

**THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN ROMA PEOPLE  
AND THE SURROUNDING MAJORITY SOCIETY  
BEFORE THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

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Although it seems almost sure that Roma people appeared in Hungary in the second half or at the end of the 14th century,<sup>1</sup> the sources related to them started not only to increase in around 1410 but also provided information based on which one can get an idea about their relationships with the surrounding majority society. Of course, these relationships concerned almost all layers of society in that period even if, as a result of the character of our sources, our knowledge about the relations of Roma people with the individual layers is uneven.

At the beginning, the state and its offices, or generally the authorities showed no reservations towards either the groups of Romas or their lifestyle: at least, this is what is indicated by the licenses permitting wandering. The first one among them is the royal decree issued by King Sigismund in Szepes in 1423, studied many times by many.<sup>2</sup> (This license, only handed down to us in a copy, is not accepted by some researchers as authentic and is excluded from among the sources to be used: however, dating problems can be solved and the contradiction can be accounted for.) The license of King Vladislaus II is also well-known. It was issued in 1496 for Roma chief Tamás Bolgár and the Roma people travelling with him, occupying 25 tents. A relatively large number of such licenses remained from later periods, too. From among them, a similarly well-known license which Palatine György Thurzó issued in 1616<sup>3</sup> is probably worth mentioning because it is clear from the arenga-like part that contemporary people could not imagine that the lifestyle of the Roma was not the consequence of God's punishment so they actually showed compassion towards them. A proof of this is that the first Hungarian data concerning the Roma for certain mentioned alms given to them.<sup>4</sup>

At the same time, the authorities, of course, strove to bring under their control the groups that came to Hungary or had already been wandering in the country for some time. For example in Transylvania, Queen Izabella appointed non-Roma chiefs for the Roma in the middle of the 16th century; the most important task of

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<sup>1</sup> TÓTH 2005, 18–19. For example, ACHIM 2001, 25. considers it certain that the Roma were present in Transylvania around 1400.

<sup>2</sup> For its publication and translation, see MEZEY 1986, 75–76; NAGY 1998, 59–60.

<sup>3</sup> DONGÓ GYÁRFÁS–DÓKUS 1895–1928, II. 199. (Translated by Ede Matolay.)

<sup>4</sup> See NAGY 1998, 56.

these chiefs was the collection of poll tax.<sup>5</sup> In Transylvania, this type of tax was also regulated by Diet acts.<sup>6</sup>

It seems that the Roma living in the territory of Transylvania were directly subordinated to the Transylvanian chief with respect to taxation before the introduction of the position of head chief. We also know of two charters that testify this. Both charters permit the exemption of the Roma from taxes and it is especially interesting that in both cases, it was a city that applied for the exemption: Szeben in 1487<sup>7</sup> and Kolozsvár in 1502.<sup>8</sup> It clearly implies that the Roma getting protection provided important services for the city in question. In the case of Szeben, it is known what this service was: participation in the construction works done in order to defend the city.

The authorities strove to draw under their influence and keep under their control larger and smaller groups not only by appointing the head chief, who was not a Roma person, but also by appointing or approving of Roma chiefs. Apparently, the first known such appointment took place in 1574:<sup>9</sup> then, King Maximilian made a person named Albert Gémes the head of the Roma wandering in Upper Hungary. His tasks, set forth in the document, and the possibility of his replacement in the case he would not fulfil them make it sure that he was really a Roma person. From the end of the 17th century, appointment of Roma chiefs was almost completely the landlords' competence and dozens of charters concerning this process have remained.<sup>10</sup>

The most obvious method of drawing the Roma under control was placing them under the landowner's authority, and several sources speak about this intention. The first one among them is a charter of János Hunyadi which he issued in Temesvár on January 14th, 1455 as the steward of Beszterce.<sup>11</sup> He gave permission with the charter for Péter Barcsay and Tamás Barcsay to keep four Roma people 'as serfs' in their estates. This expression does not mean settling them in a serf's allotment. This is made certain by the fact that the charter – strictly speaking, a direct order –, forbade harrassing these Roma people *in any other place*. Thus it is not very likely that their being placed under the landlord's authority changed their lifestyle. In all probability, the landlord required them to pay taxes and provide services. In order to get such income, it occasionally happened that landlords got the king's permission for the settlement of Roma people from outside Hungary: for example, in 1504, King Vladislaus II permitted Balázs Kendeffy to import Roma people occupying 12 tents from Wallachia and make them settle in his Transylvanian estates "*in order that they would live there and he could keep and treat them like his serfs and other servants anywhere in the same estates as well as he could*

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<sup>5</sup> MEZEY 1986, 78–79.

<sup>6</sup> MEZEY 1986, 71.

<sup>7</sup> MNL. OL. F. 1. vol. 2.

<sup>8</sup> JAKAB 1888, 18–19.

<sup>9</sup> MNL. OL. A. 57. vol. 3. 1083.

<sup>10</sup> For example, THALY 1884, 568–578.

<sup>11</sup> MNL. OL. Df. No. 244 543.

*freely collect the ordinary incomes from them*".<sup>12</sup> Romanian boyars also possessed nomadic Roma people in the vicinity of Fogaras as the two charters of Fogaras Chief Captain Pál Tomori issued in 1511 certify.<sup>13</sup> It also occurred several times later in Transylvania that the princes donated nomadic Roma people (who were not settled but had a wandering lifestyle), listed by their names, to landlords: for example, in 1583, Zsigmond Báthory donated three families to László Berény, also three to Lukács Pistaky, and twelve to Sándor Kendy.<sup>14</sup> This kind of donation clearly established a relationship between the Roma person and the landlord which reminds one of the conditions of farmhands. Probably it is not by chance that the censuses made in the second half of the 18th century also categorised the Roma obliged to settle down as farmhands.

It is important to mention that no matter which level we are concerned with, the authorities guaranteed protection for the Roma. The best example of this is a case occurring in Hunyad county in 1504. From an estate donation,<sup>15</sup> we get to know that one of the smallholders living there, János Arka by name, had two Roma persons arrested for theft and punished them in the way that he made one of them poke the other's eyes out. However, this cruel act did not go unavenged: although the authorities could not undo the cruel act, they imposed on the sinful landlord one of the heaviest punishments in this period: confiscation of estates. There are also data from later periods that the authorities investigated the cases involving Roma people with the same seriousness as they proceeded in other cases, for example, the court of Borsod county in the case of Roma people deported in 1578,<sup>16</sup> or the court of Udvarhely in the case of a Roma person killed in 1589.<sup>17</sup>

Thus the sources clearly indicate that, at least in the beginning, the authority strove to integrate in contemporary society the Roma settling down or made to settle down in the country without applying any special compulsion. Furthermore, they were able to continue tolerating the Roma's unusual lifestyle, and anybody who thought they could misuse their authority against the Roma was prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

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Naturally, the authorities were just one element of the society surrounding Roma people. The relationship of the other element, that is, common people with the Roma should similarly be investigated even if this relationship is less covered in the sources or only in a biased way, precisely as a result of their character.

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<sup>12</sup> HURMUZAKI 1876–1922, II/2. 530.

<sup>13</sup> MNL. OL. DI. No. 36 579. and MNL. OL. F. 1. vol. 30. 648–650.

<sup>14</sup> MNL. OL. F. 1. vol. 1.

<sup>15</sup> MNL. OL. DI. No. 29 907.

<sup>16</sup> MNL. OL. B.-A.-Z. m. Lt. IV. 501/a. vol. 1. 51.

<sup>17</sup> DEMÉNY-PATAKI 1983, No. 41.

The broader surrounding community had already got to know the Roma thoroughly by the beginning of the 15th century and this knowledge appears, for example, in a very objective source, the language. The dictionary of Ambrosius Calepinus, published in 1585, (but reflecting an earlier historical stage of the language) proved that the synonym of the word *cigány* was the word *deceit*, namely “*clever deceit*” (in Latin, *strophá*); the meaning of the word *cigánykodás* (‘acting like the Roma’) was “*cut up the purse*”<sup>18</sup>, or later and with some euphemism, “*search the other person’s purse*”.<sup>19</sup> In 1536, a military leader used the expression in a letter in 1536 as a fixed traditional simile: *tattered like the pharaoh (= Roma)*.<sup>20</sup> There is also an early example of using the word *cigány* as the opposite of the words *sincere*, *reliable* in 1534.<sup>21</sup> These linguistic phenomena indicate extensive contact between the Roma people settling down and the surrounding society, and of course they also testify that the contact was not free of conflicts. A statute which was issued in 1611 in Zala county<sup>22</sup> and was directly made at the order of the Palatine was a good example of the possible extent of these conflicts at the beginning of the 17th century. The instructive text of this statute is as follows:

“The Honorable Palatine contacted the county concerning the expulsion from this place of those Roma who make their living out of poaching and theft, cause a lot of damage and harm and make incursions into the neighbouring countries, as well. With regard to this, it has been ordered that no-one should provide any places of residence or living for these Roma people allowing their former, routine way of living but expel them so that they should not be found in any locality in this county and the cause and opportunity for making complaints against them should cease to exist and should be radically deleted from the souls of those lodging such complaints.”

The picture depicted in this text was certainly not typical throughout the country but in any case, it can be well seen that such a turn had occurred in the relationship between Roma people and the surrounding majority society that could have this result.

It is also related to a language phenomenon, giving names that in the 14th century, there appeared in Hungary people having *Cigány* (‘Roma’) as their surnames (or rather) nicknames. As there were many landowner noblemen among these persons, it is sure for socio-historical reasons that they were not Roma since there is no example even in the later centuries that Roma people would have acquired nobility. Therefore, the fact that such a nickname could appear proves that the external or internal attributes of Roma people were already widely known in fourteenth

<sup>18</sup> MELICH 1912, 197.

<sup>19</sup> BOD 1767, 369.

<sup>20</sup> BESSENYEI 1994, No. 159.

<sup>21</sup> JAKÓ 1990, II. No. 4457.

<sup>22</sup> MNL. Z. m. Lt. IV. 1/a. vol. I. 286.

century Hungary, or else it would have surely made no sense to give such a name to certain non-Roma people.<sup>23</sup>

The reason for the conflicts was the way of living of Roma people and within this, the way of making a living. The occupations characteristic of the Roma later already appeared as early as in the 15th–16th centuries: there are data about trading in horses from 1490,<sup>24</sup> about the practice of metalwork from 1496<sup>25</sup> and about playing music from 1525.<sup>26</sup> Particularly, the number of the data for the last one increased more and more in later periods: Roma musicians played in the court of Queen Izabella in 1543 and in the army of the Pasha of Buda, leaving for Vác,<sup>27</sup> but they were also present in the army of Voivode Michael in 1599, when it marched into Gyulafehérvár.<sup>28</sup>

It casts some shadow on this seemingly idyllic picture that on the one hand, the first Roma person arrested in a crime already appeared at the end of the 15th century,<sup>29</sup> which phenomenon became an everyday matter in the sources of the 17th century. On the other hand, for example, it is clearly revealed from remaining 16th century city accounts that the surrounding majority society demanded totally different services. In the book of accounts of Brassó,<sup>30</sup> we can read dozens of notes through the decades, according to which Roma people received not only wages but also a kind of ‘bonus’ and ‘reimbursement’ for the torture and expulsion of malefactors and the execution of prisoners, as well as that, in the same period, they received a lot of money for the extermination of stray dogs. These kinds of activities were common, and the accounts of the other cities, for example Kolozsvár, certify this (though it is true that it is revealed precisely by the account book of Kolozsvár that services related to other, traditional occupations were common on the part of Roma people).<sup>31</sup> Not only the independent descriptions of the well-known story of György Dózsa<sup>32</sup> and city statutes<sup>33</sup> but also the records according to which the Roma were used for intimidation prove this fact. For example, a landlord in South Borsod did so in 1582, when he wanted to scare his fugitive serf.<sup>34</sup> In 1609, in Gyulafehérvár, a person was intended to be forced to give false evidence by being told that “*two Roma people with fiery pincers are standing near the door and are going to tear you apart by pinching*”.<sup>35</sup> We have data from 1617 that a nobleman made a complaint to the court of Borsod

<sup>23</sup> In greater detail, see TÓTH 2005, 18. These names are given a different explanation by FEHÉRTÓI 1987, 5–17. and NAGY 1998, 38–42.

<sup>24</sup> CSÁNKI 1890, 164.

<sup>25</sup> MEZEY 1986, 76–77.

<sup>26</sup> FRAKNÓI 1877, 163.

<sup>27</sup> TAKÁTS 1915, I. 422. and 425.

<sup>28</sup> SZAMOSKÖZY 1977, 260.

<sup>29</sup> Archives of the city of Bártfa, No. 3751.

<sup>30</sup> SZALAY 1914, 92–93.

<sup>31</sup> KISS 1990, 888–896.

<sup>32</sup> ISTVÁNFY 1758, 46. and SZERÉMI 1961, 68.

<sup>33</sup> For example, that of the city of Nagybánya in 1667: MEZEY 1986, 106.

<sup>34</sup> MNL. B.-A.-Z. m. Lt. IV. 501/a. vol. II. 25–26.

<sup>35</sup> KOVÁCS 1998, 249.

county because it had come to his knowledge that the commander of Diósgyőr wanted to hire Roma people to kill him.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, these kinds of threats may have been common in the period (and it was also believable for the contemporaries because it worked this way as we see from the examples).

However, people did not always meet Roma people pursuing these despised occupations in everyday life. Evidently, the use of the services offered by Roma people was the most characteristic of the relationships. These services mostly involved the traditional crafts of the Roma (musician, blacksmith), but besides these, there are data for completely everyday services: for example, Roma people plastered up a chimney in Gyulafehérvár, in 1609, whom the source calls ‘the headman’s workers’ that is to say, this kind of work may have been regular.<sup>37</sup> However, you should also realise that even in crafts said to be traditional there was an element of peculiarity, which strongly impaired the relationship between the Roma and the surrounding majority society. For example, from a statute of Szepes issued in 1624,<sup>38</sup> you learn that the Roma were involved in regular foreign trade with horses – however, those horses ‘exported to Poland’ had been stolen.

Particularly, one service should be mentioned not only because of its being interesting but also because it obviously influenced the relation between the Roma and the surrounding majority society: witchcraft. Let us see an example. In the last years of the 17th century, a Roma woman, – who even had no name, but was only mentioned in the sources as ‘the elder sister of János Czigány’ – foretold sometimes using a snail and sometimes using a hen’s egg, to a woman from Kecskemét who was worried about her husband in Turkey that the man was in good health. The witness statements also revealed that in addition, she could find lost and buried money and could also achieve with witchcraft that the child to be born should be a boy and that formerly childless women should give birth to children. According to a witness, the Roma woman “*was given a lot of things*”<sup>39</sup> for the latter by a woman who trusted in her. From another lawsuit in 1686 against the same Roma woman, it also becomes clear that she advised a harmed woman to fill a living frog with millet, then boil it in a cooking pot and she would get compensation for the damage done to her.<sup>40</sup> – These examples not only show one type of service that the Roma offered but also indicate the character of the relations: the surrounding community evidently feared Roma people to whom they attributed this efficient magic power, and what is more, made regular use of it.

The sources, with help of which I have so far tried to reconstruct the relationships between the Roma and the surrounding majority society belong to the domain of public law and legislation without any exceptions. At the same time, sources are remarkably lacking whose authors would talk about their personal experiences

<sup>36</sup> MNL. B.-A.-Z. m. Lt. IV. 501/a. vol. IV. 212.

<sup>37</sup> KOVÁCS 1998, 250.

<sup>38</sup> MEZEY 1986, 101.

<sup>39</sup> SCHRAM 1970–1982, vol. II. 458–459.

<sup>40</sup> IVÁNYOSI-SZABÓ 1996, 129.

related to Roma people. I actually know of only one. It is the work of a person from Breslau whose name was Daniel Speer. In it, he described adventures experienced in Hungary in the 1660s (these adventures also earned him the name ‘Hungarian Simplicissimus’).<sup>41</sup> He did not only marvel at Roma people as travellers generally did<sup>42</sup>, but he also had a Roma partner with whom he wandered for a long time. Thus what he described can be accepted as direct and authentic experience. Let me quote the relevant parts from this description because I have not really experienced that research would have used it to the extent as it would have deserved because of its importance.

“There are Anabaptists in Hungary here and there as well as a lot of Roma people. The latter only pursue one craft, that of the blacksmith. So, I have hardly found any normal, real blacksmith anywhere. This Roma mob wanders all around Upper Hungary and Transylvania, and it is not rare that peasants marry Roma virgins and the Roma men marry the daughters of peasants. They ruin the blacksmith and other metalworking crafts. They make all kinds of such things: nails, door fittings and locks. They are especially good blacksmiths and horse doctors, and even better horse dealers, swindlers and are even better at stealing horses. If they sell some ironmongery which they always offer at rock-bottom prices, they usually beg or steal to get the scrap metal to be able to pursue their occupation. They do not wear clothing made of bad materials. They beg for or buy the old clothes well-worn by noblemen. They marry as early as at the age of 12-15 years and they go out almost naked till getting married. They put a white or colorful shawl like a bedsheet round their neck and tie its two corners together. Although it covers their back, the front part of their body is naked so that it can be seen which sex they belong to. Their hair is long. They do not attend school. No one should get their children christened because they pretend to keep the rules of religion only to get money. In fact, they christen their children with some ointment over fire at night. They show a natural aptitude for music. Almost all Hungarian noblemen have their own Roma servant who is a violinist and, in addition, a locksmith.[...] I saw and heard a lot of things from my mate who was a Roma trumpeter and carried tuttleroor with him. He was a real »dzsamore« or magician. He could cook beef in a wooden pot without the fire burning the pot. God only knows what kind of magic ointment he could make. If he smeared something with it, let it be a pot, chair, bench, furcoat, beast or human being, they started to dance against their will. He often improvised such spectacular entertainment. If he pronounced a special Roma word, everything collapsed in heaps. [...]”

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<sup>41</sup> SPEER 1998, 189–190.

<sup>42</sup> From among them, probably the name of Jakob Tollius, from the Low Countries, is worth mentioning, who visited Buda in 1687, and gave an account of what he had seen there in his letter published about his journey. See the translation of the extract in TÓTH 1986, 111–124.

It is worth underlining right now that the description, in general, harmonizes with the picture we could get about the Roma from other kinds of sources, too. At the same time, it, of course, complements the picture. In my opinion, the most important and most interesting addition is the reference according to which marital relations between the Roma and non-Roma were common in this period. If this was true – unfortunately, the sources in archives from this period do not realistically make it possible to examine the question<sup>43</sup> –, it would provide a totally different framework for the relationships between the Roma and the surrounding majority society.

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In summary, we can conclude that, according to our sources, the relations between the Roma and the surrounding majority society were multi-faceted from the beginning, and the reason should clearly be sought in the characteristic lifestyle of the Roma, which cannot be understood without the investigation of the surrounding majority society (According to some sociologists, the non-Roma represent natural resources for the Roma, whom they exploit as other nations do it with natural resources).<sup>44</sup> The relationship, which was not unproblematic at the beginning, either, became noticeably worse during the 17th century; it is my impression that this phenomenon is connected with a continuous increase in the number of Roma people. However, conflicts did not yet lead to the demand for general settlement then: for this, another 50 years had to pass and a new age had to come.

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<sup>43</sup> So far, only one lawsuit has become known in which a Hungarian nobleman was accused of having a Roma mistress, see the text in TÓTH 2006, 161–168. However, from the first decades of the 18th century, there have remained surveys proving the cohabitation and marital relations of Roma and Hungarian people.

<sup>44</sup> STEWART 1994, 24. The authors referred to by him in this respect are Leonardo Piasere, Judith Okely, Anne Sutherland, Sheila Salo and Matt T. Salo.

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