



"Gypsy-politics" in Austria and Hungary From the 19th century to 1938

Helmut Samer

Starting in the second half of the 19th century, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was affected by a new wave of immigrants. [Cudža Roma] Roma groups from the east moved to Hungary, among them *Lovara*, horse-traders from the Karpato-Ukraine.

Along with the increasing appearance of nomadic *Vlach*-groups - seen from the point of view of the Hungarian people as a real "invasion" - there were growing complaints about "repeated criminal acts" and the lack of an adequate law to fight this "public nuisance".

Another reason for complaint was a regulation by the Hungarian law governing local authorities, obliging all municipalities to offer the Roma accommodation and basic supplies. Due to the intense immigration of that time, this regulation led to increasing problems in the various villages.

In 1907, 28 provinces demanded a common file against the Roma. However, parliament was unable to present a political solution that would satisfy both parties. Instead, the problem was transferred to an administrative level. The decisions that were taken, such as a prohibition of begging and forceful deportation to the original place of residence, document the continuous repressive character of anti "gypsy-politics". Due to the lack of financial resources and adequate economic structures, Hungarian politics that until 1918 had aimed at making the Roma settle by force, was bound to fail. Unable to achieve any kind of economic basis in the villages, the Roma were literally forced to keep up their nomadic life-style in order to survive. At the same time, prejudices and criminalising tendencies grew among the resident population. A publication on the "Hungarian legal system" played a significant part in this process.

Especially in the western Hungarian provinces (present Burgenland), the inability and unwillingness of state and society to effectively deal with the situation of the Roma led to dramatic changes: in order to stop the continuous flow of Roma immigrants, as of the second half of the 19th century, the Austrian government severely restricted immigration and ordered deportation of all Hungarian Roma encountered on Austrian territory. Along with the exit-prohibition passed by Hungary in 1870, the bordering provinces within a short amount of time experienced a massive increase in the Roma population. As the affected communities were unable and/or unwilling to provide them with adequate accommodation, the Roma were allowed to settle on worthless properties. This is how the infamous "gypsy-colonies" on the outskirts of villages and towns came into existence.

The great number of Roma and the economic backwardness of the region impeded any form of integration. As the farming society itself suffered severe economic difficulties at that time, conflicts between Roma and *Gadže* were frequent.

During the First World War, many Roma served in the army. Women and unfit men were obliged to do work according to the "Kriegsleistungsgesetz". In 1916, the animals and wagons of all wandering Roma were handed over to the military. Horses, mules, and donkeys could only be bought with special permission by the police.

With the annexation of Burgenland in 1921, thousands of Roma were taken over into the newly founded Republic of Austria. As they could not be sent out of the country, massive regulations were initiated.



As early as 1922, the federal government of Burgenland ordered that all Roma had to stay in their home communities and were to be kept from moving. In order to avoid new cases of immigration, the Roma were counted and their "gypsy shelters" registered.

In 1926, all Roma above the age of 14 residing in Burgenland were officially registered by fingerprints and photographs. As of 1928, the federal police station of Eisenstadt introduced a so-called "Zigeunerkartothek" ("gypsy-index"), which listed and identified about 8,000 Roma by their names and fingerprints.

With the onset of the economic crisis, many Roma who had made a living as helpers and wandering craftsmen found their existence threatened. Unable to find any sources of income, many of them were obliged to beg and, much to the chagrin of the majority population, came to depend more and more on charity. Due to the economic emergency, theft and minor cases of fraud increased, which tightened tensions between the Roma and the farming population, causing an atmosphere of escalating hostility against the ethnic group.

Similarly as in Germany however, newly-released severe orders significantly contributed to the increase of criminal acts committed by the "gypsies". Many previous convictions resulted from offences against the tightened law of registration and other administrative offences. However, specific contexts were intentionally ignored in order to criminalise the Roma. What is more: police-statistics were used in order to prove that "gypsies" were "a-social" beings. Roma settlements were increasingly seen as a "cultural shame". It was especially the press of Burgenland that employed a more and more radical language, thus helping to create anti-Roma sentiments among the population. Among other things, the papers talked about a "spooky growth" among "gypsies" and demanded that the region be liberated quickly from this "plague". Several conferences dealt with the question of how this could be achieved. One of these conferences took place in Oberwart on January 15, 1933 and is memorable for the suggestion to "send the Roma to live on an island in the Pacific Ocean" or else, have them "castrated".

Thus, Austria was no exception in laying the foundation for the future persecution and extermination of the Roma already years and even decades before this was to actually happen. Seen in this light, the call for a "Burgenland free of gypsies" by the NSDAP was nothing new. As opposed to other politicians of the time, leader Tobias Portschy was determined to carry out his project of "doing away with the gypsies by way of forced labour, deportation and sterilisation" and thus find a "national socialist solution" for the "gypsy problem".

In Hungary, following the breakdown of the monarchy, "gypsy politics" existed only to a certain degree. This was due also to the fact that the Horthy regime, which replaced the revolutionary interim-government, paid the Roma hardly any attention. The few laws passed at that time mostly aimed at a stricter supervision of the Roma, which was justified by their allegedly high crime rate. In 1928, a new regulation was passed, allowing for the registration of wandering gypsies by simultaneous raids in various communities.

The II. novella of criminal law, in the year 1928 contained special measures against "incorrigible criminals". Among these was the admission of such individuals to "work-houses". This novella was clearly directed against the Roma, whose living conditions at that time however hardly differed from those of other "declassified" groups of people. In 1931, the ministry of inner affairs passed a law which almost entirely prohibited mobile jobs, restricting work permission to the original place of residence, tying it to a special permission by the local council. This new regulation deprived the Roma of their



economic basis. Finally, in 1938 a decree according to which any Rom was to be seen primarily as a suspect, gave way to their persecution and deportation as an ethnic group.



References

- Baumgartner, Gerhard (1987) *Sinti und Roma in Österreich*. Pogrom 130, pp. 47-50.
- Baumgartner, Gerhard (ed.) (1995) *6x Österreich. Zur Geschichte und aktuellen Situation der Volksgruppen*, Klagenfurt.
- Fraser, Angus (1992) *The Gypsies*. Oxford.
- Mayerhofer, Claudia (1999) *Dorfzigeuner. Kultur und Geschichte der Burgenland-Roma von der Ersten Republik bis zur Gegenwart*, Wien.
- Reemtsma, Katrin (1996) *Sinti und Roma. Geschichte, Kultur, Gegenwart*, München.
- Szabó, György (1991) *Die Roma in Ungarn. Ein Beitrag zur Sozialgeschichte einer Minderheit in Ost- und Mitteleuropa*, Frankfurt.
- Vossen, Rüdiger (1983) *Zigeuner. Roma, Sinti, Gitanos, Gypsies zwischen Verfolgung und Romantisierung*, Hamburg.