

The Gypsy Problem in Postwar Hungary.

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Historical Background

It appears that more publications deal with Gypsies than with any other ethnic group. Already in 1914 George F. Black compiled a Gypsy bibliography listing 4,577 published works. The body of material that has been written about them has grown steadily since. Yet the Gypsies remain one of the most mysterious and least-known peoples. Though research institutes like the prestigious Gypsy Lore Society (with its highly esteemed *Journal*) and several other institutions and periodicals have tried to encourage research on them, many questions remain unanswered. This is partly responsible for the negative policies most governments have followed concerning Gypsies in the course of modern history.

The ancient home of the Gypsies was located in India. From there they migrated between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries and mingled with peoples of the Near East, Northern Africa, then through the Balkan Peninsula they entered Eastern, Central and even Western Europe. Their mixing with other peoples was limited so that this itinerant race has retained its distinctive phenotype until now.

Gypsies were mentioned in European chronicles as early as 1322 in Crete, 1346 in Corfu, and 1370 in the Peloponnesus. Their appearance was recorded in 1407 and 1414 in Germany, 1416 in Transylvania, and in 1417 in Moldavia and Hungary. Sigismund, King of Hungary, Bohemia and other realms had given a letter of safe-conduct to one of the first groups of Gypsies entering Western Europe in the fifteenth century. This letter of safe-conduct, dated 1423, said among other things:

“...Our faithful Ladislas, Chieftain of the Gypsies and others dependent on him have humbly besought us... our special benevolence. It has pleased us to grant their request... If the aforesaid Ladislas and his people present themselves in any place within our Empire... we enjoin you... to favor and protect them in every way... And if any trouble or disturbance should arise among them... Ladislas alone, shall have the power of judging and acquitting...”¹

Being a migratory people with no steady occupations, there was little possibility of modifying their primitive culture. Due to the almost complete lack of acculturation, they were stigmatized by chroniclers as “liars, thieves” who devoted themselves to “pagan customs.” This negative characterization evidently led to cruel persecutions in all countries, especially wherever they appeared in larger numbers. In 1725 Frederick William I of Prussia condemned all Gypsies over 18 years of age to be hanged. The situation did not differ essentially in France, England or Spain.

During the same century, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, some rulers started regulating Gypsy life in order to raise their socio-economic status to the level of non-Gypsy serfs. In the Habsburg Empire, Maria Theresa (1740–1780) and her son, Joseph II (1780–1790), tried to abolish the Gypsies’ nomadic way of life by issuing appropriate decrees. In 1761 the Emperess prescribed that Gypsies should settle down permanently. Maria Theresa issued another proclamation in 1773 to improve the socio-economic position of Gypsies. The new law instructed local authorities to demolish all Gypsy huts and to provide solidly constructed houses for them. The decree threatened to punish those Gypsies who abandoned their new houses by imprisonment. Furthermore, the law proclaimed that Gypsy women and children should wear the same national costumes which were peculiar to the peasantry of the region. Also, the institution of Gypsy vaivodes was abolished, and Gypsies were placed under the jurisdiction of non-Gypsy village judges. This same decree prescribed that Gypsy children be educated by peasants under the supervision of local parish priests with the hope of settling them in villages as artisans. Needless to say, this experiment failed completely.²

The 1848–1849 revolutionary years did not affect Gypsy affairs in the Habsburg Monarchy. While serfs were emancipated, Gypsies remained outside of the society’s mainstream. As elsewhere in Europe, they continued to live from one day to the next, moving

from place to place and committing offenses to obtain food and other basic necessities.

The lifestyle of Europe's Gypsydom helped spawn the ideology of racial superiority. The apostles of this new "science" were English, American, French and German thinkers who pioneered the theories which very soon deeply affected the philosophy of nationalism. Comte Joseph de Gobineau (1816–1862), influenced by American authors on the "inferiority" of Negroes, prepared his *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*. Since discrimination is unfortunately a barely controllable human instinct, many a scientist, historian and politician utilized it to justify his own standpoint and sentiment on inter-ethnic affairs. Racist explanations of history—that is, doctrines about the survival of the (biologically) fittest and other relevant speculations—won wide acceptance in some countries, foremost of all in Great Britain, the United States, and Germany. With the growing popularity of such theories in Central Europe, significant progress in the status of Gypsies did not occur for a considerable period of time.

Archduke Joseph's initiatives in the closing years of the past century to settle the Gypsies of the Habsburg realm permanently, belonged to the very exceptional cases. His well-compiled *Cigány nyelvtan* [Gypsy Grammar] (Budapest, 1888) was a major linguistic accomplishment. But most of his Central European contemporaries had become influenced by the theory of racial superiority. Among them was publicist Kálmán Porzolt, who in the August 6, 1907, issue of *Pesti Hírlap*—Hungary's leading newspaper—asserted that "Civilized state has to exterminate this [Gypsy] race. Yes, exterminate! This is the only method." Even Dr. Antal Hermann, Jr., the son of a liberal-minded, internationally famed ethnographer, in a public lecture in 1913 emphasized: "The nomadic life of Gypsies is full of mysticism, romanticism, stealing, burglary, kidnaping of children, animal poisoning, and murder."³

Despite the wide-spread prejudice in Hungary and elsewhere against the Gypsies, no legislative measures tried to change the existing conditions. In the meantime only a few individuals and their families became assimilated; the overwhelming majority of Gypsies did not change their much-criticized lifestyle. This situation remained basically unchanged even during the interwar years.⁴

During the Second World War the Gypsies' situation greatly deteriorated throughout Central and Eastern Europe. In the Germany of 1941 Gypsies could only be found in concentration camps. Thousands of German Gypsies perished there. About 80,000 of Gypsies from East Central European countries also lost their lives in

Nazi extermination camps.⁵ The defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 brought relief for what was left of this ethnic group. Yet, as the years passed, it became more and more obvious that the "Gypsy problem" was not going to disappear.

Population

Because Gypsies have been a nomadic people since their origins, there are no reliable census figures about their numbers. Nowadays an estimated 7-8 million Gypsies live the world over. They can be found everywhere with the possible exception of Japan. Hungary's Gypsy population is on the rise, while non-Gypsy population in the past decades has been stagnant. In 1976 their estimated number was 320,000;⁶ in 1978, according to Miklós Gerencsér, it was about 350,000.⁷ The latest figure was given in June 1985, according to which out of Hungary's total population of nearly 11,000,000, approximately 3.7 per cent is Gypsy.⁸

As a consequence of Hungary's increased industrialization as well as urbanization, more and more Gypsies have settled in industrial centers and big cities, especially in Greater Budapest, the country's largest industrial center. In Pest County alone there were more than 20,000,⁹ and in the likewise well-industrialized Borsod County, Gypsies constitute 9.05 per cent of the population.¹⁰

Language

The Gypsy problem in the Danubian region has not been adequately studied from the standpoint of ethnology. Nevertheless, there is a general understanding that all tribes (groups) belong to the same stock. Experts usually do not go further, and as a rule, the distinction is made linguistically. The ancient Gypsy (Romany) language is spoken only by a very small and diminishing fraction.

Gypsies in Hungary can be classified by dialect into three kinds: Hungarian, Rumanian and Walachian Gypsies. The Hungarian Gypsies, whose mother tongue is Hungarian, do not understand the ancient Romany (Gypsy) language. This group is relatively susceptible to assimilation. Roman Gypsies are those who speak a dialect of the Rumanian language. They are in some degree bilingual. They can speak or at least understand Hungarian. The members of the third group, the so-called Walachian or Olah, speak the original Romany; most of them understand some Hungarian.

The above linguistic classification is all the more significant, because it corresponds to specific cultural, and socio-economic

categories of the aforementioned groups (tribes) within the otherwise fairly heterogeneous Gypsydom.¹¹

Socio-Economic Development

It seems to be a generally accepted view in Central and Eastern Europe that there was no social (class) stratification among Gypsies. This view is not in accordance with the facts. Gypsy society was never completely classless, and probably continues to be socially variegated even today. Different occupations reflect appropriate social status. "Vaivodas," the leaders of their communities, used to rely for their status upon the relatively more cultured and wealthier strata of their communities. Also, musicians were socially higher placed than, for instance, makers of adobe bricks or basket weavers belonging to the same tribe or clan. Undoubtedly, horse dealers were also higher ranking than unskilled labourers within the same Gypsy community. The lack of communications between the members of different tribes and clans can also be explained as a basically social phenomenon brought about by occupational differences more than by ethnic dissimilarities. Gypsies with Hungarian or Slovak mother tongues have tended to be more "civilized" (i.e. assimilated) than others, and there have always been many musicians among them. Rumanian Gypsies were chiefly wood- and forest workers, while Walachian (Olah) Gypsies were mainly versed in metal working and horse trading.¹² Those Gypsies who were more civilized and economically better off than the majority of their communities tended to separate themselves from Gypsydom and emphasize their "similarity" with non-Gypsy citizens. Without any doubt Gypsy society has also been built upon social classes. However, among the Gypsies these classes were (and are) less well developed than in bourgeois and socialist societies in which social hierarchies are quite marked.

In Hungary tremendous socio-economic changes have occurred in the wake of the Second World War. In accordance with these phenomena, authorities had sought new ideas and methods in approaching the Gypsy question. A 1961 decision of the Hungarian Socialist Workers Party dealt with housing, settlement, employment and education of Gypsy citizens. In its spirit a 1964 government decree ordered the dispersion of Gypsy settlements in order to integrate Gypsies into national life. In the course of its enforcement, however, some local authorities allocated better houses for them but in completely segregated Gypsy areas.¹³ As late as 1971, 70 per cent of Gypsies lived in segregated settlements under very primitive cir-

cumstances. By the early 1980s, only about 20 per cent of them had lived in segregated areas, under somewhat improved conditions.¹⁴ The ultimate purpose of the fair housing policy was to make possible the change in their way of life. Therefore, Gypsy families were supposed to be relocated in purely non-Gypsy environments so that Gypsy ghettos could be eliminated. This policy was pursued, for example, by the city of Salgótarján where in 1977 Gypsies formed 5 per cent of the total population.¹⁵

Better housing, specifically oriented sanitary measures,¹⁶ systematic child welfare have contributed to the rapid growth of the Gypsy population through natural reproduction. Still another factor in the transformation of Hungary's Gypsy society was increased participation of Gypsies in the labour force. In the early sixties only 20 per cent of Gypsy men had permanent jobs in industry and on state farms; as of 1971 there were already 30 per cent.¹⁷ In the early eighties, 85–90 per cent of men and 40–50 per cent of women worked.¹⁸

Culture and Education

Although the distinctive physical characteristics of Gypsies cannot be discounted, these factors in themselves are not decisive determinants in inter-ethnic relations. Folk customs, rites, language—and above all, ideology—should be taken into consideration. Among these factors the role of language is not all-important since the majority of Gypsies have, after all, forgotten their original (Romany) mother tongue. Only 65,000 of them are able to speak the Gypsy language in Hungary.¹⁹ Despite the fact that their migrations from India had occurred centuries ago, Gypsies everywhere in the world have preserved the main characteristics of their cultural identity. This is partly due to their isolation from outside influences. Distinctive elements of their heritage are evident the world over, yet Gypsy culture has its regional characteristics, too. For this reason the culture of neighbouring peoples should sometimes also be taken into consideration in analyzing Gypsy phenomena.

There can be little doubt that Gypsy concepts and practice of religion, ritual, folk medicine and ethics, to mention only a few, fundamentally differ from their non-Gypsy counterparts. Their religious views and customs shed some light on their philosophy of life. The whole problem goes back to the times when Gypsydom was presumably a uniform ethnic (racial) entity and migrations did not bring them into contact with so many different civilizations. It seems to be an established fact that Gypsies have always followed the religion of the majority peoples of the territories they have lived in.

In Hungary it was the Catholic Church. Not a single Protestant can be found among them in Hungary. A few of them belong to the Greek Catholic Church; they had entered Hungary from Rumania in recent decades. But it would be erroneous to think that Gypsies' Christianity is identical with that of non-Gypsies. Their denominational belonging means nothing more than the fact that Gypsy children were baptized in Catholic churches. The texts of the New Testament have not influenced either their folklore or religious life to any degree. Gypsies are not churchgoers, and do not participate in religious ceremonies at all. Even wedding ceremonies are conducted in a very non-religious manner by vaivodas or Gypsy judges, or, if they do not exist, by the oldest man of their community. The name of God hardly occurs in their usage. The concept of God does not play any central role in their thoughts. Thus blasphemy is unknown. Similarly, the existence of the other world is not a theme in their beliefs. Gypsy Catholicism is a kin to Monophysitism in which the human and divine in Christ constitute only one nature. The name of Christ does not appear in Gypsy folklore and that of Holy Virgin very rarely. Fasting is also an unknown institution in Gypsy life. These criteria of Catholicism are characteristic of those Gypsies only who are not yet assimilated to any degree culturally, that is, of the overwhelming majority of Gypsies.²⁰ One factor has partly been responsible for this type of religious view and practice: the lack of spiritual care on the part of the churches. With the exception of the administration of baptism, Gypsies have been neglected and left out of the missionary work.

To help Gypsies to adopt to society, education should play an all-important role. In the past, neither the state nor society took the education of Gypsies seriously. Emperor Joseph II (1780–1790) tried to do so. On ascending the throne he issued a decree that all Gypsy children should enroll in schools. Soon 8,388 Gypsy children were placed in state-owned educational institutes and 9,463 on farms under the patronage of foster parents. Within a few years all of them ran away. By the advent of the twentieth century, the Kingdom of Hungary had compulsory universal education at the elementary level. Law No. XXXVIII of 1868 laid down a new system under the direction of József Eötvös, head of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Public Education. At a later time, but still years prior to the turn of the century, sweeping reforms were initiated to modernize secondary schools in order to raise the standards of education in line with Western patterns. Despite these then up-to-date efforts, Gypsies were not affected by them. At the end of the nineteenth century, only 1 out of 400 vagabond Gypsies was able to read and write; only 3 or

4 were literate out of 100 semi-vagabonds; and 93.5 per cent were illiterate among the permanently settled Gypsies.²¹ According to a survey compiled in 1971 by the Sociological Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, only 39 per cent of the Gypsy population over age 14 were illiterate. By the early 1980s, 96 to 100 per cent of Gypsy children of public school age were enrolled in general schools, and 45 to 62 per cent of pre-schoolers were attending kindergartens.²²

In Hungary compulsory education begins at the age of six and lasts for eight years. The trouble starts immediately with the registration of Gypsy pupils according to reports by teachers. Some parents do not even know the age of their children, and a proportion of parents living in Gypsy settlements consider schooling as meaningless. Because of the disadvantageous family background, Gypsy children's psycho-physical development falls short of the level of non-Gypsy classmates. It is in most cases insurmountable. For example, the Hungarian vocabulary of six-year-old Gypsies is reported to consist only of 30–40 words. The result is that at least 50 per cent of them become drop-outs already at the end of the first school year, and some of the remaining 50 per cent do not pass because their substandard performance cannot even be measured.

One attempt aimed at improving conditions was the creation of desegregated schools. Many teachers and most of the parents of non-Gypsy children had deemed this ineffectual. They argued that under the socio-economic and cultural conditions of the times, Gypsy students were unprepared to fulfill the curriculum requirements. Furthermore, the behavior of Gypsy and non-Gypsy students in too many cases resulted in conflicts among the students. Because the percentage of drop-outs among Gypsy students in desegregated schools was extremely high, all-Gypsy schools came to be favoured by some experts as a means of changing the situation.

There are several factors that preclude the necessary cooperation between Gypsy and other school children in integrated schools. Perhaps one of the most important is that Gypsy children do not like to engage in communal play. As a result, "white" children tend not to make friends with Gypsy ones. Therefore, the feeling of togetherness can develop very rarely among these children of different races. Another fundamental gap existing between Gypsy and other children is that Gypsies at school age find it difficult to understand any kind of abstraction.²³ Abstract terms, even the concept of time, seem to be outside of the grasp of Gypsies. This is another very serious disadvantage of theirs in the educational process, not to men-

tion the lack of discipline which is a family heritage of Gypsy children.

With a view to raising the intellectual level of Gypsy children, kindergartens in cities and specially designed preparatory (pre-school) courses in villages have tried to close the gap. Local councils have provided children with clothes and shoes—otherwise Gypsy children could not attend schools during rainy and colder seasons. Administrative and school authorities had done much to raise Gypsies from their poverty-stricken conditions to the living standards and cultural level of the majority population.

Schools and other forms of education are only capable of creating a lasting basis for effectively regulating inter-racial relations. We should not overlook the difference existing between European civilization and the primitive cultural characteristics of the Gypsies. Under current socio-economic and cultural circumstances, there is little hope for the process of acculturation in any direction. Both cultural spheres are almost hermetically sealed off from each other and therefore from influencing each other. All the more it is necessary to emphasize the significant role of education which, combined with a proper social policy, could create a healthier social and cultural environment for the underdeveloped Gypsies.

In the early 1980s, there were still striking differences between Gypsies and the majority population at the expense of their undisturbed coexistence. The thin stratum of Gypsy intellectuals and other middle-class elements did not modify the situation to any degree because their number was low and they tended not to participate in efforts aimed at improving the socio-economic and cultural status of Gypsydom.

Myth and Reality

There can be no question in anyone's mind that the post-1945 regimes in Hungary, just like elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, have treated Gypsies in a positive, humane way, in contrast to the previous governments' practices. The socio-economic and cultural level of many Gypsies was elevated. By the early 1980s many of them held permanent jobs; however, still only 1.5 per cent of working Gypsies had become skilled workers.²⁴ It is also true that as a concomitant phenomenon of this progress, the community or "ethnic" consciousness of Gypsies had grown, and began exhibiting some of the symptoms of the American Black separatist movements. These ethnically conscious Gypsies preferred to live in ethnic

quarters, to work in all-Gypsy units, and wanted segregated schools where Romany was one of the languages of instruction.

Hungary, whose nationality policy recognized the legitimate existence of ethnic minorities, has treated the "Gypsy question" quite flexibly. In connection with Gypsies, the concepts of race, ethnicity, as well as social stratum, are equally significant in policy implementations.²⁵ This point of view is more realistic and opens the door equally either to assimilation or to self-determination. Three of the basic tasks of integrating minorities in mainstream national life: housing, employment and education have been relatively well-handled in Hungary. But prejudice against Gypsies by the overwhelming majority of the public continued to exist. There are two reasons for this. One of them is the so-called "Gypsy criminality." The crime rate of Gypsies is twice as high as that of non-Gypsies.²⁶ The other factor feeding racial hostility toward Gypsies can be found in the Gypsy-oriented welfare policies of the governments. Indeed, Gypsies are in an ever-increasing magnitude welfare recipients (free housing, clothing, school supplies, low-interest loans, etc.) which fosters resentment against them on the part of the poverty-stricken portion of Hungary's non-Gypsy population.

The integration of Gypsies into Hungarian society was also hindered by the fact that Gypsy tribes are endogamous and, therefore, intermarriage is practically a non-existent phenomenon in their society. Moreover, the white partner in the mixed marriage was often considered a Gypsy by non-Gypsies. Consequently, mixed marriage as a means to promote the integration process has not been a viable option.

Although there had been tremendous changes in the positive direction, Gypsydom in Hungary from 1945 to the early eighties had failed to produce its own leadership, and Gypsy participation in public life was negligible. Their educated and other middle-class individuals and families constituted a thin stratum many of whose members disavowed their Gypsy extraction. All these facts in one way or another tend to aggravate racial animosities. In the sixties and the seventies, the situation of Hungary's Gypsies had constantly been in a process of change, undeniably for the better, especially if it is compared with wartime and pre-1945 conditions. But the "Gypsy issue" was by no means solved, and the principles and methods applied still represented an inadequate, partial treatment of the problem.

Notes

*Editors' comment: this paper is an abbreviated version of a study dealing with the Gypsy question in Hungary and Czechoslovakia from 1945 to the early 1980s. In a future issue of our journal we expect to publish another paper on the Gypsies of Hungary which will deal mainly with important recent developments (including the growth of Gypsy separatism) concerning the Gypsy problem in Hungary.

1. Bart McDowell, *Gypsies, Wanderers of the World* (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic Society, 1970), p. 83.
2. Eva Davidova, *Bez kolib a siatrov* (Kosice, 1965), pp. 19-21; and Hóman-Szekfű, *Magyar történet* (1943), p. 523.
3. Antal Hermann, Jr., *A temesmegyei cigányok* (Temesvár, 1913), p. 14.
4. In 1927, for example, the parliament of Czechoslovakia enacted a law which forbade their wandering but the country's authorities never implemented it. Davidova, p. 43.
5. (Mrs.) I. Kozák, "Historians and Witnesses; A Symposium," *The New Hungarian Quarterly* XXX, no. 96 (Winter 1984), p. 90; and B. Sabacka, *Problematika cikanskeho obyvatelstva* (Brno, 1970), p. 2.
6. Zsolt Csalog, *Kilenc cigány* (Budapest, 1976), p. 1
7. Miklós Gerencsér, "Egyenjogu állampolgárok," *Népszabadság* XXXVI (January 1978), p. 5.
8. (Mrs.) István Kozák, "Még egyszer a borsodi cigányokról," *Népszabadság* XLIII (June 1985), p. 8.
9. Gerencsér, p. 5.
10. Kozák in *Népszabadság*, p. 8.
11. Zsolt Csalog, "Etnikum? Faj? Réteg? *Világosság* XIV, no. 1 (January 1973), pp. 38-41.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
14. István Tauber and Katalin Vég, "A cigányok bűnözésének néhány összefüggése," *Magyar Jog* 29, no. 8 (August 1982), p. 694.
15. Péter János Sós, "Utolérni," *Magyar Hírek* XXX, no. 9 (May 1977), p. 45.
16. István Hooz, *A cigány és nem cigány anyákról, valamint újszülötteik közötti fontosabb különbségekről* (Budapest, 1973).
17. Tauber and Vég, p. 694.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Csalog, *Kilenc cigány*, p. 238.
20. László Szegő, "Babonáság és vallás a magyarországi cigányoknál," *Világosság* XIV, no. 1 (January 1973), pp. 44-48.
21. László Siklós, "Cigányok a társadalom szorításában," in *Írószemmel*, ed. György Nemes (Budapest, 1973), pp. 257-58.
22. Tauber and Vég, p. 694.
23. Siklós, pp. 260-63.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
25. See the No. 1016/VII.12 of 1972 Decree issued by the Council of Ministers on further tasks in conjunction with the improvement of the position of the Gypsy population, in *Magyar Közlöny*, no. 47 (July 1972), pp. 633-34.
26. Tauber and Vég, pp. 692-701.