Osada ("Gypsy settlement")

Osada (Slovak): "Gypsy settlement", a settlement where a Roma community lives.

In Slovak (Hungarian) Romani, the expression "Gypsy settlement" has many borrowed and original words, synonyms and dialectal expressions that are sometimes difficult to translate into another language. Accompanying adjectives are romano / romaňi / romane (m., f., n.) and amaro / amari / amare (our – m., f., n.): romañi vatra, romaňi koloňija, romano pero (Ungrika-Roma). The expression romane/amara chara (literally, Roma/our holes) reminds us of the time when, in some regions, Roma built themselves earth homes - dwellings hollowed into the ground. Further terms for osada include romane/amare thana (Roma/our places), romane/amare khera (Roma/our houses), romane/amare heli/helički (Roma/our place/ little places).

Many settlements arose on land reserved for Gypsies by noblemen who invited certain Roma clans [Vajda] to their domain to perform services conforming to their traditional "Gypsy professions". These were mainly services as musicians and blacksmiths, and so arose, for example, "musical settlements" (lavutariko pero, sg.) in Ihráč (L. Goral) or in Klenovec (J. Cibula).

In the 1920's, the population of the small town of Velký Šariš, an already densely populated "musical" Gypsy settlement, needed building materials for the construction of further homes, and so they invited a family of Gypsies called Bílý, who were known in the land as valkara (producers of adobe bricks). The municipality gave the valkara land at the other end of the little town from where the Gypsy musicians lived. A relationship of "caste distance" (jati) was established between both professional Roma groups. Although the population of both settlements got along well and exchanged products and services – e.g., musicians ordered adobe bricks for the construction of homes from the valkara – they would never have considered intermarrying, and the musicians, who thought of themselves as žuže Roma (ritually clean Roma, "better", "higher"), would never have eaten food in valkara homes.

From historic records it is known that, in the fifteenth century, nobility in Spiš invited "Gypsies" to settle around the Spiš castle and that the "Gypsies" performed various services for them; from Slovak serfs they assumed the function of the behari (those who beat animals out during a hunt); they provided the lords of the castle with firewood; they could even play their traditional craft as blacksmiths.

Originally, the people who settled in a community were blood relations, and since each community of relatives had its traditional profession – similar to Indian jati – that dominant profession was the one for which the settlement was labeled and known throughout the land: lavutariko vatra/pero (sg.) - settlement of musicians; handľarsko vatra - settlement of (pig or poultry) traders; buťakeri vatra, - settlement of day labourers or workers, etc. [Buti]

The labels that characterised settlements might also refer to their social standing, and so, some settlements were spoken of as čore vatri(pl.)– settlements of the poor or, on the contrary, barvale vatri – rich settlements. Roma who ate non ritually-clean kinds of meat were known to live in a degešiko vatra. In the 1950's, there were still some Gypsy communities (Švábovce, Kyšovce, Szomotor, etc.) which inspired one of the terms used for settlements, romane chara (Gypsy holes): dwellings created by caves about a meter deep in the earth and hidden by tent-shaped roofs. The roofs, with an opening for smoke, were built from turf-covered boards.
In comparison with Slovak villages, "Gypsy settlements" were for the most part worse off when it came to communal services, housing and living space. On the other hand, there were Roma communities with solid two-story houses and motorcycles or automobiles in garages, luxuries that were unheard of in pre-war Slovak villages. Most of the inhabitants of these unusual settlements in localities around Prešov (e.g. Lučky, Kapušany) were pig traders. But even Roma from Podunajské Biskupice near Bratislava, who, in the 1930's, had already founded a cooperative of artistic smiths, lived in houses which Gadže might have envied.

Settlements spread through the natural growth of the original familija (extended family). The population growth meant that each future generation brought an increase of practitioners of one profession, and led either to territorial dispersion whenever possible, or to a certain differentiation within the settlements. An example of this territorial generation dispersion is provided by the early history of a Gypsy settlement in Rakúsy near Kežmarok: At the beginning of the twentieth century, of four blacksmith brothers, two moved from Žďár to Rakúsy. All four blacksmiths would not have been able to make a living in Žďár – and because the community of Rakúsy did not have a Gypsy blacksmith of its own, it provided the families of the two brothers with the possibility of settling outside of the village. According to eighteenth century sources, as many as four Gypsy blacksmiths were registered in villages in the region of Zips.

The population growth of Roma society and the economic-political change in the whole society began to put a brake on territorial generation dispersion. And so, instead of superfluous blacksmiths or musicians moving to other communities where their traditional products and services were useful – these professionals had to remain in their original settlements and find other ways of making a living. It happened in only a few communities that many men would have the opportunity of finding work as masons or miners (as in Slovinky near Krompachy) and possibly improve their material situation. More often, the general economic crisis of the 1930's reduced the descendants of qualified craftsmen and musicians to a position of unemployed, occasional day labourers. On one hand, this development manifested itself in the "Gypsy settlement" through a large increase of its population, which often did not correspond with the territorial expansion of the settlement. On the other hand, it emphasised the materially social differences within the settlement. The rich, who were able to find advantageous jobs in the professional structure of the society, inhabited better houses – with, for example, wooden floors - on the edge of the settlement nearer the village; the poor were crowded in shacks at the farthest end of the settlement.

The discrepancy between the growth of the population and the limited space in the settlements, the deterioration of the social conditions of some families, and the worsening of hygiene caused tension both within settlements and between settlements and villages.

During World War II, the "problem of Gypsy settlements" was solved by forcible resettlement: Roma were removed from their settlements in villages and sent to settle in isolated places, sometimes two or three kilometers from any village. There, conditions were much worse.

In 1958, when the communist government proclaimed "citizens of Gypsy origin" to be a "dying-out ethnic group" there were 2,317 Gypsy settlements in Slovakia. In some, there lived as many as two thousand people (Podskalka u Humenného, Pavlovce nad Uhom, Lomnička, etc.). Harsh manipulative interventions against the Roma befell the "Gypsy communities." Although, from the beginning, there was a tendency to "liquidate" the communities; in certain communities officials forcibly moved in Roma families from elsewhere, if "there was nowhere else to put them." In the spa of Vyšné Ružbachy
it was not advantageous for spa guests to view Gypsy shacks and so the inhabitants of the village were moved to the settlement in Rakúsy near Kežmarok. The hygienic and social situation in the settlement deteriorated and a mutual distance between the original residents of the settlement (amare Roma) and the newcomers (cudza Roma) remained even several generations later.

In 1965, new regulation 502/1965 decreed that all Gypsy settlements were to be dispersed by 1980. On one hand, "selected Gypsy families" were forcibly transported to Czech sister regions; on the other hand, Roma were not permitted to build homes with their honestly-earned savings outside of their settlement if they were not chosen for the "planned liquidation of the settlement".

Currently, there are approximately 300 settlements in Slovakia. In some, Roma are improving their conditions themselves. For example, they are starting businesses and opening restaurants (Podskalka u Humenného). In other settlements, conditions are absolutely unsatisfactory. The restructuring of society after 1989 and the high unemployment of the Roma have led many to move from state and cooperative flats back to the settlements.