in the towns of Nesovice, Snovídky, Velká nad Veličkou, Hrubá Vrbka and Uherský Brod. On occasion, however, other small Roma families did live an integrated existence in Moravian villages such as Svatobořice, Oslavany, Černovice, Strážnice and others which were otherwise known for their large Roma encampments whose inhabitants lived in isolation from the *gadjo* milieu (see photo 2a). A majority of these Roma had Christian weddings (the first one in 1773 in

Fryšták na Zlínsku) and went to church regularly. Moreover, the children of the nomadic Roma were baptised long before their families began to settle. The children of settled Roma participated in other Christian ceremonies such as first communion. A number of these Roma worked for local farmers or businessmen or were employed in factories. Men often worked as hired hands; women, as domestic servants or agricultural labourers. Some of the younger generation of settled Roma learned a trade and gained a certificate of apprenticeship, women as seamstresses and men as metalworkers (smiths, locksmiths, etc.). Some Moravian Roma managed not only to inconspicuously (and essentially anonymously) engage in *gadjo* society, but also to garner well-earned attention. Among these Roma were the legendary first violinist **Jožka Kubík of Hrubá Vrbka (1907-1978)** whose artistry influenced not only highland music but Slovak music generally. The first Roma teacher, **Antonín Daniel**, came from the Roma settlement in Oslavany near Brno, and attorney **JUDr. Tomáš Holomek (1911-1988)** and sociologist **Doc. RSDr. Miroslav Holomek, CSc. (1925-1989)** from **Svatobořice** in the Kyjov region.

The promising start to Roma integration, however, was violently disrupted and ultimately ended with the physical liquidation of this group in concentration camps during the Nazi occupation. **Thus the historical development of the group of Czech Roma which first settled in the Czech Republic in the early 17th century ended in 1945.** The Roma currently living in the Czech Republic are 80-90% Slovak Roma (including Hungarian), some fewer than 10% are Olach Roma, and the others comprise the few remaining Czech Roma and a small number of German Sinti.

I shall attempt to draw a picture of Roma experience of settlement in permanent communities using the true story of the Holomek family, from which our first Roma university student, **JUDr. Tomáš Holomek**, came. This family's history is interesting not only for this important personage, but also because its fortunes from its settlement to its liquidation are of near symbolic importance and represent typical moments in the history of the Czech Roma.

The tale of the Holomek family begins in Moravian Slovakia. This multi-generational family continually returned to one favoured place from the beginning of the 19th century and attempted to settle there. This was the small Moravian Slovak town of **Svatobořice**, situated about four kilometers from the capital of the region, the city of Kyjov.

General chronicles tell of the *Svatobořice Gypsies* from their very beginnings:

grandparents of the local Gypsies, Jura and Anna Holomek, frequently returned to settle at various locations on our village lands. Usually on the common by the station and later on the

border between Kyjov and Svatobořice (where they are now) a band of local citizens or servants waited at the encampment to drive the new arrivals away with sticks.¹

The Roma could not be discouraged and time and again they returned, only to be driven out. The Holomeks had still not settled in the second half of the 19th century, though some family members did wish to winter in this place. Other Svatobořice chronicles tell of the temporary nature of the Holomek's settlement: *"They lived by smithery, but the local populace seized their equipment and harassed them to such a degree that in a short time they always departed."²*

Ten years later, a chronicle notes further attempts by this family to settle in the same place:

drove them away. All the Gypsies had there was set afire, the Gypsies themselves were thrashed and one pregnant woman was burned in the conflagration. The Gypsies registered a complaint with the district administration, the affair was investigated, the main perpetrators punished, and ultimately ridiculed by their fellow citizens for some time afterward. 'The Gypsies let hi, have it' was a taunt that their enemies went so far as to write on the perpetrators' gates; the affair became known throughout the area and one of them had considerable trouble finding a bride as a result.³

Afterwards, the municipality had to house and feed the Roma for some time in a common barn and to pay them restitution for their burned possessions. The Roma used the funds to quickly build new cabins and then settled permanently. Some members of the large family, however, left the area to travel among the neighbouring villages plying the smith's trade and ultimately settling not too far away. The first to settle near the town of Svatobořice was Jura Holomek's son **Tomáš (1842-?)** with his extensive family.

In the Kyjov flooding of 1890, his family's canvas tent was destroyed and so Tomáš' son Martin built a new tent in a better location above the weir. However, the people of Svatobořice refused to tolerate the new tent and tore it down. Tomáš then resolved to build a stronger and more durable home near his own settlement, a wooden house which could not be torn down. He filed a building permit request with the Svatobořice Village Authority, but the village council rejected the request explaining that *"he has to remain among the other Gypsies on the outskirts."⁴* The Council did

¹ Chronicle of the village of Svatobořice, page 107 (for 1932). District archives (Hereafter DA), Hodonín.

² Svatobořice Municipal Office, ID No. 50, Entry *Gypsies and the Liquidation of the Gypsy Camp 1885-1943*, f. 596-undated, hand-written entry. DA Hodonín.

³ Chronicle of the village of Svatobořice, page 107 (for 1932). DA Hodonín.

⁴ See note 2, f. 313, 314.

allow for the possibility of Tomáš obtaining a site and permission to build, of course under the condition that all the other “Gypsies” left the area. The “enlightened” Tomáš Holomek (whose grandson JUDr. T. Holomek inherited his grandfather’s legal gifts) filed a complaint regarding Roma treatment with the District Administrator in Kyjov, and obtained a building permit. Still, half a year later the Kyjov Town Council sent its bailiffs to tear down his new cabin. Nonetheless, the District Administrator procured redress for Holomek and enabled Tomáš to build a new dwelling on the same spot. Other cabins were soon built around this one, forming the basis for the later Roma encampment which became one of the biggest in Moravia (see photo no. 3). Tomáš Holomek, the camp’s founder and a fighter for Roma rights, understandably became its head or *vajda*. He demonstrated a highly valued ability to achieve his aims even in the world of the *gadjo* and a natural gift for legal matters.

Owing to its location on the territorial boundary of two villages, the camp came to be called Hraničky (hranice = boundary) by the villagers and Roma alike. The camp’s location, a result of the persistent rejections of the two villages, was the cause of never-ending disputes over the native domicile of the Roma living in the camp. The settlement comprised about 15-20 buildings, the majority of which were made of wood and unfired bricks. In the 1930s about ninety Roma lived in the settlement. The heart of the camp was the extended Holomek-Daniel clan; only rarely did other names (e.g. Šubrt) appear when Roma men from both near and far came to the encampment to join their partners. The Kyjovka Creek, originating from a local factory, flowed by the camp and provided the only (albeit questionable) source of drinking water for its inhabitants. The residents of Hraničky made their living by traditional trades such as horse-trading, smithery, basket-weaving, “doing” magic and door-to-door rag-picking. However, handicrafts could provide very little in the way of a living at a time of ever increasing industrialisation. Moreover, most of these professions were remunerated in kind. Being homeless, large Roma families were not eligible for social support and so begging was a permanent factor even in the hardscrabble lives of the settled Moravian Roma. However, the Roma had to panhandle everywhere but the nearest village of Svatobořice due to the extremely bad relations between the Hraničky Roma and the locals.

After Tomáš, the head of the settlement was his eldest son Pavel (1882-1944). Pavel’s first-born daughter Rosina remembers with pride:

We didn’t tramp around, but rode! We built a carriage like in a circus and Dad added a front made out of slats so that we wouldn’t catch a draught. And inside? Here a bed, there a bed (she points to the right and then to the left). Yeah, and after that it got better and better Dad built a house out of slats and closed off a place for the horses, and when there was a horse market somewhere, we hitched them up to the wagon and off we went. We had it good there when Dad was earning and Mom fed us; she had a wide skirt with a pocket underneath. At the market she would sit on a bag of flour and scoop it out with a cup.

*That’s how we earned our living. We were poor but we loved one another, we were a good sort of family.*⁵

The Roma settlement at Hraničky represented a temporary solution for both the Roma and the local populace. While the Roma resigned themselves to their peripheral position and were glad at least of a place to call home, the locals had no intention of reconciling themselves to the camp. In 1908 the village renewed the conflict with the city of Kyjov over the settlement of the local Roma. The conflict lay in a boundary dispute; paradoxically, neither municipality wished to claim the land upon which the Roma settlement stood. The city of Kyjov finally went so far as to have the Roma settlement moved closer to Svatobořice, which in turn made every attempt to rid itself of the Roma, taking the case to the Office of the Governor in Brno and, ultimately, to the highest court the Court of Justice in Vienna. This was not the last time the dispute over the Svatobořice Roma was to be taken to the highest courts in the land.

It is no surprise, then, that the first Romany intellectual among us hailed from this settlement which had to fight tooth and nail for its existence and whose leaders demonstrated the ability to stand their ground even under the most adverse circumstances. In November of 1914 the Court of Justice in Vienna ruled that Tomáš Holomek, his wife and the families of their three sons were domiciled in Kyjov, while the family of his first-born son Pavel was residing in Svatobořice. As regards the other approximately ninety members of the clan living in Hraničky at the time, it was decreed that they “need not be tolerated on either municipal territory. “About those who were to obtain right of residence, extant documents state: “They may remain in your municipality only if they rent a flat or purchase or lease land on which to build a home.”⁶ And this they did. The seven-member family of Pavel Holomek moved into the village in 1917. “Dad couldn’t stand to see what those Roma on the balk were doing, and so he bought a house in the village,” says Rosina Holomková of her father’s motive for leaving Hraničky.

Horse-trading, the Holomek family trade, was one of the few Roma professions based on monetary remuneration. Nonetheless, the profits from the sale of horses were insufficient, and so during the First World War Pavel Holomek earned extra income by selling blankets and other goods he had purchased from Polish Jews quarantined in an internment camp in Svatobořice. He managed to save eighteen hundred crowns, enough to purchase a small house in the poor section of town. He sold his old cabin at Hraničky to a relative for one hundred crowns. The quality of the family’s living circumstances thus improved immeasurably, though the courageous decision to move closer to the world of the non-Roma brought with it a

⁵ As told by Rosina Holomková (1903-1989), based on a conversation of 13 April 1988

⁶ See note 2, f. 79-Vienna Court of Justice attorney Zdenko Auředníček to the Svatobořice Village Council (14 November 1914), DA Hodonín.

host of uncertainties. The people of Svatobořice were not favourably predisposed to any Roma as a result of their long-standing dispute with the Roma settlement at Hraničky. The first years of this new life were hard for the Holomeks; the townspeople were cold, disdainful and extremely mistrustful. Pavel Holomek's son, the Roma attorney JUDr. Tomáš Holomek, remembers: "*At the beginning they didn't like us, didn't trust us and kept their distance.*"⁷

The beginnings of the family's life in the community were associated with problems of a different type. At the Hraničky settlement life was, in a certain sense, free and unfettered, though subject to a number of ethnic norms and clan laws unknown to the non-Roma. The Roma carefully guarded the observance of these laws, which represented an important tool for their survival in a hostile world. From earliest infancy, children were schooled in these unwritten laws through the stories they heard and in every utterance, act and gesture of the adults. These oral laws thus formed an integral part of daily life from a very early age. In the village, however, the laws were different and foreign to the Roma mentality, and those who wished to live there had to make certain sacrifices to succeed. They slowly began to learn...

The eldest of Pavel's children, Rosína and Štěpán (or Pepék), were past school age. Fifteen year-old **Rosína (1903-1989)** took great pleasure in working as a helper to the village bricklayers. Her parents allowed their daughter to do so only after she promised not to climb the scaffolding, and so she passed mortar to the bricklayers and provided other assistance. Rosína remained illiterate for her entire life, refusing in later years her children's offers to teach her.

Pavel's eldest son **Pepék (1905-1943)** learned horse-trading from his father, and rode to horse markets to sell his stock. Pepék wanted to learn to read and write and his brother Tomáš taught him the fundamentals, which he developed during his compulsory military service to the point where he could read the newspaper. He was easy-going and therefore had far less trouble adapting to the new way of life in the village than his sister Rosína or his somewhat temperamental brother Slávek. Pepék later took regular employment in a blue collar position at the local Viktorín Works^{7b} where he worked for many years.

In contrast to their older siblings, Pavel Holomek's younger sons **Slávek (1908-1943)**, **Tomáš (1911-1988)** and **Vincek (1915-1943)** were able to adapt their behaviour to the new models far more easily, as they were of the age at which school attendance was obligatory. This was a novelty because the children of Hraničky, considered to be undomiciled, were not permitted to attend primary school, whether they wished to or not. In long-running discussions, the village of Svatobořice

repeatedly refused to establish a special one-room Gypsy school in the Roma encampment, arguing that the Roma of Hraničky were not domiciled in their territory.

Tomáš (1911-1988) was the fourth (second to last) child of Pavel and Terezie Holomek. He was named after his combative grandfather, the founder of Hraničky, which, considering the grandson's future legal career, was somewhat prophetic. He was born at a time of renewed disputes over the domicile of the Roma settlement's inhabitants. He spent the first seven years of his childhood in Hraničky in a small, one-room, clay-floored cabin, on which a total of seven family members slept after the birth of his younger brother Vincek. As a young boy Tomáš had great difficulty in dealing with the taunts of white children. For years he had no idea how to defend himself against shouts of "*vikán*" (Gypsy), and invariably responded with violence. Once he reached high school, however, he understood that his only viable line of defence was knowledge. Upon moving to the village, both six-year-old Tomáš and ten-year-old Slávek were obliged to attend school, and both entered first grade in August 1918 – despite the difference in their ages.

*We sat in the last row, the children laughed at us, kept away from us. There was nothing for us to do but leave school and run to the field beyond the village, returning home in the evening as if we had been in school. Once a civil servant came to the house and threatened our Dad with prison if he didn't send us to school. My brother and I heard this and started to cry. We felt very bad for our parents and began to attend school regularly so that they wouldn't get into trouble. The teacher won us over by having us sit in the front row, bringing us chocolate and taking us home to our parents every day at lunchtime. Her father was the school principal.*⁸

Only after several years, once they realised that the family was rather different from the Roma of Hraničky, did the inhabitants of Svatobořice begin to treat the Holomeks with a degree of acceptance. The first contacts between the Holomeks and the townspeople were initiated by local farmers in need of Pavel's services as a horse-trader. He was extremely skilled with horses, and they often called him to their barns rather than the veterinarian, who would have charged for his services. For Pavel, however, a Roma father of a large family, food for his children or feed for his own horses sufficed as payment. Thus did the inherited experience of this traditional family trade create a bridge for later amicable relations between the villagers and Pavel's family.

⁷ As told by JUDr. Tomáš Holomek (1911-1988) based on conversations of 6 January, 12 February, 15 February, 8 March and 12 March 1988.

^{7b} A factory for rolled metal products built in Svatobořice in 1905. Compare with DA Hodonín- Chronicle of the Village of Svatobořice, pp. 13, 87.

⁸ As told by JUDr. Tomáš Holomek.



1 Moravian Romka in typical Moravian Slovak folk costume, First Republic

2 Roma camp in Pážnice, First Republic

3 The Roma camp of Hraníčka, photograph 1938-1941

4 Terezie Holomková (1873-1966), née Danielová

5 Attendance certificate of Tomáš Holomek from the 4th class of the 5-class school in Svatobořice, 28. 6. 1923

6 The Realschule in Kyjov, II.A, school year 1924/1925. Tomáš Holomek standing in the second row, second on the right.

Pavel's wife **Terezie (1873-1966**, see photo no. 4) helped the farmers in their fields and homes. She came to be a great favourite among the local farmers and a sought-after helper known both for her diligence and the stubbornness through which she expressed her "Gypsy pride." According to contemporaries, it was said throughout the village: "*That Holomková, she's a fine Gypsy woman.*"⁹ Like a well brought up woman from a good Roma family, she respected one of the most important of the family laws the ritual cleanliness of food. In brief, this meant, among other things, not eating any food cooked outside the family circle, that is, food whose preparation she could not observe and which therefore may not have been prepared in accordance with the basic principles of hygiene and cleanliness. Her grandsons confirm that Terezie never allowed anyone in the family to eat cooked food they had received from, say, a farmwife for helping in the fields. The children once watched balefully as she threw pastries to the chickens saying "*The farmwife is dirty and you won't eat any food from her.*" One of her granddaughters further remembers: "*I had to wash her back every day. She had a big basin for it. And then I had to check her scalp. I always told her 'Old woman, your scalp is so clean it shines,' but she said 'Don't tell me tales. I know I have lice. Off with you now. But she really never did have lice.'*"¹⁰

After moving to the village, the Holomek family only gradually gave up the occasional petty theft of food. Village life gradually put an end to such behaviour; neighbours became potential customers or employers and, if relations were good, voluntary helpers in time of need, offering a cup of milk or flour. All the same, the poorer quarter of the village had little to offer, though the more distant townships did hold some attraction, and in lean times family members would venture there for a hen or two. Extant penal registers confirm petty thefts perpetrated by the three eldest Holomek children: Rosína stole trees and the act was classified as theft for gain, while elsewhere she was caught begging, which was classified as indigence. By 1939 she had committed seven similar transgressions. Her brothers Pepek and Slavík were penalised for gambling (cards, shell games) and Slávek for stealing chickens. Each of them was punished four times, serving anywhere from twenty-four hours to seven days in jail. Former police inspector Klement Boda recalls: "*Mainly they were the kinds of stupid offences for which they could have paid a fine, but they preferred to go and sit. Twenty-four hours in the jail equalled a 10 crown fine.*"¹¹ Only the two youngest brothers, Tomáš and Vínček (who, incidentally, were the best of friends), have no records in the penal registers.

⁹ As told by Emílie Machálková, nee Holomková (born 1926), based on conversations of 8 June, 19 July, 5 August and 10 September 1989.

¹⁰ As told by Ilona Šelígová, nee Holomková (born 1932) based on a conversation of 26 July 1989.

¹¹ As told by Criminal Inspector Klement Boda (1908-?) based on conversations of 6 February, 4 March, 10 July, 19 July and 7 September.

The Holomeks' settlement in the village went a long way toward opening their own eyes as well as those of the other villagers. Thus far, the dominant society had represented an unfriendly monolith in the eyes of the Roma. However, communal life within one village had to change this; the first, tentative economic relationships later grew into personal and at times even friendly relations. The faceless mass was differentiated into specific faces, each with its own human qualities. Daily, relatively close contact was the rule and as personalities became familiar, fear of the unknown dissipated, and the demonisation of the "other" was undone. Their Roma neighbours came to be distinguished in the eyes of the villagers from the unnamed *Gypsy rabble from Hraničky*. They began to speak of the Holomek family as "our Gypsies." Moreover, the smaller children who were now permitted to attend school had a further opportunity to engage in non-Roma society, which they indeed did. Tomáš enjoyed the greatest success in school, having entered first grade at the optimal age of six, as did the youngest, Vínček.

Despite the great progress made on both sides, however, these Roma continued to be a thorn in the side of some villagers, and in particular, of the village council. Long after their arrival in the village, the Holomeks still were denied the full rights accorded to other citizens. According to a ruling of the Court of Justice in Vienna of 1914, Pavel Holomek should have acquired right of domicile in the village of Svatobořice. Nonetheless, the village was not prepared to accede to the decision and refused to grant the family right of domicile until ten years had elapsed since its arrival. In 1928 this ten-year deadline elapsed. Still, after the urgings of half a year, right of domicile was granted only to Pavel, Terezie and their three youngest children, Slávek, Tomáš and Vínček. Rosína and Pepek were not granted this right as they were already of age, and for this reason were considered to be residents of Kyjov. This shrewd manoeuvre later served to justify the forced removal of Rosína Holomková and her new family from the village. Rosína and her family thus left Svatobořice to settle in the village of Nesovice. However, the wrong that she suffered would later prove to be a blessing in disguise.

For the officially homeless of Hraničky the situation became more and more complicated than it was for the Holomek family, which had learned to look after itself. None of the Hraničky children went to school. The situation of the camp's inhabitants became especially intolerable in the winter months when they had neither fuel nor even basic food. An unusually harsh cold descended in 1929. As a local chronicler remembers:

It was so cold they burned the entire cemetery fence as well as the wooden crosses of the former emigrant cemetery, the acacias by the brooks, and dead trees. After many years, they again had to ask in the village for some potatoes or straw (normally they went to other villages as

*they wouldn't get anything from us because they robbed from the locals year-round, mainly from the fields in autumn).*¹²

A big shift in the relations between the village and the Holomek family related to the unexpected scholarly successes of **Tomáš**. Were his parents so prescient as to name their most gifted son after his celebrated grandfather, or was it the name itself which predestined its bearer for a great future? Tomáš proved to be a gifted pupil and his marks showed it. He himself remembers his approach as follows: *"In 1923 when I was in the fourth form Director Frank went to see my father and told him that I was doing well in school and that if I should be enrolled in gymnasium (see document no. 5). Father said that he didn't understand it, but that if it were true he had nothing against it."*¹³ Tomáš did indeed enter and successfully matriculate from gymnasium. Credit for his success was due to the entire family, which supported Tomáš, investing all their hopes and finances in him with a view to a better future. He was the only family member to have proper shoes, so that he could visit school in any weather: *"Mother woke with me every morning and made me black ersatz coffee and plain potatoes. I ate my breakfast and in winter and summer walked the four kilometres to Kyjov."*¹⁴ For almost the entire duration of his studies Tomáš sat in the fourth row beside the son of a farmer from Stavěšice, František Řihánek, who split his snack with Tomáš for seven years. Řihánek remembers his poor schoolmate as follows: *"He was a great guy. I had trouble with mathematics and he was always willing to help me. Not everybody was like that."*¹⁵ Socially, however, Tomáš became closest to the son of a miner:

*We two were the poorest... I always sat close to him... He liked to talk, and he liked people. Our French professor Václav Hala always held him up as an example. Our class teacher Josef Horák, a Czech teacher, was also proud of him. Tomáš was extremely hard-working. At recess, when we went off with the other kids, he kept working. But he wasn't a swot, no way! He was nice and polite and we all liked him."*¹⁶

However, according to the recollections of Tomáš himself, we know that among his classmates and in front of his teachers he had always to exercise strict control over his behaviour, assuming that any transgression would be viewed differently than if committed by one of his fellow students. In fact he was boisterous and emotional in nature but managed to keep himself in check in the service of his one and only goal to study. The words of another of his classmates testify to Tomáš' success at

self-control: *"I never saw or heard of Tomáš blowing up during a discussion like his brother Slávek. He did show a wilder disposition when completely at ease, like while playing football though he was never brutal, just spontaneous. "Another classmate described his behaviour as follows:*

*You could say his behaviour in class was consciously self-contained. Whenever we laughed at a classmate, he always hid his laughter behind his hand. He deliberately did not draw attention to himself. He acted wisely... He was the first Gypsy at the Kyjov Gymnasium (see photo no. 6) and at that time the only one (the second was Tomáš' nephew Miroslav). He excelled with Professor Kalus in history and geography. He thought highly of him. At the time I didn't even realise that Tomáš was different from me, that he was a Gypsy... Actually, I never associated him with the Gypsies at Hraníčky, which we regularly passed on our bicycles."*¹⁷

A student from a lower form recalls: *"Tomáš was well-known in the school. His origins made him interesting. We always looked in the school yearbook to see if he had a star beside his name, that is, if he passed with honours. I remember that if he hadn't, it was an exception."*¹⁸

Tomáš also liked to participate in extra-curricular activities at the Kyjov Gymnasium. He sang tenor in the school choir, and regularly did gymnastics exhibitions at the May student carnivals. After school he engaged in athletics and was an excellent sprinter. As a university student he represented our Republic in table tennis. However, his favourite sport was football. As he gladly mused: *"Vincek and I were behind the birth of the football team in Svatobořice. We started by kicking around a nylon stuffed with rags in our yard. Gradually, other local boys came to play and we created a football team. We played on the field in Písky, in Zmole and near us in Hlíník. "He played football in Svatobořice until 1932, when an official football team was founded, with the Holomek brothers among the first members. "Football helped a great deal in improving relations between us and the villagers; on the team we were all the same, what mattered was not whether I was the son of a farmer or a pauper but how I played."*¹⁹ (see photo no. 7)

From gymnasium Tomáš Holomek went on to study law at Charles University. He had to interrupt his studies during the war years but completed them in the first year after the war (see document no. 9). Once the well-known Prague newspapers (*Pražský ilustrovaný zpravodaj* and others, see document no. 10) began to write about a certain Tomáš Holomek from a small Moravian hamlet, the position of Pavel's family in the village was substantially improved. A university graduate or student was rare for the village; indeed only seldom did a wealthy farmer have a son at university, and here we had the son of a Gypsy. The people of Svatobořice stopped associating the

¹² Chronicle of the Village of Svatobořice, p. 68 (for 1929), DA Hodonín.

¹³ As told by JUDr. Tomáš Holomek.

¹⁴ DITTO.

¹⁵ František Řihánek (born 1910) based on a conversation of 10 August 1989.

¹⁶ Václav Kašpárek (born 1910) based on a conversation of 25 July 1989.

¹⁷ Helena Silvarová, nee Pátková (born 1911) based on a conversation of 10 August 1989.

¹⁸ JUDr. Jaromír Kovářik (born 1913) based on a conversation of 28 July 1989.

¹⁹ JUDr. Tomáš Holomek.

Holomek family with the Roma of Hraničky, whom the villagers still despised and continuously wished to be rid of. However, the relatively integrated members of the Holomek family never broke off relations with their extended family in Hraničky. Tomáš Holomek remembers: “We got on well with them, and were happy together. They were our family and we always visited them.” Another recollection illustrates the family’s relations:

Tomáš returned home from Prague for feasts where the whole family gathered. Everybody was friendly with him, everyone admired him. That time the feasts were organised separately by the Orli (Eagles) in the Eagle Hall and by the Sokoli (Falcons) in the Falcon Hall. At the Eagle Hall there were only farmers and wealthy people. Tomáš and Vínček went to have a look and stood in a small gallery. Three fairly well-dressed Roma boys from Hraničky showed up. An old guy stood in the middle of the hall and shouted that to them that Gypsies were not permitted, that they should get out! At that moment Tomáš jumped over the balustrade of the gallery, surprising the old guy so much that he fell over. T4lien he got up he began ‘Tomd I didn’t mean you. I meant those boys from Hraničky. Tomáš responded ‘How do you mean? I’m a Gypsy too. Those boys from Hraničky weren’t doing anything. If they aren’t allowed to be here, then I’m not staying either.’ And he got Vínček and they left with the other three boys to go to the Falcon Hall.’²⁰

Pavel’s youngest son **Vínček (1915-1943)** was also quite gifted, especially in mathematics. Despite his excellent marks, however, Vínček was not able to continue his studies after basic school (see photo no. 10) as his brother Tomáš, while studying at the gymnasium, was a heavy financial burden on the family. So Vínček learned to be a fitter. He worked at the local Viktorín Works until his 1943 internment in a concentration camp (see photo no. 11). Vínček was the only one of Pavel’s sons to choose a Roma woman as his partner; the other sons all chose non-Roma, which their mother Terezie found extremely hard to bear. Vínček further pleased his mother by choosing a young woman from a very good Roma family that was settled in nearby Snovídky. Emílie Danielová was not only beautiful, but she could sing, play several stringed instruments and was a trained seamstress. She and Vínček both died in the concentration camp. They saved their only child, a daughter named Rena, by hiding her with non-Roma friends before their deportation. **Růžena Holomková-Kočí (1939-1985)** studied at secondary library school after the war (see photo no. 12). Her son Pavel, a graduate of the Charles University Faculty of Philosophy, today runs a successful language school.

In the oppressive times of the second half of the 1930s, hate campaigns against the Roma became ever more intensive, and the dispute over the *Svatobořice Gypsies* started up again. A petition taken up by the Svatobořice Village Council and sent to

Government Chairman Rudolf Beran on 5 February 1939 fanned the flames of anti-Roma feeling. The petition stated:

Many speak on the radio and write in the daily papers of how we must adapt to the needs of the new state. In the Gypsy question it is of utmost urgency that immediate statutory measures be taken other than the mere stamping of thumb—prints in Gypsy identity cards. Where a policy of humanity has so far failed, we must embark on another path. We must not be subject to censure we want to cleanse the body of our nation of such parasites as the Gypsies.’²¹

Sadly, this Svatobořice petition provided the impetus for rapid implementation of the Roma measures then under preparation. In November of the same year a decree on the enforced settlement of nomadic persons was issued. Once Svatobořice had feverishly worked to get rid of the Hraničky Roma, it then had the task of finding proper accommodation for them. The local Roma had been settled there for more than 50 years and should rightfully have found domicile in the village. However, the territorial boundary dispute between the two municipalities again flared up and culminated in the liquidation of the Roma encampment at Hraničky in Spring 1941. The Roma families were relocated to various surrounding villages. Once the liquidation of Hraničky was completed, the Svatobořice Village Council could write to their Brno attorney that “...With that the entire dispute over the right of domicile of the Roma on the Kyjov-Svatobořice boundary which had been dragging on since 1864 was resolved sooner than all expectations.”²² The majority of the Roma from Hraničky were ultimately sent to the so-called Gypsy camp at Hodonín u Kunštátu for reasons of racial persecution. A smaller number was deported directly to the concentration camp at Auschwitz. Only a very few who had been born in Hraničky survived the war. Thus ended the history of one of the largest Roma encampments in Moravia.

The situation for the families of all three sons of Tomáš Holomek Senior the founder of Hraničky who since the First World War had lived in non-Roma environments and gradually adapted to non-Roma society, was just as difficult during the occupation as for the nomadic and unemployed Roma. At the beginning of the war, the integrated Roma believed that the decree aimed at “the final resolution of the Gypsy question” did not relate to them. This did seem to be the case at first as **the racist nature of the resolution of the so-called Gypsy question in the Protectorate was not fully evident at the outset**. It later became clear that its intention was not to address the Roma who were *asocial* or *unadaptable* **the**

²⁰ Emílie Machálková.

²¹ Nečas, Ctibor: *On the Fate of the Czech and Slovak Gypsies in the Years 1939-1945*. Brno, 1981, pp. 24-25.

²² See note 2, f. 564 – Svatobořice Village Council to JUDr. O. Brázda (31 May 1941).

liquidation of Gypsies and Gypsy crossbreeds was carried out from an “anthropological” perspective.

The decree issued by Heinrich Himmler on 16 December 1942 made these racist intentions patently clear. Based on the decree, not only *Gypsies*, but also *Gypsy crossbreeds*, were to be interned in a newly-built concentration camp at Auschwitz II-Birkenau. The decree applied not only to Roma living in the Reich, but to the Roma living in all the lands subordinated to the Third Reich, including those living in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

On 5 August 1942 the majority of the original inhabitants of Hraničky were sent to the newly-opened Gypsy concentration camp in Hodonín u Kunštátu, a transit point for the Roma of Moravia on their way to the extermination camp. Those who survived local internment were thus gradually deported to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. Only the family of Pavel Holomek in Svatobořice remained. His sons Pepek, Slávek and Vincek continued to work in the local Viktorín Works, which produced gas cookers. A co-worker remembers that *“even though they knew that all the Gypsies from nearby were being taken away, they believed until the last moment that they would be left alone because they were permanently settled and working.”*²³ All three were dragged off on 19 March 1943. At the time of their deportation, the Roma had no idea what awaited them. In order to keep them in line the gendarmes assured them that there was no need to worry, they were simply being taken somewhere to work. The Holomek brothers had a clear chance to escape shortly before the gendarmes were to come for them, but they feared that if they fled their wives and children crossbreeds would be deported in their place in retaliation. Regardless, it was only a little later that the children were to be taken away. The daughter of the oldest brother, Pepek, will never forget the moment when she saw her father for the last time:

*Dad went by the name Josef He had been baptised Štěpán, but we kids didn't know that. From the 18th to the 19th of March we always celebrated Josef's name-day in Svatobořice. Musicians went around the villages and wished every Josef well. My Dad already knew he was going. His suitcase was packed, he was beautifully dressed as if for a special occasion he always took care to dress well. When people found out that they were taking Dad away, they came and brought him food for the trip. Salamis, duck, but he couldn't fit everything into his suitcase. They all really liked him, especially our neighbours. They played in the village all night. The gendarmes came for him in the morning when it was still dark. Dad came to our room, kissed and hugged each of us and left. He had had a feeling. Even before the war began he would say to our mother: 'Come on, let's all go to India.'*²⁴

²³ Josef Kulheim (born 1907) based on a conversation of 25 July 1989.

²⁴ Ivona Šeligová.

The source documents for compiling the lists of Roma to be deported were assembled by the village together with the local gendarmerie. Thus there was a clear opportunity for the mayor of the village to vouch for “his” Roma and save them from deportation. However, it must be noted that this was done in only a very few exceptional cases. Pavel's only daughter **Rosína**, who had earlier been forced to move with her family out of Svatobořice, was extremely fortunate in that the mayor of her new home, the village of Nesovice, stood behind her, as did the chief of the local gendarmerie. The Roma of Nesovice were forbidden to travel by train or to appear in local concourses, and were demeaned in other ways, but were given a chance to survive the war. Rosína's son, **Miroslav Holomek (1925-1989)** was a student of the Kyjov Gymnasium at the time, but understandably had to leave school due to his race. Nonetheless, he completed his gymnasium studies after the war, went on to university, and became a sociologist.

After two months of imprisonment in Auschwitz-Birkenau II, **Pepek**, along with his brother **Slávek** and some other Roma attempted escape. They were caught, incarcerated and, after being made examples of through public torture, killed by firing squad on 22 May 1943. Soon after the execution of his brothers, **Vincek** died in pain from the effects of camp-fever (typhus). His wife Emílie, together with the family patriarch **Pavel Holomek**, were murdered in the concentration camp gas chambers as the Germans liquidated their prisoners in anticipation of the advancing enemy troops. On the night of the 2nd to the 3rd of August 1944 approximately three thousand Roma were murdered.

Pavel Holomek, the family patriarch, came to the concentration camp later than his sons. He had fled with his wife Terezie to hide in the woods around Nesovice near his daughter Rosína's home. She regularly provided them with food, as did the forestry workers and gamekeepers who knew they were in hiding. The gamekeepers occasionally gave them shelter, though they mainly slept in the woods in hay-filled mangers. At the end of March it was still quite cold and damp due to heavy rains. The seventy year-old Terezie contracted pneumonia under these intolerable living conditions. Her husband secretly carried the gravely ill Terezie to their daughter's house in Nesovice. She could not go to the hospital so they called their family doctor from Kyjov. He visited and treated Terezie, who was hidden in a closet, regularly. However, somebody from Nesovice turned the couple in and the desperately ill Terezie made one last attempt to save her family by pouring the blood of a chicken over her prone body and claiming to be spitting up blood and on the verge of death. Thus she was saved from the transport. However, her husband Pavel was immediately despatched to the Gypsy camp in Hodonín u Kunštátu, and in 1943 to Auschwitz, after his sons Pepek and Slávek had already been executed. Thanks to tremendous luck and an “unyielding life force” Terezie survived the war and lived to be 93 years old. Aside from her five children, she also raised her granddaughter Růženka, whose parents did not return from the concentration camp.

Tomáš Holomek was informed of imminent danger sooner than other Roma. He represented a clear precedent disproving the racist theories of the ineducability of the inferior “Gypsy race.” After concluding his university studies he worked in a Kyjov glassworks as an assistant clerk, and it was at work that he learned of the interest in his capture. He himself remembers the beginnings of the chase: “*I had a telegram at work from my school friend ing. Josef Mareš who worked in Prague at the Ministry of Public Works. The telegram said ‘It’s urgent, your Doctor God’.*”²⁵ With the help of some others, in particular Criminal Inspector Klement Boda and Sergeant Kantek, Tomáš was warned in time. Still, all attempts to have his name removed from the list of individuals slated for deportation proved to be unrealistic. All the involved gendarmes could do was advise Tomáš to flee. He hid with non-Roma relatives for the duration of the war and for a time stayed in Slovakia where he found cover in a Roma encampment. While Tomáš was absent, his wife hid their half-breed children Karel and Marcelína with far-off relatives. Karel was later to become a mechanical engineer and Marcelína a nurse. All the children of the two siblings are university graduates.

A great drama was to be played out in the case of the six children of Pepek Holomek. Not long after his deportation, his wife and children were summoned to Hodonín to a commission which was preparing further transports to Auschwitz which were to include “Gypsy half-breeds.” Inspector Klement Boda was present at the selection and remembers: “*Criminal Secretary Herzig looked into their faces and said ‘Bleibt heir’ (stays here) or ‘Geht mit’ (to the transport)... Herzig was extremely temperamental, a Reich German. Usually, when he saw black hair and black eyes, he sent them to Auschwitz.*”²⁶ It was decided that all six Holomek children were to join the transport without their mother. In any case, she opted to follow her children. It was at this fateful moment that Klement Boda and a Svatobořice gendarme, Sergeant Angr, both of whom knew the family well, displayed their personal bravery by helping the half-crazed mother and her children to flee. Cecilie Holomková hid with her children until the end of the war. She had no food-cards and so was fully dependent on the kindness of her friends and family. All six children studied after the war, most of them as cooks and food servers (see photo no. 13). Their children are today all high school or university graduates.

Three members of Pavel Holomek’s seven-member family survived the war due to good luck: Terezie, Rosína and Tomáš.

A worse fate awaited the families of Pavel Holomek’s three brothers in Kyjov. Not a single member of the three families returned from the concentration camp.

Those Czech Roma who understood the danger ahead of them and hid before the deportations were the only ones with a real chance of survival. Some of the Roma

who fled joined the partisans. The best-known of these was **Josef Serinek (1900-1974)** known as the Black Partisan.²⁷ After escaping from the Gypsy camp at Lety u Písku he became a member of the Čapájev forest partisans the first in the Czech-Moravian uplands.

No more than five hundred Czech Roma returned from the “camps of death” after the war. Their homes and dwellings no longer existed. All of the Roma encampments had been razed to the ground, and the homes of the settled village Roma had either been appropriated by others, or completely ransacked. The Roma returning to their villages were provided with accommodation and work; however, they frequently left the painful memories of their former homes behind, and looked to settle elsewhere. For the most part they took non-Roma partners, as so few other Roma from the large clans that had been living in the Czech Lands returned. The Roma coming here after the war, particularly from eastern Slovakia, were on a different social and cultural level and therefore not much mutual contact occurred. Over time, the few descendants of the surviving Czech Roma were subject to natural assimilation. Thus culminated the fate of this Roma group which had successfully begun the process of integration. In 1945, the Slovak Roma among us were to begin this same process all over again.

In: *Life in Black and White*.

²⁵ JUDr. Tomáš Holomek.

²⁶ Klement Boda.

²⁷ Compare: Nebojsa, Bořivoj: *What Was It Like with the Partisans?* Tišnov 1998, pp. 27-30.