



Burgenland-Roma

Romani-Project

The Roma residing in present Burgenland, which is the furthest east of the nine Austrian federal states, and borders with Hungary, belong to the group whose members are called *Ungrian Roma*, → *Ungrika-Roma* or *Romungri* in older literature. This group living in the western region of Hungarian influence, ranging from southern Slovakia to northern Slovenia, are characterised by their long-term settlement and, consequently, by a strong Hungarian influence in their culture.



History

At the end of the 14th century, Roma are first mentioned in western Hungary, to which today's Burgenland belonged at that time. From the beginning of the 15th century, larger Roma groups started entering the Pannonic border area of western Hungary. Most likely due to the fact that they served in the war as soldiers and blacksmiths, the Roma were at first tolerated and to a certain extent even supported by some of the Hungarian nobility. This favourable condition led to the first settlements: in the second half of the 17th century, there is documentary evidence of the founding of villages under Christoph Batthyány. In contrast to the liberal Batthyány, who controlled southern Burgenland, the Esterházy of northern Burgenland expelled the Roma from their area of influence. This contrast characterises the situation of the Roma at that time as one situated somewhere between acceptance and discrimination.

After the end of the Ottomanic Reign in 1688, the situation of the Roma living in western Hungary changed. The law was laid down that they were to be banned from the country. In cases of disobedience, they were to be executed. Another negative turning point for the Roma was the reign of Charles VI (1711-1740), who outlawed them and simultaneously with the cultural backdrop of the Baroque Era began the so-called "gypsy hunts". In the second half of the 18th century, the Roma were affected by the likewise inhuman assimilatory programs launched by Charles' successors, → Maria Theresia und Josef II. : among other things, nomadic lifestyle as well as language use were strictly forbidden, the Roma were forced to marry inter-rationally, and their children were taken from them to be educated in farming families.

During the time after Joseph II, these prescriptions were followed less rigidly. This, however, in no way meant an end to persecution and discrimination for the Roma, who lived on the edge of society in so-called "gypsy houses" situated at the outskirts of town, practicing mobile jobs such as basket weaving and forging. They often worked as knife-grinders, broom- and brush-makers, or made a living as professional musicians and seasonal field workers.

In the western Hungarian region of five ethnicities (German speakers, Hungarians, Croatians, Roma, and – up until the time of national socialism – Jews), the Roma have remained at the very bottom of the scale of ethnic value. Out of about 7.000 to 8.000 *Burgenland-Roma* before 1938, who were already discriminated against by the authorities of the First Republic in the inter-war period ("gypsy-survey"), only a few actually survived the time of → national Socialism . One of the things that played a fundamental role in their → persecution by the Nazis, was a "Commemorative" writing by the prime minister of Burgenland, "PG Dr. Portschy" from August 1938, according to which the Roma were considered half-breeds. At the time of an ideology of "purity" and the "sick race", this had negative implications by far exceeding that of merely being "gypsies". It is primarily the grandparent generation, the group within a minority carrying on and passing down its culture, who fell prey to the.



The few survivors – in all of Burgenland there are only a few hundred of them – are faced with total ruin: settlements have been destroyed, and the little property once owned is lost. Even more problematic than this material loss is the fact that their entire social structure has been broken, and that the end of the war in no way meant an end to stigmatisation and discrimination. The survivors receive hardly any support whatsoever. Most often they are denied the compensations granted to other victims of the concentration camps. Worse still, Roma, even today, often have to deal with the cynical question of "how come" they got away alive.

Without the support and security of belonging to an intact larger group, which had, until the inter-war period, made stigmatisation and discrimination more bearable, or rather, more digestible in a psychological sense, only the fewest survivors managed to work through the traumatic experiences suffered in the extermination camps, their treatment by non-Roma and the ignorance shown by the authorities. Many Roma no longer want to be "gypsies" and thus "inferior". Symptoms resulting from this more or less self-enforced assimilation are a denial of their own language, the changing of names, tendencies to marry inter-rationally, as well as migration to the anonymity of the larger cities of eastern Austria. Those who stay in Burgenland, however, by no means dissolve into the majority population. Rather, their status changes from "ethnic minority" to that of "social minority", with all negative components remaining intact due to their exclusion from society.

The first real opportunity to break out of their social isolation presented itself to the *Burgenland-Roma* during the economic boom of the 60s and 70s. Those who at that time managed to participate in the society of prosperity and achieve a social climb, experienced an increase in self-esteem: being Rom no longer meant only poverty and hopelessness.

Current Situation

Today, the *Burgenland-Roma* estimate their share in Austria's total population as being somewhere between 2,500 and 5,000. Larger settlements are found in the Wart (= Oberwart and its surrounding communities). Some Roma or Roma families live in the central and northern areas of Burgenland, or, as already mentioned, have settled in the larger cities of eastern Austria. According to their individual social conditions, three major groups can be distinguished:

- those who have become assimilated and no longer consider themselves to be Roma, having dissolved into the majority population and thus are not part of the estimation above. This group mostly lives in the cities of eastern Austria.
- those who have become emancipated to some degree, openly accepting their ethnic identity. This group lives fairly well and has become socially integrated to a certain extent.
- those who are still living "at the edge of society" as a stigmatised and discriminated (social) minority.

The "gypsy houses" on the outskirts of villages and towns still exist. Many of these Roma settlements just like the one near Oberwart, the economic centre of southern Burgenland, seem like ghettos due to their location. When they are looking for jobs or dealing with local authorities, Roma still face discrimination, and prejudices are as strong as ever. Generally, the majority population is familiar with the names of the various Roma families. If ever there are doubts, the Roma are bluntly asked whether they are "gypsies". Upon confirmation, many applications are simply refused or treated unwillingly. This happens for instance when Roma look for apartments and apply for jobs or any kind of permission. Commonly, the rights of the individual are violated. Sometimes, young Roma find themselves banned from public places, such as pubs. In 1989, such a prohibition pronounced on a



young Rom, forbidden to enter a local disco, prompted the formation of the Roma Association **Verein Roma** in Oberwart. Within a short amount of time, this again led to the founding of a publicly financed Counselling Centre for Roma. Since its foundation, the centre has developed into a refuge for the Roma living in the district of Oberwart. Meanwhile, it has great achievements to show for itself locally, such as a supervised study group for Roma school children, work training for young Roma, and support and advice on work and the work place. Over the years, the centre has successfully resolved a variety of social problems.

Due to the political, cultural and social activities initiated by the associations **Verein Roma** in Oberwart, **Romano Centro** and the **Kulturverein österreichischer Roma** in Vienna, self-esteem has increased within the group. Also, although decades too late, the official recognition of the Roma as an Austrian ethnic group in December 1993 has contributed to this positive development.

Text based on

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