

The Survival and the Identity of Ethnic Roma

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Vital matters concerning the survival and the identity of ethnic Roma people have been reinforced in the Roma communities in the last 50–60 years. The relationships of linguistic, tribal, local and religious Roma communities to their environment, state organisations, international, regional organisations and organisations of broader circles have become issues requiring inner consensus.

Similarly to most people of the “third world”, we are witnessing a late national development in case of the Roma, too. The difference from the average situation is that this development is not linked to any specific geographical area and no such claims have emerged either.

What is more, we cannot even see what level the direction of the development—in different countries or spanning the borders—reaches, or where the processes of self-definition and integration, and the mechanism of assimilation results will lead in the future, as this development is strongly affected by internal and external factors as well.

The struggle for the emancipation of the Roma communities appears not only on self-organisational but also on ideological levels these days.

Different events promoting the forming of communal identity (e.g. standardization of the language) of ethnic Roma people are going on at different levels now. These events are also designed to evaluate political, cultural, historical and communication processes and to set values.

Naturally, we could witness similar events in the case of other nations in Europe about 2–400 years ago, and in Africa and Asia nowadays.

In Europe the specification and planning of Roma identity and collective self-identity primarily raises cultural, scientific and communication tasks determined by political and ideological goals. In other places religious and mythological devices have greater importance.

On the other hand, we should not forget that these processes are going on under strong internal and external pressure based on conscious and spontaneous powers. One of their forms is the violent pressure of assimilation, which considers Roma people valueless and to be ceased. It questions the right of their language and culture to exist, stigmatises them as stolen and deviant, what is more: denies their values and usefulness.

One of the elements of external ideological pressure to cease the Roma as an ethnic group is the destruction of the community self-esteem and shaping of self-hatred. It tries to deny their historical values and their useful presence or tries to project so called present prestige correlations in the past which are unacceptable, and make it impossible for the Roma to be taken as equal partners in present and past historical processes. And this way the Platonic philosophy could be justified in a negative and pejorative way: 'Everything is identical with itself and its history'.

According to our humanist convictions, we must protect Roma people from these external pressures as long as these pressures and vulnerable communities (according to their self-definition) exist. We must do this even if we cannot see the final stages and limits of the identity planning processes. We have to do this because the communities are formed by people who are offended in their human dignity, who are humiliated and considered inferior only because they belong to the Roma community. And of course, we have to do it for ourselves and the sake of our children because this ideology creates further tensions and violence between Roma and non-Roma people in the future.

By the exposure, systematization and interpretation of primary and secondary historical sources modern historical science tries to introduce the determining facts and processes of the past reality from various vertical and horizontal aspects. It sets up different scientific hypotheses, proves and tries to form scientific 'general agreements' based on theorems, and through the denial or supplementing of these theorems it tries to analyse and introduce the processes of the reality or alleged reality in a deeper, more nuanced and richer way.

There is no general scientific agreement about the important parts of the Roma history and processes, actually the first hypotheses haven't been formed yet either, not even at European, national or smaller community levels.

Some fields of historical science (e.g. national histories) are very sensitive when it comes to ideological interests or partiality, as the mythologies presented as scientific facts of their and past historical misconceptions turning into ideological dogmas belong to the identity of these national communities too. Usually those scientists who foster and promote their nation's historical myths are the most impatient when it comes to similar phenomena in case of their neighbour's. But in the case of Roma national and ethnic history it is very easy to appear as a 'purifier' demanding the exclusiveness of scientific and exact claims.

We are not really in possession of primary sources concerning the history of European Romas, as there were no historians or priests among these people, furthermore, their environment was not interested in their inner matters.

Consequently, the information about them reflects the opinion of states, priests and other intellectuals from that period. These data that could be the source of more thorough information about the history of Roma (let's say from 4–500 years ago) are

mostly unprocessed or these features (church documents, treasury or chamber reports etc.) were neglected while processing them. In spite of these facts, the related sciences and the secondary historical documents, if analysed properly, could give us extremely useful information about the lifestyle of Roma people, about their livelihood and their relationship to their environment if the researchers were not only interested in the texts but also in their real content and system of connections.

When dealing with Roma historical sources, one can be surprised by the number of anti-Roma laws and regulations. The number exceeds all expectations. Based on this fact, it would not be unwise to conclude that the Roma people lived in unfavorable conditions. In fact, due to the limited capability of the 16th and 17th-century-governments to carry out its regulations, it was not all that bad.

It can be easily proved by the fact that the “sinto” and “manus” languages managed to survive in an area characterised by long-term and stabile co-existence and division of labour between German, French, Dutch and Roma communities. Obviously, it was more typical in the margin than in the central areas. The Roma people successfully satisfied local economical demands and created business connections though not necessarily in the form of well-established economical units and not completely legally.

Considering the responsibility of the Roma people in the birth of the restrictive measures many forget about the historical environment, the age of Reformation and religious wars. The concept of “us” was merely limited to belonging to a certain religious community. Other sources of identity were having the same feudal master or the civic rights of a city. Those not within any of the above circles were exposed to persecution, distrust and the stigma of that of a stranger.

On the other hand, besides real-life experiences, guilds’ fears of undesired business competition also contributed to the negative attitude against the Roma people.

With the above conditions given, the mere subsistence of the Roma people can be regarded as a great achievement. I believe there is a lot to learn, even today, from this attitude.

What are the elements of it?

First, language skills. Having a good command of languages enables them to handle conflicts better.

Second, marketable professional skills. These ranged from entertaining skills and metal work to traditional curing.

Third, empathy and psychological skills, with which they could make contact with other people more easily.

Fourth, the flexibility and the readiness of the Roma culture to adapt to new situations.

Fifth, their sense for business and—and because of this—their extended travels, their vast experiences of various countries in Europe. How did it help them to survive?

Well, upon encountering a new community, the Roma people always looked for the unsatisfied needs and tried to provide an appropriate service.

Roma people living in the Hungarian Kingdom had been enjoying certain privileges and autonomy for generations when the first anti-Roma laws appeared in Western Europe. This autonomy contained the following authorizations:

- tax autonomy: The Roma only had to pay direct tax to the sovereign. The annual amount of it was determined (1 Forint in two instalments). They were not obliged to pay tax to neither any landlords, nor any feudal counties.
- The Roma tax was collected by the appointed noble “Vajda”-in-chief.
- change of place autonomy: The Roma were free to change their place for the sake of better business opportunities. They were granted a free pass from the sovereign to assure their privilege.
- legislation autonomy: On one hand the Roma were allowed to settle their internal legal disputes according to the Roma customs or the “Vajda” could administer justice.
- On the other hand, in cases of a Roma vs. non-Roma legal dispute, the parties could turn for justice to the representative of the sovereign, to the noble “Vajda”-in-chief.

The central power guaranteed the realization of the above autonomy and protected the Roma from the 16th to the 18th century. The free pass of King Sigismund (1387–1437) is just one of the proofs for this kind of treatment.

Although certain researchers have questioned the authenticity of the pass, considering the passes of the later monarchs of Hungary (King Ulászló, King Mathias, Queen Isabella or even Ferenc Rákóczi II. from the beginning of the 18th century) the validity of the pass is beyond question.

Obviously following the Turkish attacks against Hungary and the disintegration of the country into three parts (the western part run by the Habsburgs, the central part by the Turks and Transylvania by the Hungarian Crown) the autonomy system of the Roma was not any more feasible.

It is interesting that in Transylvania, a territory where the Hungarian legal system and statehood subsisted, certain Roma groups managed to keep their autonomy as long as until 1848.

Of course, in case of lacking sufficient number of peasants, following the fading of the central power, famines, epidemics or the Tatar attacks, noble landlords were eager to restrict the Roma autonomy, not with great success, though. It is also true that many Roma people left the Roma community and settled down as feudal peasants.

In some extreme cases Roma individuals, mostly running away from slavery from the trans-Carpathian territories, were given to landlords as gifts. Obviously these events triggered the assimilation of the Roma people.

Question: what is the reason of this special treatment of the Roma in the Hungarian Kingdom while in most Western-European countries they were badly suppressed?

The autonomy appeared earlier in Hungary than the persecution of the Roma in Western-Europe. In addition, the contemporary cultural environment was not too closed, xenophobic and hostile against the Roma.

The Roma people became Christians in the Byzantine Empire. In the beginning it was regarded as the most important element of the community identity, consequently the Roma were held as part of the society. They accepted the authority of the monarch of the country they were momentarily roaming in. Their professional skills were highly respected. (The Roma people could make cannons, rifles, swords and other military equipment. They were skillful enough to repair fortresses and provide all sorts of services for the feudal armies. These skills proved indispensable for the Hungarian monarchs constantly at war with the Ottoman Empire.)

In Western Europe, on the other hand, the above demands of the army were already satisfied by the guilds. Therefore, Roma were considered as business competition and were seldom welcome.

The fear from the Ottoman invasion and the Reformation movement generated mistrust against the strangers, which later turned into xenophobia. There was a desperate need for strong state and church control. The Catholic Church was particularly distrustful with the Roma people who had come from the East, did not have tight roots in the society or belong to any institutionalised church.

The exploration of the New World in the meantime, with vast numbers of pagan people to be converted, changed the openness of Christianity. The new identity of European humanity restricted its members to European Christians. Just at the very last moment the Roma people did not make it to be a member of it.

Through the example of a part of the European and Romany history I have tried to demonstrate that the main events of history have caused different fates at the same period of time in groups with a very similar composition—some of these groups had a privileged situation whereas others suffered persecution.

Adaptation and survival were effective on both grounds, in most cases with the help of gained cultural experiences. The growth of social relations based upon the mechanical industry and the totalitarian states resulted in closing down these cultural experiences and undervaluing them and made the Roma people defenseless in these times.

At the same time due to the depth of previous traditions and experiences, the values are still available, with the help of which assertive, up to date and competitive knowledge, and cooperative integrative ideology, a current self-consciousness and identity can be built up.

The Roma children are usually educated in “gadjo” schools, which are non-Romany education institutions. These schools, however, are not sensitive to the needs of the

Romany students' identities, to the self-respect of their communities and thus the self-respect of the individuals. This has already led to serious conflicts. The Romany family and community have sensed this as an aggression against their existence and again their values—and did so not without reason.

They considered school as a foreigner that wants to make Romany children turn against their parents, so they resisted or simply found it a bad aptitude; they were indifferent to the things that happened around the school. Meanwhile, the real opportunities of integration are only available through the school system. So, the approach of the schools and of the education needs to be changed. The school is not only that of the 'Gadjo's, the non-Roma people, but is also the Roma peoples'.

The Roma values should be integrated into education, their community identity and self-esteem should be protected there as well. In order to achieve this goal, they should be provided with information about the values of their communities, the morals of their good history, so that they have a way to appreciate themselves and their communities. Through this, they will learn to appreciate other's values as well, which should be of course mutual.

The responsibility of historians and scientists cannot be overemphasised in this matter. Romany cultural values have to be written down, demonstrated and have to be made available for the school system. The example of the Roma heroes should be stated starting from the 'dzsat' warriors, through the Scottish Billi Marschal and the Hungarian Balázs Lippai ('hajdúcaptain', one of the officers of the Bocskai Uprising in 1604–1605), Ferenc Horváth (colonel Ferenc Horváth, the captain and officer of the Thököly Uprising in 1678–1685) and so on.

The historical significance of Romany handicraft should be emphasised (canons were presumably brought into Europe with the help of Roma people). All Roma children should learn about these values and of the many others that helped their community subsist through many thousands of years.