



The history of the Roma in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism

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The period which started in November 1989 with the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia and soon after in the whole Eastern Europe, triggered an "unprecedented change in the history of Roma". Is this true or did I just use an exaggerated phrase? We shall see in the future.

An analysis of all the turbulent events after 1989 would require a long study. I shall try to limit my information to the main markers of this period and to the main factors which have been influencing Roma's identity.

Transition from the totalitarian communist regime to virtual democracy (unexperienced in real social life), is accompanied by uncertainty, struggle for a place in the new, undefined, unfixed social structures, with fights in the sphere of the market economy - though also by honest effort to establish a functioning human society.

In the context of all the trials and errors, struggles, fears and frequent hopelessness, Roma - as many times before, and as many ethnic minorities in similar circumstances - have become a scape-goat blamed for the faults of the *gadže*. Under communism "gypsies" were looked down rather than hated - and the socially integrated families stopped to be considered "gypsies". Cultural performances of Roma were even admired. One or two years after 1989, when the euphoria of the "victory over communism" was replaced by the hardships of the real work needed for establishing totally new order, condescending feelings towards Roma changed into full-fledged racism.

Roma were the first to be dismissed from jobs in the bankrupt privatised factories. (Many of the dismissed still have the walls of their flat decorated by an honorable certificate "hero of socialist labour".). Even today the percentage of unemployed Roma is several times higher than the share of unemployed *gadže*.

Up to this very day there are restaurants and discos where Roma are not admitted.

More than fifty Roma have been murdered by the skinheads and many more of them have been injured.

The private owners of houses to whom their "nationalised" property was returned in the so called "restitution" process evict their Roma tenants. New little Gypsy-ghettos arise with consent - or even from the initiative - of municipal authorities. The wall built by the municipality of Ústí nad Labem on "Matiční Street" made the Czech Republic "famous" all over the world.

The Czech "citizenship law" passed after the division of Czechoslovakia (1992), discriminated against Roma.

It is first of all criticism "from outside" - from the Council of Europe and many important international organisations monitoring human rights - which made the Czech official authorities punish racist attacks more strictly. Still, they have not succeeded yet in stopping discrimination on the labour market, neither in solving Roma's dwelling problems.

Also, the pressure of Czech NGOs and individuals fighting for human rights has forced the *gadžo* authorities not to ignore discrimination against Roma.



What is the reaction of Roma to all these negative by-products of democracy? It is diverse.

Most destructive are all sorts of addictions typical for unemployed and hopeless people (occurring probably in all ethnic groups): drug-addiction, slot-machine addiction and alcoholism.

Many Roma, especially the more educated ones and the rich ones, try to emigrate from the country. A great blow to Roma culture in the Czech Republic is the emigration of those Roma who under communism were cultural activists and who succeeded to bring *romipen* to public stages. The kinship community which founded and represented the famous ensemble " *Perumos* " emigrated to Belgium (1996). One of its leading members, Margita Reiznerová, is an excellent poet. Margita founded the Union of Roma Writers in ČR (1990), and became its president. She founded a publishing house, " *Romaňi čhib* ", (Romani language, 1991) where she published seven little booklets of short stories written by Roma writers (in Slovak Romani). Nobody continues her activities.

Nearly all the members of the folklore-group " *Khamoro* " emigrated to New Zealand.

The Miko family which was composing and performing very original songs advocating *romipen* in their group " *Čercheň* ", emigrated to Great Britain.

Another former ardent cultural activist, the talented writer Ilona Ferková (Rokycany) emigrated with her whole family to Great Britain.

(By the way, most of these Roma whom I mentioned are of dark complexion. They had justifiable fear of being attacked by skinheads or discriminated against in other ways).

However, the "unprecedented change in the history of Roma" is a chance to react to the negative by-products of democracy and to the Roma's distressing situation as political partners of the official (*gadžo*) authorities - in the interest of all Roma and *romipen*. A *phundrado drom* (open way/road) of this kind has opened for the Roma in ČR only after 1989.

At present there are 140 Roma political parties and social and cultural associations registered at the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Some exist only by name, but some of them are culturally and politically very active. Some are guided by experienced cultural activists from the past historical period, and some by young, "new" people.

Did these organisations achieve any improvement in the general social conditions of Roma or in better protection against discrimination? It is hard to say.

When in May 1995 a Rom baker Mr. Berki was killed by a gang of skinheads, the " *Perumos* " folklore group (they emigrated to Belgium a year later) organised a demonstration of Roma under the windows of the prime minister (Václav Klaus at the time). The prime minister promised publicly to be more strict with the extremists. (Strict steps against skin-heads were taken only several years later. However, the whole affair in 1995 made the official authorities as well as the general public more aware of the danger of racism).

Another political campaign of Roma were protests against the "wall on Matiční Street", erected by the municipality between Roma and their *gadžo* neighbours. An actual physical protest was organised by the ex-MP Ondřej Giňa. Giňa, with several other Roma held a hunger-strike sitting for three days



in front of the wall (According to Ondřej Giňa's information some Czechs brought hot tea to the Roma and expressed their sympathy to them). The wall in Matiční was removed after the joint protests of Roma organisations, NGOs, human rights' organisations - and especially after massive criticism from abroad.

Since 1998 Roma advisers are placed at ministries and district offices. The initiative came from the Roma political party ROI (founded in November 1989 by JUDr Emil Ščuka, who guided it till the year 2000).

The idea of Roma pedagogical advisers (there are about 200 of them at present) was also formulated and pronounced by the Roma political party ROI.

Unfortunately, these "advisory" bodies are not as efficient as a Rom representing Roma in the parliament might be. In the two years of euphoria after 1989 there were 11 (!) Roma in the Czech, Slovak, and federal parliaments. After the division of Czechoslovakia (1992), only one Rom remained. After the last elections (2001), the Roma do not have a single representative in the Czech Parliament.

In my opinion, the cultural work carried out by some of the many Roma organisations is as important as the direct political activities. In comparison with the past the present cultural activities of Roma are (1) multidimensional, (2) supported by the government, (3) supported by international Roma organisations (4) supported by the whole contemporary general trends of multiculturalism and of the promotion of minority languages and cultures.

As before, probably the most popular are the concerts of Roma music. In comparison to the past they have also become international. At concerts of foreign Roma groups the boundaries of subethnic-group identity are dissolved.

Songs in *amari čhib* (our language) and in other Romani dialects are reaching Roma families on audiocassettes and CDs. They are an important factor in keeping up at least passive competence in Romani. Being published and publicly sold, they support the feeling that the existence of *romipen* is justified.

A new phenomenon after 1989, "Miss Roma" contests have become very popular. In a way, they go against *romipen*, as according to a traditional cultural law it is *ladž* (a shame) to expose a half naked body. (My friend M.Š. told me that his daughter who won the contest in a swimming dress, goes swimming in her normal dress if she participates in a family picnic).

The "Miss Roma" contests are justification of the anthropological Roma's identity which is so often mocked at by *gadže* (*černá huba* - lit. "black mouth" is the mildest appellation for the Gypsies).

To organise a "Miss Roma" is of course much easier than to develop *romipen* by promoting language and finding new ways of transmitting oral culture. No visible mass progress has been achieved in this respect, and still, what has been done is unprecedented.

After 1989, the Roma got a chance to publish their own press. At present three monthlies and two half-monthlies are being published by Roma editors. (" *Amaro gendalos*, *Kereka*, *Romano vo'di*, *Romano kurko*, *Romano hangos* "). Unfortunately, only a small share of the texts is in Romani. Most of the editors have only a passive knowledge of Romani. The authors who write in Romani use their



own orthography because they have not a chance to get acquainted with the orthography elaborated by the Union of Roma. Nearly all the Romani contributions are in Slovak Romani. The Roma press is not sold at newspaper stalls but distributed to Roma organisations and to subscribers.

Of all the journals the quarterly "*Romano džaniben*" dedicates the most space to Romani. The journal also brings contributions written in foreign Romani dialects. The standard orthography is used for Slovak Romani. "*Romano džaniben*" also could not find its place on the public market. It is distributed to subscribers and sold at seminars for Roma activists.

About thirty books in Slovak Romani and/or in Slovak Romani-Czech have been published since 1989. Only one of them reached a public market, and it was immediately sold out. It was the thin collection of poetry written by Margita Reiznerová (*Suno - Sen* - "Dream").

There was a programme for Roma on TV running for about five years. Romani served here more or less as a symbol of *romipen* but not as a living language. The programme was mostly in Czech.

The same situation occurs on the radio, where a programme for Roma continues to run. Though it is called "*O Roma vakeren*" (Roma speak) - Romani sentences and slogans serve only in the secondary function of the language, as symbols of ethnic identity, but not in its primary function of communication.

It is without a doubt that all these activities do support Roma identity. First of all, they support the *Slovak Roma* identity but in a way probably also the all-Roma identity. It seems to be a paradox, but the less Romani (ie. Slovak Romani) is used, the more Roma of other subethnic groups are addressed and mobilised by the Roma press.

However, I do not believe that the transition to a *gadžo* language which is understandable to all the Roma and which is not marked by any specific subethnic-group identity would be the only way to bridge the boundaries between distinct Roma groups. This would be particularly unhelpful in the contemporary world, where international contacts among Roma are becoming more and more frequent. Here, the *gadžo* language does not help, because "*gadžo* language" is in fact a cluster of completely different European languages. The only "lingua franca" at international Roma congresses, festivals, etc. is Romani, ie. a cluster of dialects which are commonly understood.

International contacts and activities of the Roma are one of the most important incentives to relearn and revitalise Romani. The demand to re-learn Romani and/or to study it theoretically is met in ČR at institutional level. In 1991, Romani and romistics (Romani studies) was introduced as a university subject (MA degree) at Charles University in Prague. Five years ago, the Romani High School was opened in the town of Kolín. It is attended by Roma students, and Romani and romistics are incorporated into the curriculum. A five year distance study course for adult Roma was opened at the Evangelic Academy in Prague. (An absurd situation arose in both of these high schools: Roma are taught Romani by *gadže* - ie. by MA graduates in Romani studies at Charles University. The latter have a perfect theoretical knowledge of Romani, but their practical knowledge can never equal that of the Roma students, for whom Romani is still their mother-tongue. The Roma students, on the contrary, have never before had any chance to study their language theoretically. However, the cooperation of the native-speakers of Romani and the non-Roma who know the language theoretically is an inspiring example of a non-conventional pedagogical approach of a teacher being a student and a student being a teacher at the same time).



Basic Romani is an optional subject at some pedagogical faculties in ČR (Prague, Ústí nad Labem, Plzeň). The Romani taught at all these institutions is Slovak Romani.

Growing interest in Romani among *gadže* is also an incentive for Roma to give more attention to their mother tongue.

The pedagogical NGO "Nová škola" (New School) has organised for the fifth time a contest for children (7-15 years) in Romani literature. In each contest, about 120 Romani children took part. Their works have been published in five little volumes. Out of all the contributions only three were in the *Vlachi* dialect, the rest in Slovak Romani. In the language of the children a heavy influence of Czech is apparant. However, their work is an optimistic sign of the fact that Romani is still living even in the youngest generation.

One of the most important institutions which collects, conserves, and publishes Roma's cultural works is "Museum romské kultury" (the Museum of Roma culture), founded in Brno in 1992. At present the Museum is preparing a standing exhibition of the Roma's history and culture out of the artefacts which the workers of the museum have collected. The museum was founded by Ing. Karel Holomek, the son of JUDr Tomáš Holomek who in 1969 was one of the founders of the Union of Gypsies-Roma. The daughter of Ing. Karel Holomek, PhDr Jana Horváthová, has been collecting pictures, sculptures, and carvings of self-taught Roma artists, and thanks to her an outstanding exhibition "*Luma romane jakhenca*" ("The world through the eyes of Roma") has been shown in many cities of ČR.

Another phenomenon reviving the feeling and damaged pride of Roma identity are publications written by Roma historians about the Roma's history. The shared present and past destiny of Roma has always been a constitutive part of their group-identity. In traditional communities the awareness of shared destiny - which in reference to the past may be called awareness of shared history - did not extend beyond the boundaries of the kinship group, or of one "Gypsy-settlement", or of the conuptial region - *amaro okresis*. The extention in time was limited to several generations. The historical memory of the community was fixed and transmitted in special oral forms of oral culture "*vakeriben pal o dada*" ("narratives about the fore fathers").

With the extention of contacts among Roma and with the increase of Roma's institutional education, a quite immense interest in all-Roma history arouse. In the past two centuries many books about the history of Gypsies have been written, all of them by *gadže*. Most of them, if not overtly loaded with prejudices, at least used language by which Roma feel offended ("host population" - for non-Roma, "invadors/intruders" for Roma, "gypsy squads/bands" for Roma communities, "primitive/socially lowest/backward" as an epitheton constans denoting the Roma society, etc.).

Studies written by the late Rom historian MA Bartoloměj Daniel (1924-2001) and by the young historian PhDr Jana Horváthová (in Czech) are bought and read with great interest. It is true (and quite natural) that Daniel glorifies the Roma's history as a reaction to the previous studies distorting it. However, generally speaking, his work is admirable.

The thirst of the Roma in ČR to know the history of all the Roma is another manifestation of ethnic identity and of an aspiration to develop and promote it.

All these institutions and activities help Roma to get rid of the deep complex of ethnic (and thus also personal) inferiority which forty years of forced assimilation has arisen in them. More and more Roma



identify themselves publicly with their ethnic origin and declare their *romipen*. On one hand, "Gypsyhood" has still not stopped being a stigma in the eyes of the ignorant average *gadžo* public. On the other hand, Roma identity is highly evaluated by many *gadže* defending human rights, by *gadžo* artists, linguists, scientists, young people interested in music, etc.

The Government of ČR has created quite a number of posts for Roma who have expert knowledge about Romani language and culture. Thus, competence in *romipen* is rewarded by prestige and by money. This of course is also an incentive not to give up the Roma ethnic identity.

However, two basic preconditions for full-fledged revival of *romipen*, Romani language and culture, are missing. (1) Restitution of Romani at home, in communication between parents and children, (2) teaching of Romani language at primary schools and talking in Romani in kindergartens. Without the second precondition the first one is hardly possible: Roma parents will always fear that their children will have difficulties in the Czech speaking schools if they don't speak Czech. They have been taught by the assimilationists that the only way to improve their Czech is to give up Romani. This false idea is deeply rooted in Roma as well as *gadže*. It is true, that there are not enough professional teachers who know Romani, but there definitely are ways to utilize Romani speakers at school even if they lack pedagogical education. The point is, I dare say, that in spite of official declarations of multiculturalism and a wish to support Romani, the subconscious ethnocentric belief of most of the *gadže* is that the assimilation of the Roma would after all be the best way for them to achieve the "superior" standard of the Czechs.

On the other hand, a question arises: should it be the *gadže* to bother themselves about the promotion of Romani language and culture? Should not it be the Roma themselves? (Was it the Germans who bothered themselves about the revival of the Czech language and culture in the 19th century and who liberated the Czechs from Austrian rule? Definitely not. But the situation of Roma is much more difficult. And their emancipation process has on a large scale started only about one or two decades ago). But if the Czechs today try "to compensate the injustice of the past" (*napravovat křivdy minulosti*), they definitely should also compensate the injustice which in the past was done to Roma.

What can be said about the changes in ethnic (subethnic) identity of Roma in ČR as a summary of its development since 1989? It is much more difficult than summarising the "closed chapters" of the former past periods. The changes are ongoing and prediction of what fixed forms will be their result is not easy.

The Roma have declared themselves to be a non-territorial nation at the V. Congress of IRU (International Romani Union) which was held in Prague, July 2000. (The congress was attended by delegates from 42 countries. Romani /a cluster of Romani dialects/ worked for five days as an excellent medium of communication). JUDr Emil Ščuka, who was elected the president of IRU at this Congress, also declared the aspiration IRU to become a member of the General Assembly of Nations of the UN. (Now IRU is a member of the ECOSOC section of the UN with the status of a consultant).

The all-Roma emancipation process is going on at an international level with growing force. The general atmosphere of multiculturalism and promotion of ethnic minorities is a support (including financially) for Roma's national aspirations. All this helps the tendencies of distinct subethnic groups of Roma in ČR (and in the world) to revitalise their identity, to extend its boundaries, and to seek new forms for its articulation. Let us, who have come to know and admire the fascinating traditional culture



of the Roma hope that the *phundrado drom* (open road) to the Roma's modern ethnic identity will not stop.