



Servika Roma in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

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The Servika Roma live in the former Czechoslovakia and had traditionally made their living from blacksmithing and playing music for peasants. Nowadays, some copy the professional careers of the surrounding population, and some remain unemployed. Romani society is empathic, has an attitude of solidarity, and manages to educate and regulate its members. It is clearly structured, but without official posts. It shows a rich spiritual life which influences everyday behaviour. The language is partially retained and partially shifted to majority Czech or Slovak. The Roma who have inhabited Bohemia over the last fifty years have undergone their own development.



THE SERVIKA ROMA

The term *Serviko Rom* (plural *Servika Roma*) refers to Roma labelled by experts also as *Slovak Roma* or *Carpathian Roma*. The term stems from their country of origin, Serbia, at the moment when they entered what is today Slovakia. This etymology is still known among some elder Roma, while the term *Slovak Roma* has meanwhile replaced the original term. The co-inhabiting *Vlax Roma* call them *Rumungro*, without distinguishing them from the second largest Romani population, the *Hungarian* or *Ungrika Roma*. The *Servika Roma* represent the largest minority of the Romani population inhabiting the former Czechoslovakia and its successor states. Estimates suggest that

there are 250,000 Roma in the Czech Republic and 500,000 in Slovakia with an 80% proportion of *Servika Roma* among them and an additional approximate 10% *Ungrika* and *Vlax*. Apart from this, Roma closely related to those living in Slovakia inhabit southern Poland and Carpathian Ruthenia in Ukraine.

In Bohemia the geographical structure mirrors to some extent the population situation of the Germans before WWII, as the Roma were needed to substitute labour forces after the Germans had left these regions. Still today most Roma live in northern and north-western Bohemia, southern Moravia and Silesia (see Ill.1 Bohemia/blue), but generally the situation is much more homogeneous than in Slovakia. Speaking about a certain location, the Roma in Bohemia are spread all over the area of a certain municipality, while in

Slovakia compact settlements (*osada*) exist. The concentration within one location (newly called “ghettos”) is a phenomenon new to Bohemia, caused by social exclusion during the last decade. The vast majority of *Servika Roma* live in the eastern part of Slovakia, mainly in areas in the north (see Ill.1 blue). *Ungrika Roma* settled in the southern part of eastern Slovakia a long time ago (see Ill.1 grey). Over many generations, the transition between these two groups has become fluent. *Ungrika Roma* additionally live in the whole south of Slovakia, along the border with Hungary, apart from those who migrated to Bohemia.

It is not easy to learn about Romani culture, because in the presence of even a single *gajo* ‘non-Roma’, their behaviour immediately adapts to rules unconsciously expected to be valid in majority society.

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Many educational principles, traditional beliefs or everyday experiences are coded in proverbs, which tell us more than long analyses:

Tiri bu'í tut bararel, na tire lava. It's the effort you make which makes you grow, not your talking.

Pal o pora prindžares čirikles, pal o lava prindžares manušes. You recognise a bird by his feathers, a man by his words.

Ko kamel ča te sikhavel, bisterel te sikh'ol. Those who want only to teach, cease to learn.

Pa'iv des, pa'iv chudes. Giving respect means receiving respect.

Hjaba phenel mato dad le čhaske: ma ma'uv! – So kerel o baro keren the o cikne. In vain says the drunken father to his son: Don't get drunk! Whatever the elder does, the younger does, too.

Čhines čhuraha, e dukh pes predžal, čhines laveha, e dukh ačhel. A wound from a knife fades away, a wound from a word remains.

SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURE

Romani society is not internally coherent, the internal structure of the *Servika Roma* is manifold, and so is the number of ways of living, so much of what will be said may not be valid for all families and situations.

Within the group as a whole, dialectal criteria, which are important for scientists, have only a peripheral meaning. Political and/or geographical differences do not necessarily imply inner-group boundaries either, and members of one family may live all across Europe. Nonetheless, concrete settlements or villages do have their collective status and persons joining a village community (e.g. by marriage) adopt such status. Material welfare is not a strong factor of social distance either. The strongest source of identity is given by birth. At the moment of birth the status of a human is defined, and traditionally also his profession. Every family had its own profession, so there were families of musicians, of smiths, etc. Here the Roma copy the socio-professional structures of *jati* 'castes' of Indian society, where profession was tightly linked to the fate of a family and to the whole group.

Before industrialisation and globalisation the traditional professions can be tracked down through the 1893 census in Slovakia. The most frequent registered professions were metal working and music, both direct offspring of the Indian system. Just like in India, they performed their smithery in a sitting position. In Slovakia, while metalwork meant to be a blacksmith or a horseshoe smith (*char'as, kovačis*), musicians (*lavutaris*) were

employed to entertain the "locals" at public dances and family celebrations like weddings and funerals. The exercise of both these crafts could mean real wealth to a family, and still today many successful Roma descend from old blacksmith or musician's families. Further common means of making a livelihood then were the production of adobe bricks, strings and brushes, baskets and brooms and also embroideries and lacework. Apart from this, some of the Roma were labourers and navvies. During communism the Roma started to be employed in factories and on the fields.

After the fall of the communist regime in 1989 many lost employment and large numbers of Slovak Roma now live on social welfare, primarily in the countryside. Many have managed – in spite of the common practice to place Romani children automatically in schools for the disabled – to catch up with educational standards and have successfully entered the labour market. Due to a close link between "Roma" and "poverty" in the majority discourse, successful Roma usually have difficulties with their Romani identity. Many Roma are employed in social services (street-workers, assistants in schools, healthcare, police) and in Roma-related NGOs. Employing the Roma in the state sector is easy for the authorities and is presented as an expression of the will to create employment for the Roma. On the other hand it may be merely substitution for real political action, e.g. to persuade the majority about the implications of stereotypes and discrimination. A substantial part of the Romani community from both Bohemia and Slovakia left their country to settle in one of the now accessible countries of Western Europe or North America.

VALUES

The values shared by the community are most important for understanding the Roma. A traditional community of *Servika Roma*, settled together in a village or spread across a city, is linked by strong bonds, with someone always taking care of the other members of the community. Everyone is looked after not only for their physical well-being including hunger and thirst, but also for their state of mind: "Are you sad? Why did you smile?" It is an expression of solicitude as well as its counterpart, social control. Individual families are part of the whole, in the case of a lack of food or of an unexpected visitor they can rely on help from the rest of the community. Aid is to be offered automatically, empathy with the others is typical.

Aid comprises assistance and consultancy, material or financial help, loaning of food or equipment. It may take the form of even replacing another member in claiming guilt and consequently serving a prison sentence if the guilty person is not capable of undergoing punishment, for instance by being the father of many children.

In the case of conflict between members of the community, the social network has developed mechanisms to resolve them by a partly ritualised exchange of opinions. To outsiders, such an exchange may give an impression of an unpleasant quarrel, but both sides of the exchange know at every moment that regardless of the outcome of the exchange, they continue to like and need one another. Only if an accusation would mean *ladž* 'shame' for taboo reasons or hierarchical limitations may the complaints be transferred into songs.

Añi o pandž angusta nane jekh. Even five fingers of the same hand aren't the same.

Te avel gadžo ke Romeste andro kher, rodel mel. Te avel Rom ke gadžeste, rodel charakteris. A gadžo visiting a Rom looks for dirt. A Rom visiting a gadžo looks for character.

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Traditionally, very high esteem is granted to visitors. Guests must receive fresh warm food, accommodation and complete attention, whatever the current material conditions of the hosting family. Food, chairs, spoons or money may have to be borrowed from neighbours in order not to be *ladžalo*, i.e. not to be 'shamed'.

The key institution for keeping and controlling social norms in traditional communities is the *famel'ija*, the network of relatives, beginning with a common grandfather, which may make up part or even the whole of a small Romani settlement. Compared to *famel'ija*, the role of the core family who lives together in one house is not nearly as important. The highest organisational level *fajta* ('more distant relatives, clan') comprises five to six generations and is relevant for one's identity, for business and marriage arrangements. It provides shelter and supports that part of the society which is not self-reliant. *Fajta* represents the central place for social life and for passing professional know-how on to future generations. It supplies knowledge about good or bad behaviour and about accepted or forbidden words (*džungale lava*). It helps to recognise and to respect social context (i.e. whom to talk to in what manner, which expressions to choose or to avoid, etc.).

Another "control mechanism" influencing one's behaviour is provided by persons who died (*mule*). They come to visit those living in this world. Their presence can be recognised by moving plates or glasses, replacement of dishes, or when the *mule* talk to somebody, an event which may not be restricted only to dreams. As these visitors know about the future, they may utter warnings

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Values are also transferred via paramisi (story or fairy tale). Paramisi were narrated mainly among adults, organised or spontaneous, for entertainment, be it a dramatic, heroic and long viteziko paramisi or a short pherasuñi paramisi (humorous story) or džungal'i paramisi (coarse story). A storyteller is highly respected in the region he lives. Vozaris is one of them from eastern Slovakia.

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concerning intended decisions, or they may just express prophecies. The Roma are afraid of them, and their society has developed sets of mechanisms on how to avoid contact with them or with the evil forces the *mule* are in contact with. Consequently, many traditions concerning cooking, dressing or moving outside during the night are in some way connected with the expected behaviour of the *mule*.

Objects sanctified by the *Del* 'God' are excellent remedies against the actions of a *mulo*. Prayers, holy icons, sanctified water and the like protect a person from evil. For example, the baptism ceremony is considered necessary to save a newly born child from evil. God is a commonly shared and undoubted entity and a part of everyday life. Formulas containing "god" are meant literally: *te del o Del* 'God willing', *te arakhel o Del* 'God forbid' etc. Communication with God mostly takes place in front of an altar-like corner of the house, or in the presence of icons. Prayers are held individually, without a common manifestation of belief, except for active church members. Public churches are visited occasionally, mostly for the purpose of family events or as a source of holiness, but many priests manage to attract Roma as active members, too.

Children are beyond valuation. Comments like "we cannot afford another child" or utterances about "unwanted children" or even abortion are incomprehensible to traditionally educated Roma. When a woman becomes pregnant, everything is done to keep the child and to bring it into the world healthy. The pregnant woman has to be in a good mood, receive any food she longs for, she has the right for maximum comfort, and she is not allowed to see horrid objects like certain animals, pup-

pets, or nowadays also watch horror or animated movies, etc.

House and food always have to be clean, where cleanliness may range from "hygienic" to "ritually clean". In traditional communities the floor has to be cleaned several times a day and during cooking a headscarf is recommended. Moreover, the meal should be prepared in a good mood, and never from *nažužo* ('evil', lit. 'unclean') animals like dogs or horses. Vessels are strictly divided into those for food and for laundry. In addition yesterday's food should not be consumed, as during the night it might have been touched by a *mulo* and thus could endanger the health of the family. Fear of unclean food (in a ritual sense) also influences behaviour towards strange families (in the sense of the wider family). The public forms an opinion about which family is to be regarded as clean, and therefore by extension the food they prepare.

CHANGES

One cannot talk about traditions without mentioning changes and dynamics. There were two extraordinary inputs to the system of behaviour of the *Servika Roma* during the 20th century: The events of the Second World War and the establishment of communist rule.

Due to WWII and its aftermath, two sub-groups of *Servika Roma* can be traced in the former Czechoslovakia today: One remained at their ancient places all over Slovakia, mainly in its eastern part. They have been settled for centuries, now dwelling in settlements (*tabori, osada*) built more or less completely by their ancestors. These settle-

ments are attached to the villages inhabited by ethnic Slovaks, separated from them by up to five kilometres. Many of them had appeared very quickly during the Second World War when the Roma were banned from entering the majority settlements and were forced to settle outside them. These settlements are similar to villages in some respects, but generally lack stores, pubs, churches and formal administration which are supplied by the core village. Some of these services like selling goods or offering a place to gather are also provided within the settlement on an informal basis.

As the original Romani population in the territory of Bohemia was exterminated during WWII, large numbers of Roma moved – for better labour prospects – to the territory of today's Czech Republic shortly after. This migration has continued to this day with numerous families even losing contact with their Slovak relatives. Besides the spontaneous waves, however, migration from Slovakia and the “state-driven dispersal” was in parallel organised by the federal government, especially since the mid-1960s. Contrary to the above-mentioned Roma who have stayed on Slovak territory, these *Servika Roma* can nowadays be identified as a separate sub-group. In the territory of Bohemia, the Romani communities were not as large, and – especially in cases of the government dispersal plan – they consisted of members from different parts of Slovakia, from differing social backgrounds and different sub-ethnic groups. Contacts with the majority population have therefore been established on a completely new basis. The position of these *Servika Roma* was that of newcomers or guests, initially only on a temporary basis.

Under these new conditions, new rules arose with the Romani culture having a weaker status than in the settlements of origin. For this particular group, such change caused a faster loss of *Romipen* (Romani identity) and a stronger cultural assimilation than for the group which stayed in Slovakia.

The political situation after WWII brought about other dangers for the cultural traditions of the *Servika Roma*, be it in Bohemia or in Slovakia. The communist regime was aware of their low social status and declared them a retarded social group. The Romani culture was regarded as an obstacle to development (“civilisation”), and further steps aimed at reducing its influence on them were taken, e.g. by actively prohibiting the use of the Romani language (from 1958) or by scattering families all over the territory through the official dispersal plan (from 1965). During the second half of the 20th century another process took place in both countries. The demand for their traditional products and services sharply decreased while new labour possibilities were offered by the growing industry. Consequently, the Roma started to settle *maškar o gadže* (‘among the non-Roma; in non-Romani locations’) still under communism, received formal education (up to or exceptionally even including university degrees) and participated in the full employment ideology of communist rule.

Simultaneously, the minds of *Servika Roma* adopted new values. The (older) ideal of the beauty of white skin and hair has changed into the stigma of the dark. The aspiration of the Roma does not aim to be merely well-dressed, but to have the very best on their bodies or in their homes, namely branded confectionery or at least a

second or third TV set at home. The underlying motivation is to clearly distinguish themselves from the Roma presented on TV as dirty and poor.

Another recently adopted value is the majority language. The language shift is still ongoing. Hand in hand with the loss of the traditional language, the acquired knowledge of Czech is generally still widely superficial. Therefore the Romani ethnolect of Czech is a general subject of common jokes as well as a common way of humiliating Roma by ethnic Czechs.

Only during the weakening of the communist regime at the end of the 1960s and after 1989 were they given a chance for self-representation and for a free expression of culture. In both areas the Roma immediately took advantage of the cultural freedom and started to write and to publish. Several books appeared, many newspapers and journals were published in the language of the Roma or of the majority. Besides these periods, Romani culture was restricted to forms viewed officially as folklore. Its only public representation therefore consisted of dancing, singing and theatre groups, where Romani intellectuals expressed their minds and could voice national feelings.

Both literature and dancing groups could be viewed as a transformation of older forms of cultural expression, of telling *paramisi* on the one hand and of gathering and celebrating on the other hand. Newly arising literature themes and genres were very widespread, but just like in storytelling, it drew its motives from old traditions, from everyday experiences and from the genuine imagination of the storyteller (*paramisaris*), now called author.

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