

The Roma in the Czech Lands: Past and Present

The people we know as Romanies, Roma or Gypsies probably left the sub-continent of India around the year 1000. Based on linguistic evidence, most scholars believe that they are of Indian origin. It is also believed that their language belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family, more particularly to the Indo-Aryan subgroup along with, for example, Hindi, Urdu or Sanskrit.

I. The Origin of Roma Dissenting Theories

The language of the Roma is spoken, however, exclusively outside of India. Thus there exist dissenting theories concerning its origin, one of them being the theory of the so-called Dutch school represented by Leo LUCASSEN and Wim WILLEMS.

These scholars claim that the differences among the various subgroups of Roma in terms of language, religion, customs and even colour of skin are so vast that there hardly could have been a single original people.

They argue that a similar itinerant lifestyle alone does not qualify the Roma to be one nation, as from roughly 1400 until early 1900 so many different groups of people peddled goods, offered various services, divined future, entertained, and worked as seasonal labourers, that the term *Gipsy* was easily assigned to just about anyone.

This is an interesting challenge to the traditional understanding of who the Roma are, but it does not mean that Leo LUCASSEN and Wim WILLEMS are coming from a different background from the rest of Romany studies experts.

They only choose to interpret the facts available differently. In this paper, we present Romany studies from the more conventional point of view of scholars such as Angus FRASER, Thomas ACTON and Ian HANCOCK, or the late Milena HUEBSCHMANNOVÁ, who was extremely instrumental in establishing Romany studies as an academic discipline in the former Czechoslovakia.

II. From India to Central Europe

Why the ancient ancestors of the Roma left their original homeland of Punjab and Rajasthan is yet to be ascertained. There are numerous theories, but none of them has supplied sufficiently convincing evidence so far.

Some believe that proto-Roma accompanied trading caravans bound for Europe as entertainers, musicians and providers of various services. Others think it might have been a question of finding ever more removed areas of business, having satisfied the needs of local people for a considerable time to come.

Others still hold that the Persian king BAHRAM V was given a large number of Gipsy musicians, who did not know how to work the land but were eventually allowed to roam the Persian lands. Most likely it was a combination of several factors.

We would like to point out, though, that to contemporary Roma worldwide, India has very little meaning other than as an unreachable romantic paradise on which they sometimes place their hopes.

A common Romany, from for example the Czech Republic, has no specific relationship to India and their furthest memories of ancestry usually lead to Central Europe, Hungary or Transylvania, Romania.

This is not to say that the Indian origin is deemed false, let alone rejected, but it simply has no bearing on everyday life with its tangible up-to-date problems. Rather, questions of origin have become a useful political tool in the hands of Romany intellectuals, who struggle for the recognition of one unique Romany nation.

Linguistic evidence shows that the most probable route from India to Europe led across the Persian Empire, Armenia, the Byzantine Empire and Greece to the Balkans. In the early XIVth century, the first Gypsies arrived in Central and Western Europe.

They presented themselves as pilgrims leading an itinerant life in order to pay penance and be granted forgiveness for alleged crimes they had committed against Jesus Christ (legends of the nature of the crime vary).

In an overtly Christian mediæval Europe, this was at first accepted

with understanding and the Gypsies were on the whole given a warm welcome. But soon the falsehood of their claim for protection and means became clear.

At the same time, the approach to labour following murderous plagues changed from hiring vagrant labourers to securing steady ones; therefore, Gypsies became victims of a vicious and bloodthirsty persecution, with the sole objective of banishing them from the countries they were then roaming.

In the Czech and Slovak lands this went on until the mid-eighteenth century, when Empress MARIA THERESA and her son JOSEPH II of the Austro-Hungarian Empire came up with the first concept of integrating them into the standing system.

They wanted their labour, as well as wished for law and order to be established, but also exercised the typical absolutist belief that every pagan soul must be saved by and for the glory of Jesus Christ.

This period of utter assimilation when traditional costumes, customs and languages were ignored, interethnic marriages were encouraged and Gypsy children were placed in host families for re-education, also had some advantages.

Firstly, this was the first time the Gypsies received education of any sort, and secondly, since this time Gypsy clans gradually, if forcefully, started to settle and cultivate various crafts, such as blacksmithing, basket-weaving or coppersmithing.

Little by little, the various Gypsy subgroups became an integral part of the local rural population, more so in Slovakia, where their services such as music, trough-making or horse-dealing became indispensable to local economies.

III. From 1927 through 1948

In 1927, shortly after the independent Czechoslovakia had come into existence in 1918, the first of the two modern laws that would help disintegrate, massacre and culturally debase local Gypsies, was passed.

All Gypsies were registered, fingerprinted, exact routes of customary mobility were traced, and they were issued Gypsy identity cards. For one thing, this prevented semi-itinerary Gypsies from taking detours or digressing from the stated route, which in the hungry years to follow would lead to lack of means and starvation.

Secondly, these same identity cards, and the register of them, were used in WWII to identify and intern Gypsies, to place them in camps



and ultimately annihilate them in the gas-chambers of concentration camps.

The 1927 law and all other attempts before and after to keep track of Gypsies led to the general hate among the Roma for providing personal information and signing documents of any sort.

The memory of the people has retained the past reality that owning up to one's name or origin automatically leads to trouble or death. This explains why official censuses bring such inadequate information on real numbers of Roma in respective states (32.000 in the 1991 Czechoslovakian census. and 12.000 in the 2001 Czech census, while according to the official estimates there must be at least 250.000 Romanies in the current Czech Republic).

Concealing information is a self-preserving mechanism. While Slovakia, as a satellite state, supported Nazi Germany during the Second World War, Czech lands became part of the Nazi-ruled Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.

It is a disgrace that the modern Czech Republic has only just started to come to terms with the fact that it was not Germans who tortured and killed Czech and Moravian Roma in Lety u Písku and Hodonín u Kunštátu camps, but our own people, overly eager to deal with the "Gypsy scum" themselves. This, and the subsequent transports to Auschwitz, resulted in a fatal decrease in numbers of the so-called Czech Roma to some 600 surviving individuals after the war had ended.

In Slovakia, Gypsies were discriminated against, persecuted and interned as well, but they were spared the final solution thanks to the sluggishness of authorities and the war, which luckily ended just in time.

The reunited post-war Czechoslovakia was at first willing to accept Gypsies in their midst on equal measures, partly because of the effects of the Porrajmos (Roma Holocaust or Great Devouring).

The other reason was to recognize their courage and help as partisans in wartime. The communist coup of 1948, however, was about to bring yet another difficulty to the poor unsuspecting survivors.

Like MARIA THERESA, communists believed that there was not a grain worth saving of the unique Gypsy culture, and they set out to destroy it. Similarly to the Nazis, they labelled them as a social group with dwindling residua of ethnicity.

There followed decades of tough assimilation, boosted by a final forced-sedentarisation law in 1958, when all itinerant Gypsies were ordered to settle and the wheels of their caravans were literally sawn off.

IV. From 1945 through 1989

The period of unrelenting assimilation affected the language and culture of the Roma heavily. Rural settlements in Slovakia, for centuries based on family and clan principles, were razed to the ground.

At the same time, the people were randomly moved to other villages and cities. The former Sudetenland along the Czech borders, which had been evacuated by Germans fleeing forced eviction from the country, was being re-populated by Gypsies.

But it was also being re-populated by people without means and by all sorts of adventurers who came for the easy loot. Large portions of Gypsies went to Czech cities especially in the North and West of the country.

There new industries were being created and there was need for cheap labour. The Gypsies were hardly to blame for poor maintenance of brand new living quarters, when often they had never seen a gas stove, a flushing toilet or an elevator before in their lives.

On the other hand, this influx of Slovak Gypsies meant that an unprecedentedly large number of Roma received decent accommodation, regular wages, employee securities, schooling for their children and holiday resort vouchers for their wives.

Many Roma nowadays recall the times of communist oppression as an era of relative luxury and safety. When the regime let up a bit during the 1960s, "socialism with a human face" came to allow a yet unprecedented amount of civil rights in a communist country.

The Gypsy-Romany Union then came into being. It only lasted briefly, from 1969 to 1973, but it laid the foundations of the intellectual Romany elite that would later work on the so-called Romany Enlightenment.

Gypsies demanded to be called Romanies; Romany as a language was vastly promoted, the first Romany writers emerged and a network of both Romany and Czechoslovakian activists for the Romany cause was created.

The Union was dissolved by the Communist party in 1973, but unofficially the efforts at cultivating Romany culture were carried on. Since the end of World War II, the makeup of local Romany communities has remained more or less the same.

There are five unequally represented subethnic groups here: Czech Roma, or what is left of them; Slovak Roma, ie. post-war immigrants mostly from Eastern Slovakia; Magyar (Hungarian) Roma from

the South of Slovakia; a very small group of German Roma called the Sinti; and the Vlach (Romanian) Roma, the most secluded and isolated of them all with the strictest code of behaviour.

Generally, most non-Vlach Roma tend to look up to Vlach Roma, because they have managed to retain their culture largely intact thanks to a low degree of intermarriages or contact with the majority.

The Vlach dialect of Romany has the biggest prestige among local Roma. The Vlach Roma, on the other hand, hold the other groups in low esteem, especially Slovak, or Servika Roma (originally from Serbia), whom they pejoratively call *Romungre*.

While most Roma nowadays do not face ostracism from their own for marrying a non-Romany person, the Vlach Roma not only avoid matches with members of the majority, but also with other Romany groups.

V. From 1989 onwards

The Velvet Revolution of 1989 was marked by general enthusiasm and a massive upsurge in Romany intellectualism. The society proclaimed Roma to be equal with the majority, and at first, no need for special treatment for the community was perceived.

At the same time, heavy industry was collapsing, leaving formerly employed and thriving Romany families floating in the system of social benefits without offering alternative sources of livelihood.

The 1992 citizenship law following the break-up of Czechoslovakia discriminated against Roma and further worsened their plight. The democratic regime with its market economy challenged the whole population to attain a good education and high performance.

At the same time, competition took hold, racist moods started to be felt, resulting in a series of racially motivated crimes and even murders. This was followed by a large emigration wave, especially to Great Britain, Belgium and Canada, which were perceived as welcoming and non-racist countries offering opportunities for a new start.

As of the mid-nineties, two contrasting motions within the Romany community can be discerned: one, upwardly mobile, where Romany professionals have established businesses and careers quite in pace with the rest of the fast-developing society.

The other motion was the opposite, heading down to second-generation unemployment, debt, petty crime and drug-abuse in an atmosphere of utter hopelessness. New ghettos have emerged, especially in Slovakia.

The former industrial regions are worst off, as the general destitution leaves Roma literally out and away from any chance of recovery. But there are still examples of good practise, including in Pardubice, Uherské Hradiště, Staré Město or Český Krumlov.

VI. Český Krumlov as a Case Study

It is not our aim to provide a thorough analysis of the favourable situation in Český Krumlov, but a few comments are included.

The first Romanies arriving from Slovakia in the 1950s consisted of several extensive families from one area, such as the Kotlars, the Dunkas, the Červenaks, the Rakašes and the Bílýs. This alone provided a good basis for communication with the majority.

The cohesive group had better chances for self-control in the new environment. In reverse, the cities, which received immigrants of different family origins and social standing, were to witness conflicts among the heterogeneous groups.

Secondly, where there is will, there are results. Many city councils fail to recognise the need to enter into frequent communication with their Roma, seeing to their needs and problems, seeking mutually advantageous agreements. But Český Krumlov has recognized this need early on and their current success is the best proof of this good practise.

Thirdly, the fact that Český Krumlov is by no means an industrial town accounts for the fact that Roma have always been employed in services, crafts or the tourist industry along with the rest of the Český Krumlov people.

Therefore, there was no loss of employment like there was in industrial communities (Ústí nad Labem, Ostrava, Chomutov). Roma-run businesses have further enriched Český Krumlov as a multicultural city with much to offer to tourists in terms of diversity.

Last but not least, the high degree of intermarriages has also helped to establish positive links among the families concerned.

And finally, allegedly, the Český Krumlov Roma have been extremely cautious about receiving new Roma in later migration waves, making sure that they could always answer for their own people and their deeds rather than struggle with potential trouble arising in connection with newcomers.

Although this might be perceived as discrimination in its own right, it seems to be a feasible mechanism when it comes to preserving the mutually beneficial outstanding relations between the Czech and Romany communities.

Suggested Reading

Rombase: Didactically Edited Information on Roma. <http://romani.uni-graz.at/rombase>.

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Romanies in Český Krumlov

Within the territory of the Czech Republic (as well as the former Czechoslovakia), the coexistence of Romanies (Gypsies) with other inhabitants has been the most successful in the town of Český Krumlov. The Romany community has lived for more than twenty years in Český Krumlov without any internal or external conflicts, enjoying good social standing, which, among other things, has resulted in a high proportion of Romany–Czech marriages.

Moreover, the vast majority of Roma profess gypsyhood (romipen) and do not find their origin shameful at all, which is good and right. Český Krumlov has then set an example: the positive coexistence of the bulk of population with the minority, Romanies, is indeed possible.

What has happened during the past decades to lead to such a result and confirmation of this possibility? Why was and is it possible in this historical town and why, on the contrary, has there been a significant increase in a number of problems with Romany communities, ethnic tension and mutual relations in many other towns and villages recently?

I. History of Roma Migration

For thirty years Romanies have represented the largest minority among all ethnic groups who live in the Český Krumlov region and in the town itself, directly after the Czech majority.

In the post-war years there were radical changes in the Romany population of Czechoslovakia, including changes in internal structure, number and territorial density. In addition, there was an intensification of internal differentiation according to levels of possible adaptation within groups, leading to lifestyle and culture