



Vlach-Roma (Vlachi) in the Czech Republic and in Slovakia

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Autonymum: *Roma*, (*čače Roma* - real Roma, *mesal'ake Roma* - Roma "of the table")

Appellation: → Vlachi , *Vlachika Roma*

According to a rough estimate, *Vlachi* may represent about 15-20 % of the total Roma population in ČR and SR.

The group of Roma called *Vlachi* in SR and ČR is in other countries (Hungary, Rumania, Poland, Sweden, USA, etc.) denoted by the professionymic appellation → Lovara (→ horse-dealers , derived from the Hungarian word "ló" - horse).

The *Vlachi* in former Czechoslovakia were nomadic until 1959, when according to the law 74/1958 they were forcefully settled.

The group-identity of *Vlachi* - felt as an inner property as well as viewed from outside - is very integral. *Vlachi* speak their own specific dialect. It is a variety very close to other *Lovara* dialects. Grammers and vocabularies of the *Lovara-Romani* have been published in several countries (Hungary, Austria, USA, Poland). Probably the oldest *Lovara* dictionary was written by the *Vlach Rom* Ferenc Sztojka and published in 1886 in Hungary (Kalocsa).

Vlach Romani would be very well understood by speakers of → Slovak and → Ungriko Romani if contacts between members of these groups were more frequent. My argument may be supported by a unique case of coexistence and even intermarriage between *Vlachi* and *Slovak Roma* in the village of Petrovany (district Prešov, East Slovakia). Here a sort of *Vlach-/Slovak-* Romani semicommunication takes place: members of each group speak their own dialect in which the members of the other group have perfect passive competence. (The same model of semicommunication is used in contacts between Czechs and Slovaks).

Such group-coexistence between *Vlachi* and other Roma is exceptional. (In the region of South-West Slovakia, where in several villages *Vlachi* and *Ungrika Roma* each live in their own separate settlements, intermarriage is out of question. Mutual contacts are limited to business. *Ungrika Roma* grow vegetables in their gardens which the *Vlachi* buy from them. For this sort of communication Hungarian is usually used. But even there I have witnessed *Vlach-* and *Ungriko* Romani semicommunication.

Out of all the five subethnic groups of Roma in the Czech and Slovak republics, *Vlachi* have best preserved both the use of and active competence in their Romani. Romani is the primary language in all age groups. *Vlachi* speak their language at home as well as "in the street", in public. They do not care if they are frowned upon by → gadže for it.

Language generally is also a container and possible transmitter of oral folklore and art. *Vlach* Romani still fully serves this function. At community gatherings, which are considered to be "a holy" manifestation of group-identity, songs embellished by beautifully elaborated formulas advocating fraternal relations are sung. These songs are sometimes called → *mesal'ake d'ija* - songs of the table. The *sunto mesali*, holy table, is a table covered with food and drinks in honour of the participants,



who in coming to drink and eat together declare their *romimo*. Beautiful language as an expression of ritual politeness, which in its turn is a manifestation of *Vlach* identity, is highly appreciated.

While in some other countries (Hungary, Austria, Sweden) *Vlach* Romani is becoming a language of literature, in the Czech and Slovak republics it is only approaching the first step of its literary stage. Neither grammar nor vocabulary have been elaborated yet and orthography for the *Vlach* dialect is also missing. The enthusiastic self-taught Peter Stojka, who wrote quite a number of articles about habits of *Vlach* Roma in the region of Nitra (Slovakia), uses his own phonetical orthography. His articles are published in the journal " *Romano džaniben* ".

Vlachi being nomadic until recently, were constantly changing their *gadžo* social environment. Consequently the relation *amare gaže-naši cikáni* has not been established. The relationship between *Vlachi* and the *gadže* is rather antagonistic. According to a general law "to do harm to an enemy is rather heroism than a sin", a theft committed against a *gadžo* is praised and has become a traditional subsidiary way of providing livelihood. To steal from a *Rom* is of course considered a violation of *romano sokáši*, (*Rom* habit, norm, law), and is punishable by the internal court (trial) *kris*.

Being isolated from *gadže*, the *Vlachi* culture and social structure was not exposed to the influence of the *gadžo* culture to the same extent as the culture and habits of the traditionally sedentary *Slovak* and *Ungriko* Roma. *Vlachi* have preserved several institutions which were lost in communities of the settled Roma: the institution of the "king" (→ *vajda*, *angluno Rom*), institution of the " → *kris* " (court), institution of "buying brides", etc. Roles and status of distinct members of the community, kinship-group and family are clearly delineated, overtly symbolised, and they govern interaction and communication between the members of the group. Also, all the rules of ritual purity are strictly observed. He, who does not observe them is summoned to the " *kris* ". The heaviest punishment is to become *magerdo* (*marime*), ie. excommunicated for a time corresponding to the severity of the crime.

Part of the *Vlachi* identity is their professional and material status. Their traditional " → *jati* (cast)-profession" is *šefti* - trade. Physical work *buti* is despised. Aspiration for jobs which in the *gadžo* society are considered prestigious is low. Highly valued is the ability to do good business and to have lots of money. Gold and golden jewellery is still a visible symbol of *Vlach* identity. (Like many other nomadic people, for instance the Scythians, the *Vlachi* also invested their wealth into gold, which is valuable and at the same time easily transportable).

The mutual relations between *Vlachi* and other groups of Roma are ambiguous. Each group detests and admires the other group simultaneously. *Vlachi* detest the sedentary Roma for being "gadžikanised". On the other hand, they appreciate the *Hungarian* and *Slovak Rom* musicians and sometimes use their services at funerals or weddings. Also the development of Slovak Romani literature is viewed as something which should be imitated also by *Vlachi*.

The *Slovak* and *Hungarian Roma* condemn *Vlachi* for their frequent violation of a *gadžo* law, for which not only the *Vlachi* but all Roma suffer and are stigmatised. On the other hand they admire the *Vlachi* for having preserved the *romipen* - culture, language and social structure - in a pure and traditional form.

Vlachi are appreciated also for being "beautiful", i.e., for having a fair complexion. A current expression in Slovak Romani " *jov šukar sar Vlaxos* " (he is beautiful, i.e. fair, as a *Vlach Rom*) is evidence of this.



References

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