

STUDII DE ATELIER. CERCETAREA MINORITĂȚILOR NAȚIONALE DIN ROMÂNIA
WORKING PAPERS IN ROMANIAN MINORITY STUDIES
MŰHELYTANULMÁNYOK A ROMÁNIAI KISEBBSÉGEKRŐL

Nr. 60

Plainer Zsuzsa

**'WHEN SOMEONE CAME AND
STARTED TO SING, THE OTHERS
SANG TOO, ACCOMPANYING
HIM ON THE VIOLIN'**

**Living and Working Conditions
in the Onetime Roma Colony in Oradea
and Its Liquidation in the 1970s**



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Titlu: *'When Someone Came and Started to Sing, the Others Sang Too, Accompanying Him on the Violin' – Living and Working Conditions in the Onetime Roma Colony in Oradea and Its Liquidation in the 1970s*

■ Coordonator serie: Iulia Hossu, Horváth István

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Abstract

■ Roma in the Romanian state socialism are a rare subject in present-day Romania studies. Thus, to fill in the blank, this paper recalls and analyses an important moment in the recent past: living and working conditions in a onetime Roma colony in Oradea as well as its liquidation by the communist policies of urbanization in 1977 and 1978. In doing so, I try to investigate whether the widely shared scholarly belief on the relatively high living standards of the Roma during socialism does stay for this particular case. As empirical data show, winding up the Roma colony and forcing its inhabitants to move into blocks of flats did not significantly improve housing conditions of the group; nevertheless, it destroyed their previously existing socio-cultural environment and cut them off from a series of resources. In opposition to the official discourse of communism, living standards after the removal were not raised but lowered, which – in lack of coherent urbanization policies in the post-socialism – turned the place into an urban ghetto by the 2000s.

Rezumat

■ Condiția romilor din România în timpul comunismului de stat reprezintă o temă puțin dezbatută în literatura de specialitate. Astfel, pentru a contribui la acest subiect, studiul de față are ca scop analiza unui eveniment important al acestui trecut apropiat: condițiile de viață și de muncă în colonia de romi din Oradea, precum și distrugerea forțată a acestui loc ca urmare a politicilor comuniste de urbanizare, care a inițiat relocarea locuitorilor din aceste case într-o zonă de blocuri în anii 1977 și 1978. Ca punct de pornire în acest studiu de caz se dorește investigarea asumpției bine cunoscute în romologie, conform căreia condițiile de viață ale romilor ar fi crescut în timpul socialismului de stat. În lumina rezultatelor cercetării, relocarea acestei comunități nu a contribuit semnificativ la creșterea nivelului de trai a acestui grup, ba din contră, acestea s-au înrăutățit în urma relocării, fapt ce – în lipsa unei politici de locuire coerente din timpul postsocialismului – a transformat aceste blocuri într-un ghetou urban până în anii 2000.



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'WHEN SOMEONE CAME AND STARTED TO SING, THE OTHERS SANG TOO, ACCOMPANYING HIM ON THE VIOLIN'

Living and Working Conditions in the Onetime Roma Colony in Oradea and Its Liquidation in the 1970s

■ Despite the growing literature on Roma in Romania – policy papers, state reports, newspaper articles, and, of course, qualitative and quantitative (Fleck–Rughiniş 2008) researches –, little is known about the communist past of this group and the way state socialism influenced its present-day marginalization. Unlike the Hungarian scholarly production, which gave a special focus to the issue (Kemény 1970; Stewart 1997), the recent past of the Romanian Roma has but fragmentally been written (M. Crow 1996; Bárány 2002; Achim 2004). To fill in the blank, this paper claims to recall and analyse an important moment of the state-socialist period: a forced demolition of a Roma colony in Oradea in 1977 and 1978, relocation of its inhabitants into blocks of flats, and – if possible – some future consequences of this event.

Roma in (the Romanian) State Socialism

■ Researches on Roma under (the Romanian) state socialism have some commonly shared views when accounting the condition of this ethno-racial group in the mentioned period of time. As many scholars affirm, living standards of the Roma were increased during the decades before 1989 as the state facilitated their access to free and compulsory education, labour market, healthcare system, and public housing (M.Crow 1999; Creţan–Turnock 2008) – a fact acknowledged even by those anthropologists who show a critical attitude towards such forms of social engineering:

'The Gypsy policy's success in getting the Rom into the wage labour market was more than statistical. When I talked to Gypsies, in some contexts at least, it did seem that work and the act of labouring had been given a new centrality and value in their lives [...] The Rom did acknowledge wage labour as the source of the fundamental improvement in their living standards over the previous twenty years.' (Stewart 1997: 98)

Allocation was – in my view – embedded in the political and cultural logic of Eastern European state socialisms. These systems were in fact projects of social modernization, which – according to party ide-



ologies – were elaborated to catch up with Western capitalist achievements seen as rivals of socialist projects. (Bartha in Krausz ed. 2003) Modernization – theoretically and sometimes practically – provided access to a set of material and symbolical goods for many groups exploited during pre-socialist times: like the economically subordinated working class or the landless peasants.

The Roma, too, fitted into this category of the underprivileged still, in their case the assigned path of upward mobility went hand in hand with very a strong tendency for assimilation. (Csepeli–Simon 2004) Assimilation in this perspective encompassed not only the narrowing of linguistic and cultural rights, like a refusal to recognize the Roma as ethnic minority (Helsinki Watch 1990) but also a concern to erase those economic practices the Roma performed and reinforced due to the economic niches they held. To quote Michael Stewart again, an important aim of state-communist policies targeting the Roma was 'to assimilate the [...] Gypsy population into the [...] working-class. The party intended to eliminate totally all traces of Gypsy lifestyle and behavior. [...] Gypsies were characterized less by a culture than by a "way of life" marked out by behavioral traits such as scavenging, begging, hustling, dealing and laziness.' (Stewart in Hann ed. 1993: 187-188)

This image of the Gypsy as an inferior other appears, too, in a Romanian Communist Party document from 1977 issued under the name of 'Study regarding the Socio-Economic Condition of the Gypsy Population in Our Country'. In this report, the Roma 'refuse integration on the labour market' (p. 3) and 'do not provide any socially useful activities; thus, they live on social allowance. They have a parasite way of life' (p.4.), 'disregard their obligations, as they do not register themselves to the authorities'. (p. 3) 'The majority of the adults are illiterate or half-illiterate, showing reluctance (manifestându-se refractari) in sending their children to school; the children are sent to beg. (...) They live in tents under unhealthy conditions, many families in the same room; three or four persons of different sex are sleeping in the same bed.' (p. 4)

The 'Gypsy way of life' – as Stewart labelled it – understood as a pattern of cultural racism (Wrenner–Modood eds. 2005) refers to an engagement to traditional, non-industrial working activities such as wood carving, spoon making, tinsmithing copper-smithing, or drain-pipe making; the Roma were also performing certain services like playing musical instruments, fortune telling, or bear-leading. Small trade is also important among the pre-socialist Roma occupations: purchasing and reselling certain products such as feather, saucerpans, or horse. (Helsinki Watch ibidem) All these required certain skills of negotiation and an ability to make connections with the non-Roma (Stewart, 1993), and also implied the condition of geographical mobility (that shaped many social practices) in order to obtain new clients and purchase goods. In addition, many of these activities were acquired through personal relations instead of a formal institutional background (Stewart ibidem). Unsurprisingly, these practices were in strong opposition to the socialist state, which regarded waged labour performed in works and factories as a privileged form of occupation. Doing trade also implied discovering new markets, which was really unwelcomed in a state that demanded a control of all economic resources and (especially in Romania) intended to supervise geographical mobility. This contrast *per se* engendered and reinforced a marginal position and a negative 'othering' of the Roma.

This above-mentioned party document issued by the Central Committee – one of the highest-level institutions in the hierarchy of power – did not only take stock of the problems, but also claimed to have found a 'solution'. But – because of these strong, negative stereotypes – facilitating access to public resources for the Roma was not just a project of upward mobility but also one to civilize the group. (Okely 1983)

Subsequently the following tasks were assigned to the plan: 'integration in agriculture, factories' (p. 1), 'intensifying of police control over the Gypsies who do not integrate into the norms of social cohabiting and [who] perform a parasitarian way of life.'(p.2), 'raising the level of education,' and 'providing daily food for schools with afterschool programme. For delinquency, vicious behavior, and negative influence on other minors, children should be transferred to special schools of work and re-education.' (p. 2) Improving the housing conditions of the Roma was, too, a target to reach in this set of directives: 'allocation of land to build up houses, in accordance with plans of systematization [...] demolition of unhealthy (insalubrious) houses' (p.1) were set as objectives to increase the living standards of this group.

Relocation as Country-Wide Phenomenon

■ Interventions in the spatial organization of the Roma in state socialism had two major dimensions. Sedentarization was one of them, a project that stretched out over more than two decades, having been completed by the 1980s (Achim 2004), and the above-mentioned construction of new dwelling places, in accordance with the systematization, which affected either the Roma or the non-Roma in Romania. Systematization was a centralized planning embodied by Law Nr. 58 of 1974, which aimed at reshaping urban environments in the 1970s and rural ones one decade later. According to its official objectives: 'Systematization should assure the decrease of the built-up surface from the urban and local areas, and an optimal usage of the land that represents an important national good.' However, discordant with its officially admitted intention, the mere effect of the law (for towns and cities) was the mass removal of urban residents from houses into blocks, pulling down entire suburbia, or suburbia-like areas and turning them into districts. (R. Süle 1990) Applying the Act of Systematization for the Roma in urban settlements enhanced the winding up of their neighbourhoods settled on the fringes of many towns. According to some scholars, this demolition was 'not much of a loss' as the Roma were provided better living conditions than their previous ones. (Achim 2004: 192) But – as this is also acknowledged – systematization simultaneously implied a forced relocation, a liquidation of neighbourhoods and communities. (Achim *ibidem*; M.Crow *ibidem*) As it may come out, the forced relocation of the colony in Oradea was not an isolated case: the same happened in Bucharest (Achim *ibidem*) and in Cluj to the Bufnița neighbourhood.¹

To sum up, aim of this research is to investigate the impact of state-communist housing policies over the onetime Roma colony in Oradea. Describing the process of removal, demolition of the houses, and relocation of their inhabitants into blocks of flats is just one, indeed important, task of my investigation. Simultaneously, a more complex question seeks for an answer throughout the following sections. Does this particular case study prove the benefits of the Roma policies during state socialism? Did such interventions raise living standards of the Roma? And, finally, how are these past events influencing the present-day marginalization of the group?

The Research Itself

■ Fieldwork for this research started in 2011, initially on the school integration of this Roma group. Later, as recollections of the onetime colony became more and more salient in carrying out my interviews, I placed this issue at the centre of my investigations. Remembering the past proved to be of help when initiating contacts with the locals and trying to gain their trust: all of them were eager to recall their memories of the colony life. But narratives about the 1970s were not just a useful fieldwork toolkit: these served as recourse in linking fragmented individual episodes to – as Loic Wacquant puts it – the broader context of socio-cultural patterns (Wacquant 2002) to understand the pauperization, or up- vs. downward mobility of the Roma in the post-socialist Eastern Europe.

The majority of my respondents were born in the 1950s and the 1960s, and, with a few exceptions, none of them was permanently hired as industrial worker; thus, the proletarianization of the Roma could not be grasped through these empirical data. Still, as it may come out, the 'Gypsy way of life' was somehow affected by the forced relocation.

1 Gyöngy Pásztor's personal communication in May 2015.



The Colony

1. Non-Roma Representations and Misrepresentations

The local Hungarian society in Oradea – especially its older members – knows about a winded-up Roma colony in the town. They are familiar with its name, given after Cinka Panna, the famous female fiddler of Roma origin, and they can also locate the place: on the Eastern fringes of Oradea. But details of the liquidation are unknown to them.

Written sources about the colony are also small in number, all of them being misleading or even biased. The Wikipedia entry on Cinka Panna mentions that ‘the Roma colony in Oradea bears her name up till now’ (http://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Czinka_Panna); however, the place no longer exists. A blog – defined as a ‘unique collection of home pages, information, and news about Oradea,’ uploaded with the purpose of ‘loving Oradea and keeping its memory for the following generations’ (<http://egyvaradiblog-janagyvaradrol.blogspot.ro/2013/08/czinka-panna-es-rola-elnevezett-volt.html>) – sees the colony as a provenance of Roma folk music, a place frequently visited by the well-known folk singer of Roma origin, Apollónia Kovács, who would collect songs from the colony dwellers. Approaching the area as an ethnographic thesaurus also occurs in an obituary of the famous teacher of Hungarian language and literature, Ágoston András, remembered as a playwright too, who collected Roma folk songs from the colony in order to use them as a ‘dub’ for the play he was directing and staging with his students (<http://www.varad.ro/node/1253>).

According to a database created to the order of the Democratic Alliance of Hungarians in Romania about the schools in Romania with Hungarian classes: before the 1970s, the Roma in Oradea ‘had lived in the Tokai colony, also known as Cinka Panna, until a flood destroyed their home places’. (http://www.iskolakveszelyben.ro/m_bihar.html) Indeed, there is a place in the town that previously bore the name of Tokai Colony, but – according to discussions with local non-Roma – this was a non-Roma working-class area settled in the neighbourhood of the Roma colony; the children of these two areas (Roma and non-Roma) were attending the same school during the 1960s.

Misuse, wrong location of the place, and its confusion with the Tokai Colony are also common in homepages about the history of Oradea. (<http://nagyvarad-oradea.blogspot.ro/2007/11/trtnete.html>) Confusing the onetime area with the present-day Roma urban ghetto is also a common way of representing the place. According to a piece of news on a member of the European Parliament, he visited the Cinka Panna Gypsy Colony in 2011. (http://tokeslaszlo.ro/cikk/cinka_panna_romatelep_nagyvarad)

According to my findings, there is but one written source about the area, a newspaper article on a non-Roma intellectual’s memories, who worked as a teacher in the neighbouring school and was a well-known writer of local history. (Indig n.d.) Some fragments from his article are extracted and quoted here in order to show the range of negative stereotypes he used, similar to the ones in the party document. This similarity may show that cultural racism was not typical only of institutions and of the official discourse, but it was – probably – filtering into everyday perceptions of the Roma–non-Roma ethnic boundaries. In the above-mentioned intellectual’s view, the colony was ‘a disgrace to Várad (Oradea)’ (Indig n.d.: 4), as ‘the reader cannot imagine the misery of the place.’ (Indig n.d.: 1)

In Ottó Indig’s memory, ‘there was a grammar school there with I-IV classes [facing the street line], its fence being eroded by the kids, who were in shortage of firewood. The high fence failed to protect the three buildings from the unwelcomed visitors, and thus all removable things in there were removed after a while. [...]. Only “better-off” families built a toilet near their houses, the kids imitated what they’d seen from their parents, so they did their “needs” on the narrow stripe behind the houses. [...] There was an unbearable stink when one entered the house – and going in was inevitable because of the kids. Puppies were let to live in the room and so were the poultries during winter, and I remember even a grunting pig tied to the door! [...]’

Two or three generations were living together in these hovels. Due to the bad nutrition and slovenliness, the 35-40-year-olds looked as wretched old ones, with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren, who gathered around them according to Gypsy traditions. The “family life” of the grown-ups took place in the eyes of the little ones’ group; thus, sexual education offered by the school was useless for these kids.’ (Indig n.d.: 1–2)

2. The Roma about Themselves

Men, women, and children whom I address as 'the Roma' in this paper belong to an economically and socially heterogeneous group; however, the majority lives in an urban ghetto facing economically disadvantaged conditions. They refer to themselves as 'Hungarian Gypsies' (*magyar cigányok*), which – in my view – may signify their assimilation towards the local Hungarian society. It could be so as the generation of the grandparents speaks Romany although they do not identify themselves with any vernacular or sub-ethnic group; the parents' generation only understands the language, but Romany is not transmitted to their children. Younger ones are enrolled in the Hungarian classes of the local school; many parents apply for the education funds offered by the Hungarian state and allocated to those who enrol their children in Hungarian classes. 'It is because we are Hungarian Gypsies. Gypsies but also Hungarians: as a Roma woman – mother of two – explained to me. The term Roma was missing from our conversations; they use the 'Gypsy' one instead, without any negative connotation.

The memories of the colony are central to all my Roma respondents: they recall it in long, rich narratives. According to these, the place itself was in fact a street with two rows of houses forming an L shape, all the buildings having a private courtyard that enabled raising animals such as chicken, pig, or rabbit; there was a communal fountain, serving as water supply. The street renamed as Mixandrelor during the 60ies was settled on the Eastern fringes of the town, quite close to a series of factories: the oil factory, the timber yard, the cement plant, the brewery, Fructexport (for collecting and processing fruits), and the peltry works.

In contrast with the poverty and misery described by Indig, memories of the local Roma preserve colony life as a positive experience: 'we were not in shortage of anything'. 'Everybody loved each other there, we were visiting each other. Everybody was taking care of the other. The Gypsies were cooking, cleaning, building houses, anything that was possible.' 'Yes, I repeat, those were good times. Living there was good. We had nights of dancing as there was a community centre, and there were film screenings. This was the venue for the balls, where older Gypsy musicians came and played.' 'There was the well-known Gypsy folk music singer, Apollónia Kovács, who was from Oradea. She came to us, to my aunt, and she taught her Gypsy songs, together with other women.' 'And there was love and togetherness. They made a fire outside to cook the meal which everyone was helped to. And if a drunkard came and started to sing, the others sang too, accompanying him on the violin.'

3. The Colony as a Series of Economic and Symbolic Resources

The Roma in the colony had different occupations. Some were hired in the above-mentioned factories, mostly men, but some women, too. Many (women) performed day-work in Fructexport, collecting and sorting out the fruits. Apart from these two, there was the complex category of the self-employed: a few had horses and carts, and worked as carriers, transporting woods from the timber yard to the non-Roma households in the town and carried paper, scrap iron to the refuse site. Similar to them, but mainly in a 'lower' position, were the younger men or boys helping the carriers in processing wood in the town; many women were collecting paper and other waste by hand, taking them over to the ones with carts. As memories inform us, the great majority of the colony dwellers, both men and women, was doing small trade through personal networks with no authorization: they were purchasing goods from the Hungarian tourists in the town centre and reselling them on the flea market; they prepared sunflower seeds, and sold them in the area of the stadium to the supporters before the Sunday football game. Others were buying beer or non-alcoholic drinks in the town, reselling them to their fellow colony dwellers. Some others were making pies and selling them.

Very important is to understand the importance of this colony for its dwellers. It was not just a place but also a treasure-house of precious resources. Above all, there was the land that enabled the free extension of each house and helped the Roma to improve their living conditions: 'If we could have remained there, we would have had room for everyone, as we would have made some extra rooms, but here in the block we cannot do this. We could build whenever we wanted to as we thought the land was ours. We, the Gypsies, thought it was ours, but it belonged to the council. But when we had to move out, we found out we were wrong. It was not ours since we were forced to move.' Apart from the land, the possibility of raising animals, the idea of ownership also appeared as a reference to the courtyard: 'there



everybody had their own courtyard, everybody had their fence. Everybody knew what was theirs. We were not making any mess there as everybody knew that was somebody's courtyard.'

Adjacency to two major factories, the oil factory and the timber yard, appears in almost every narrative. It is not just a source of supply but also a social scene of purchasing goods through informal contacts. Being in good terms with factory workers and – as they say – by the director was also a sign of trust and reliability of the Roma in non-Roma eyes, and also a way of purchasing oil, wood, or other products. Although Ottó Indig sees this process as begging ('they liked sawdust-burning stoves, the necessary heating being supplicated from my younger brother, who was in charge of the timber yard') (Indig n.d.: 1), the Roma have different interpretations:

It was good living in the colony as we had a garden, we had animals, and we had everything. We did not need wood as there was a boss there in the timber yard, and he was a good man. He let us pick up the waste. And we stored it for the whole winter. We were lucky because of the house and we were lucky with the timber yard, as the boss told us 'come and take some if you want,' as he was a good man.

I picked up the wood in the colony to bring it home. I was allowed to do so as there were some small branches of trees, and they let me take them home. And I left there, and took them home. I was there and took home some wood, but I did not steal because there was the boss. And the boss let us take the branches home. In the colony we wanted for nothing, neither wood nor money nor anything. We were given oil from the factory, which was a scarce commodity as others had to queue up for it. But we were given oil as the people from the factory knew us. So, we took it home and made food with it. When it was over, we returned and asked for more. And we were given. They knew us as we were living in the neighbourhood.

On the timber yard, there was everything, all sorts of materials for constructions. There was that thin parquetry, you know, which was in communism. But the Gypsies did not touch anything.

Forced Relocation – Liquidation of the colony

■ The new, allocated dwelling place for colony-dwellers was a set of two, semi-detached blocks of flats, situated in the same district, still a one-hour walk from the initial location of the colony. As narrations of the past are always shaped by present experiences, it is difficult to approach them as mere documents about the communist times. Still, some clues, other than recollections, may give us guidelines for interpretations. The only preserved photograph about the colony was taken of one house: a hovel made of adobe. As all respondents agree, the colony had a poor infrastructure: there was only a communal fountain serving as water supply, only a few families had electricity, and the others bought it from them. According to the memories of a retired engineer who was working at the State Office for Housing and Urban Development in those times, the two, newly built blocks had a tile stove, a bathroom, a tub – true, a bit smaller than the regular size, as it was of 120 cm –, and a sink. Then again, there was no central heating, but a stove, no separate electricity meter, and only one for measuring water consumption; there was no wall-tile, only cement on the floors and a nylon rug.

Although an actual estimation of the conveniences is not possible, the different interpretations of the new place are still noteworthy. The above-cited engineer argues in the spirit of the Law, in accordance with the above-mentioned party document. In his view, the aim of this relocation was to settle the tumbled down hovels, 'and these [new] apartments were one or two classes higher, even more civilized than the Gypsies' previous houses.' In opposition, members of the Colony saw the old place as an ideal one, and perceived the relocation as a traumatic event:

One morning, when we were still sleeping, my cousin knocked at the door heavily. He said: wake up, we have to move out! I asked 'Why should we?' But the police came and shouted at us to go out. My little daughter was two years old then. We could carry out

some of our things, the wardrobe, but the chairs were left inside. Me and my daughter were crying, but the carriers and the police took our things, broke many of them and put them on the carriage. Everything was taken from here to the block. But it was a misery. There is nothing here, nothing at all! No electricity, no water, just shit, I mean shit. My mother could never get over; she soon died. I was forced to leave with the small children. The first to come have found everything ok: doors, windows. But when we arrived there, there was nothing left. So it was. We were moved in by force by the police. They threw our things at us. We had animals that had to be killed as we could not take them with us.

It seems to be difficult to reconstruct the exact course of the removal, so I will present the most likely version. As some respondents recall, there was an assigned order of the families to be removed. As the initial succession was changed due to arrangements between authorities and the Roma leader (vajda), some colony dwellers, who were initially eligible to leave with the first round, were moved onto the second, so they – possibly in sign of protest –, occupied the block illegally. This version is in line with the one provided by a onetime bureaucrat, who, too, confirms this occupation, adding that after a while authorities issued identity cards to these illegal dwellers, indicating this new place as their home address. This meant – as the old bureaucrat said – legalizing their status.

This may explain why the second wave of Roma met destroyed apartments: 'there was nothing here, nothing, can you imagine this? No doors, no windows, nothing but the walls as they put them to fire. There was dung in here, do you understand?' And this degradation became more and more acute, according to their narratives:

There was no cleaning. Nobody cleaned the stairway as it was nobody's. I painted the stairwell myself, buying everything with my money. I took the garbage away, paid some beers to the fellows to take them. I tried to mobilize them to make a common complaint, signed by each one of us, go to the council and ask for central heating. I thought it would be better than the tile stove. But they did not come.

Or:

They, the other Gypsies, were all making themselves a heater (hot plate) from tiles. But the sole electricity meter could not withstand this as it was extra consumption, and it did not resist. So, electricity was cut off.²

To stop worsening its situation, one category of dwellers moved out. They were mostly full-time employees, who – in accordance with state policies – were allocated apartments by their factories elsewhere in the town. Others, with no permanent workplace, were not eligible for such benefits, and – having not enough amount of money to buy a better apartment, stayed. This moving out of the better-off, who left the poor behind, engendered not just an increase in social inequalities, but it also contributed to transforming the block into an urban ghetto. In lack of a carefully designed post-socialist urban planning, these conditions have not been seriously improved ever since, and this has maintained and reinforced the negative labelling of the area, which is known today as one of the 'Gypsy blocks of flats'.

2 In these recollections, destruction may have been caused by the absence of know-how. Being acknowledged by the Roma themselves, this seems to be a well-known, large-scale phenomenon, accepted and related by researchers as well as by some Roma intellectuals. According to the Helsinki Watch Report, the Roma were moving in from houses to blocks and put all wooden windows and doors to fire. (Helsinki Watch, 1991) A similar phenomenon – one of 'transposing' the old life-style into a new environment – was described by Judit Durst during her fieldwork on Roma migration to Canada and the UK: 'I was hanging around with them in the large mansions in Toronto, where they totally reproduced their previous village-colony environment. This was one of the most interesting issues. They carried on the same life on the mansion's passageway as they had done before at home, on the Colony. They popped in with a cake at 10 p.m., their babies were crying on the bags left on the passageway [...]' (Ádám Kolozsi: *Angliába költöztek a borsodi cigányok*. Index: http://index.hu/belfold/2014/09/02/angliaba_koltoztek_a_borsodi_ciganyok.) Still, in my opinion, these events and practices are underinvestigated in present-day Romany studies.



Instead of erasing the 'Gypsy way of life' and 'civilizing' this group, as initially intended, state policies remade and reinforced the negative stereotypes attached to the local Roma, and thus involuntarily contributed to their perpetuation up to the 2000s. 'In communist times, there was an attempt to make them better houses. But they destroyed everything. Nothing is good for them because they cannot appreciate what they have got.' – as a retired bureaucrat affirms. Her young colleague, who seems to have been born in the time of the relocation, affirms: 'EU funds did not bring visible changes. It is in vain to spend money on the Roma. We worked a lot, but no outcome is seen.'

Work Opportunities before and after the Relocation

■ Work opportunities on the colony can be divided into certain types: apart from the full-time, paid work at factories and plants – less investigated in this actual stage of research –, there was a variety of them.

Day-work was an occasional occupation more or less common among colony dwellers: it was performed mostly by the women, who were sorting and packing fruits; men were doing day-work in factories, sometimes making plaster.

Carriers were typical of the colony, some having horses and carriages to transport the wood, and collect scrap iron and paper. Others, the less well-off, were collecting residues and took them over to the carriers, especially boys of 12–15, who were employed by them, and helped these formers to process and transport the wood: 'after leaving school, I was working with the carriers when I was 15. We were chopping wood in the town for the Hungarians and Romanians. If they were contented, we were given money, and not just money. They invited us for lunch or something.' Other colony dwellers were doing small trade with goods from Hungary (earning a considerable amount of money) or sold sunflowers in the city. This letter 'was good, we loved it a lot. We were selling the seeds during the football games close to the stadium. I remember the men helping and hiding us when the police came, as this was forbidden. But they were nice and hid us.'

These above-mentioned works were usually temporary ones or with a flexible schedule. Except day-work, success of these activities was up to personal skills such as getting in contact with the non-Roma, making a non-Roma clientele, persuading them to buy the goods; each activity needed an extended personal network and was performed via face-to-face interactions with the non-Roma; all works were immediately rewarded (invitation for meals or refreshments). Payment was also immediate, while the skills necessary for these works were transmitted through personal contacts and learning, instead of an institutionalized form of knowledge transmission. Thus, the majority of work opportunities conveyed a certain status to their performers, a status acknowledged among the non-Roma as well. Such activities conferred economic independence, and belonged to the realm of informal economy. These were radically different from the dominant types of occupations in state socialism; the latter ones required a rigid timetable, an economically subordinated status, a controlled access to resources, and a formal and prescribed order of performance. This is why there was but one officially recognized full-time employment that showed similar features to the above-mentioned informal occupations: work in public sanitation. As many Roma recall: 'I liked cleaning the streets. I had been doing it for four years, and then I got ill. But I liked it; two sons of mine were doing this, too. I think it is a good job to make the streets clean. Everybody had its street, a street of their own. And at least we were outside, not in a polluted hall, like those in the factories. We were out and nobody told us what to do. My husband was employed in the factory, but he did not like it; he quit and started to work as a street sweeper.'

The legal status of these activities varied. Waged work was, of course, legal, so was transporting (if done with credentials), but helping the carriers and small trade was illegal; day-work was settled between these two. According to the Act of Labour enacted in 1976, day-work was also a recognized type of economic activity: its working time was officially registered and acknowledged to be an employment relationship entitling to certain social benefits. Moreover, the working age-limit for day-work was lower (15 or even 14 years) than for full-time employment. That is why many Roma stress on the fact that they were hired only by certain plants and factories, the one, that 'could hire minors'. The legality of employment was of high importance during state-socialist times. It was so, as unemployment was considered 'parasitism' (Stewart *ibidem*) and punished by law. Under the age of 14 or 15, children were forced to

stay at school, while over 14 or 15 everyone ought to be at least temporarily employed to avoid legal penalties. Thus, doing day-work helped many Roma to carry on with illegal activities, such as small trade, and it offered them some protection against the police.

The generation of those born in the 1950s and the 1960s seem to have many similarities in their biographies. Many left school quite early, after graduating three of four classes, as they were unsuccessful with learning: 'I left school as my head was not good for this' – one said. Girls were usually helping their parents with housework and looking after their younger siblings, while boys were helping the carriers. Both were performing jobs in the informal economy (selling sunflower seeds, collecting residues, and doing trade with Hungarian goods) or day-work at factories and plants. In doing so, this generation unconsciously reinforced the pattern of the pre-communist way of life: temporary employment, day-work, and holding positions in the informal economy.

The forced removal brought forward the vanishing of previously accessible resources: it cut off the Roma from purchasing oil or wood; it terminated the possibility to extend the living area by attaching extra rooms to the previously existing building as well as the possibility to raise animals, which provided food for Roma families. Moving away also made impossible carrying on many of the previously existing jobs: carrier work, including transportation and procession of wood, and transportation of residues – as the new living conditions offered no room for horses and carts. Animals were, too, impossible to be raised in the blocks of flats.

Conclusions

■ As it may come out from the previous sections, the official intention of improving the Roma's living standards seems to be quite an ambivalent phenomenon. Being allocated an apartment instead of a hovel, having running water instead of a communal fountain, and a sink and a toilet inside and not outside the house may be regarded an upheaval, but without being completed with additional facilities, such as central heating, large living spaces, parquet, wall-tiles, or separate meters for water consumption, these had not considerably improved the living conditions of the Roma. Such policies, to follow Iván Szélényi (Szélényi in M. Smith in Andrusz-Harloe-Szélényi eds. 1996), went indeed against the officially promoted egalitarian aims of the Eastern European socialisms, reinforcing their previously existing inequalities. True, the Roma were part of the paternalistic (Kligman 1988; Kligman 1998; Verdery 1996) system of allocating blocks of flats, as were their non-Roma fellows, but these former were given lower-quality apartments and a restricted set of facilities. Inequalities were intensified after the degradation, when the better-off, those with full-time employment – who held better positions in this structure of allocated goods – left the block, leaving behind the poorest of the poor, who were not able to stop the further deterioration of the area.

Nevertheless, the 'Gypsy way of life' did not remain untouched in this case, too. But instead of taking socially and politically accepted 'civilized' jobs like full-time industrial work, the Roma preserved after the removal their previous activities and practices: doing small trade as economically independent agents. But the relocation cut off this colony members from their previously existing resources such as purchasing oil or wood; it stopped the possibility of extending of one's house according to the needs; it ceased raising animals or depositing the carriages, which helped them in providing services such as transporting and processing wood. Relocation also damaged the status of these community members. It took away their dignity of having an estate perceived to be their own, built with the family members' own hands and some self-made adobe. It also deprived these Roma of the pride of having a courtyard, seen as a private property they could take care of, and – last but not least – the relocation narrowed the niche of trading with the non-Roma, who – as a sign of acceptance – gave the former the goods they were looking for. True, after these many years, the flip-sides of this duplicity (Kligman *ibidem*) have also become salient. Many from the generation born in the 1950s and 1960s have reached by now the retirement age, and – in lack of formal employment – they are not entitled to pension or other social allowances.

Those many decades elapsed since the fall of socialism may help to see the long-time consequences of state interventions. In lack of carefully drafted and implemented housing policies, the deterioration of the block has aggravated, turning the place into a 'Gypsy block of flats,' an urban ghetto known as a



no-go area all over the town. And it was not just this. As an outcome of such measures, this negative label that persists even today re-enters both Roma and non-Roma into the vicious circle as it not only describes but also explains conditions of the former: the Gypsies do not deserve more. A permanent deterioration of living conditions linked with lowering of economical possibilities have become mutually influencing factors, which have contributed to the impoverishment of many ex-colony dwellers, pushing them towards the fringes of the social structure.

This research also informs us about the transition from socialism to post-socialism. A dominant perspective on the pauperization of the Roma (tacitly) acknowledges this to be a result of the collapse of Eastern European communism (see, for instance, Szalai-Zentai eds. 2014). And this may be true as those plants and factories the Roma worked in were closed down after 1989. The transportation and procession of wood performed by economically independent individuals or small groups disappeared, too. But – as these sections reveal – the social and economic marginalization of the Roma took place gradually, beginning with the 1970s. Moreover, in this case, it was the state-socialist policies themselves that blocked the previously existing resources and engendered the lowering of economic and social conditions of this group.

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