



An encampment along the Vistula River in the Salvator District of Krakow in the 1990s.

Romani immigrants from Romania in Poland in the 1990s

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Ethnographic observations

This paper presents a handful of ethnographic observations concerning the Romanian Romani people migrating to Poland in the 1990s. This migration wave, although not very well known in the world, became a very important factor influencing, among others, the perception of the Romanian Roms, the Romani people in general, and even citizens of Romania as such by Poles. For Romani immigrants, this was most often the first opportunity to stay abroad. We can, therefore, suppose that it was at that time when certain models

of action formed in migrating Romani groups; later, they were reproduced during the migration to Western Europe. After the preliminary comments on the number of Romani immigrants from Romania in Poland and their legal and institutional status, we will try to describe specific characteristics of their migration and the character of immigrant Romani communities in Poland, with particular stress on the economic foundations of their existence, forms of economic activity, actions undertaken for the benefit of their own group, and institutions created or cultivated

by them. In this context, we also present relations between particular groups that comprise the Romanian Romani community in Poland, as well as the phenomenon of adaptation of their cultural rules to the new situation. Thus, our study is not an exhaustive presentation of the life of the Romanian Romani migrants to Poland, nor does it lead to any precise conclusions. The information used in this text is not a result of systematic studies; they have been obtained mainly from observations conducted in the course of interaction with Romani immigrants and various actions for the benefit of their communities. In spite of these restrictions, we think that they may contribute to shedding light on this heretofore unknown aspect (and period) of Romanian Romani migration.

Size of the population

At the end of the last decade of the 20th century, the border authorities estimated that the Polish border may have been crossed approx. 400,000 to 500,000 times by Romanian citizens, with local Romani people constituting a definite majority. The inaccuracy of this very indicative calculation resulted from the fact that some of them entered Poland several times under various names, so there was virtually no possibility of determining the actual number of people arriving and staying in Poland. This was commonly practiced by the Romanian Roms. In the case of deportation and a re-entry ban, they obtained new passports in Romania in an entirely legal and official manner after changing their surname into the one adopted by their spouse. For this purpose, they very often carried out formal divorces that were actually fictitious and concluded fictitious marriages. There were also cases of formal change of surnames (not related to marriage) for the purpose of obtaining a new passport. Irrespective of these combinations within formal and legal limits, a considerable number of those Romani immigrants, which was difficult to estimate, entered the territory of Poland in a fully illegal manner and beyond any form of registration. In connection with the above, we must admit that even if we knew exactly how many times the border was crossed by citizens of Romania, it would not reflect at all the number of people coming to Poland and staying in its territory at a given moment.

It is also necessary to consider the fact that a large number of Romanian citizens who arrived in Poland in full compliance with the law according to the then applicable rules and, therefore, at least theoretically, were registered by the border authorities, subsequently crossed the Polish-German border in full violation of the law to reach Western European countries. It is impossible to estimate how many times the Polish western border was crossed illegally in this way. However, taking into account mass media reports of that time concerning Romanian citizens who drowned when trying to cross border rivers or were captured by the border guard during such attempts, it was a common phenomenon. For this reason, it is also difficult to estimate how many persons arriving

in Poland actually stayed in its territory at the given time.

It is utterly impossible to determine how many Romani people may have been in this general and very imprecise number of 400,000–500,000 Romanian citizens. First of all, both in Romania and in Poland, there are no formal or legal grounds for such separation of citizens according to their national or ethnic origin. We can only try to make a very close estimate of this number on the basis of the following circumstances. A visit to Romania at least once a year during the last 20 years was an opportunity to very often meet Romani people of both sexes and of every age, who confirmed their stay in Poland in the 1990s, demonstrating a better or worse command of Polish. This could refer to approximately every fourth person contacted. Considering these persons to be a representative sample of the entire Romani population in Romania, we could assume that almost 25% of local Romani people stayed in Poland during that period.

The number of the Romani people in Romania has not been determined accurately either. Depending on whether it is estimated by state-owned institutions or by Roma organizations, it varies between 1 and 3 million persons. Independent organizations and international institutions most often estimate their number at approx. 2 million. Assuming that this size of the Romani population is the most probable, we can presume that approximately 500,000 Romanian Roma people stayed in Poland in the 1990s. Therefore, this number corresponds to the estimates made by Polish border authorities with regard to the number of entries by Romanian citizens. It is worth adding here that, according to Valeriu Nicolae, Romani people accounted for 90% of the 270,000 Romanian citizens staying in Poland in November 1990.¹ Unfortunately, this author does not explain what data helped him arrive at this conclusion.

OBVIOUSLY, THIS DOES NOT mean that approximately half a million Romanian Roms stayed in Poland invariably throughout the 1990s. The size of their population in individual years of this period was very unsteady and virtually impossible to estimate.

Most probably, it may have ranged from several thousand to a few dozen thousand every year. The inflow of Romanian immigrants began in 1990 and increased gradually every year, reaching its peak in the middle of the 1990s. At the end of its second half of the decade, their population began to decrease remarkably. This tendency

“WE CAN PRESUME THAT APPROX. 500,000 ROMANIAN ROMA PEOPLE STAYED IN POLAND IN THE 1990S.”

continued till 2007 when Romania (and Bulgaria) joined the European Union. From the beginning of the 2000s, there was a noticeable tendency among a relatively small part of Romani migrants (which was difficult to determine) to stay further in Poland. Staying in Poland illegally, part of them tried to survive until the accession of Poland to the EU, hoping that they could then enter other countries of Western Europe without serious problems in visa-free traffic within EU states. A small group of them intended to stay in Poland for longer, assuming that the accession of their country to the European Union would enable



them to legalize their permanent stay in Poland. The authors have learned about six such cases, which absolutely does not reflect the extent of this phenomenon, because even now you can still come across families that have lived in various regions of Poland since the 1990s.

Between 2004 and 2007, the inflow of migrants from Romania ceased entirely because of Poland's accession to the EU and the introduction of a visa requirement for Romanian citizens. Shortly after the accession of Romania to the EU in 2007, the migration of Romani people from this country began again, this time according to the rules of visa-free traffic. In this connection, there are no longer any grounds for estimating the number of Romani people – Romanian citizens entering and staying in Poland. On the basis of contacts with various groups of these migrants (Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, Łódź), it can be clearly seen that the number of the Romanian Roms arriving and staying in Poland is much smaller than in previous years. This number is also subject to seasonal fluctuations: it increases in summer and decreases in winter.

Sometimes, under more favorable circumstances, it is possible to determine the size of some local groups of the Romanian Roms. Such is the case of Wrocław, where, because of a widely covered conflict between the city authorities and the Romanian Romani people staying there, an attempt to determine the number of the latter was made. It turned out that there were not as many of them as in the 1990s, when a number of Roma camps were inhabited by one hundred to a few hundred persons. In two camps in Wrocław, a total of 70 persons were counted, including children. Also, in this case, this number is subject to periodic fluctuations and amounts to 60–80 persons, depending on the season and as a result of the steady movement of some of the families between Wrocław and other cities (Poznań, Tri-City).

On the basis of direct contact with the community concerned and intuitions gained during 20 years of work among the Romanian Roms, we can risk the statement that the size of this group in Poland ranges from 2,000–3,000 in the winter to 12,000–15,000 in the summer. Members of this group move constantly between Poland, Western Europe (Germany, France, Italy) and Romania.

Legal and institutional status

Romanian citizens arriving in Poland from 1990, including the Roms, crossed our border on the basis of passports issued to them by Romanian administrative bodies. They were allowed to enter Poland with a tourist visa obtained at the border and confirmed with the stamp of the Polish border service affixed in the passport. This entitled them to stay in Poland for a period of 90 days. At the very beginning, this border traffic actually took place according to valid legal and administrative rules. However, it turned out very soon that there was a large discrepancy

between the goals and intentions of the migrating Roms and the formal status of tourists assigned to them. For the Roms, indefinite residence for economic reasons was of utmost importance.

Initially, many of them were not even aware of limitations resulting from the type of visa they held. Thus, exceeding the statutory time of stay in Poland became common. Some of the incomers tried to bring in openly and officially musical instruments or coppersmithing, tinsmithing and roofing tools (hammers, pincers, metal cutting shears, etc.) in order to perform various kinds of economic activity. Only at the moment of their confiscation at the border were they made aware of the fact that they were not allowed to undertake any kind of economic activity when staying in Poland on the basis of a tourist visa.

Because of this lack of basic knowledge about legislation and legal requirements applicable in Poland as well as the complete inconsistency of their goals and expectations with the actual status of their stay, their activities started to become illegal very fast. First of all, in order to conceal the fact that they exceeded their stay beyond the statutory period of 90 days, they repeatedly avoided disclosing their passports to the police because of the date of entry appearing in them. In order not to have them actually with them, they very willingly deposited them in places they considered safe. An example could be the Ethnographic Museum in Tarnów, where at least a few dozen passports were kept in the

“BETWEEN 2004 AND 2007, THE INFLOW OF MIGRANTS FROM ROMANIA CEASED ENTIRELY BECAUSE OF POLAND'S ACCESSION TO THE EU.”

years 1993–1996, officially for the purpose of being protected against loss or theft. A similar trick began to be used by persons who crossed the border illegally and feared that the lack of the stamp in their passport would cause a justified suspicion of committing such a crime.²

THE SAME WAS DONE by persons who, as a result of various petty offences, had an “administrative visa” inserted in their passport, which meant an order to leave the country of residence within a strictly defined very short time, and who did not comply and did not intend to comply with this order. For fear that items that could be used for economic activities might be confiscated during the customs clearance, it became increasingly common to smuggle them in by hiding them in baggage and not declaring such to the customs service. In the case of items with larger dimensions, such as musical instruments difficult to hide, that was the reason for crossing the border illegally at points other than official border crossings.

Apart from actual short-term returns to Romania, one of the ways of prolonging a legal stay by a further three months was to cross the Polish-Czech or, even more frequently, the Polish-Slovak border and to return almost immediately in order to obtain a stamp with the valid data of entry to Poland. This method was sometimes modified to a large extent with regard to the activity of criminal groups specializing in such “legalization” of stay. An example of this can be a situation from the second part of the

1990s (reported to the branch office of the Office for State Protection), when a group of Romanian Roms staying in a private lodging in Western Pomerania obtained stamps in their passports confirming their entry to Poland through the Polish-Slovak border without moving anywhere and without giving their passports to anyone. The entire procedure looked like this: having gathered an appropriately large group of foreigners willing to legalize their further stay and having collected the necessary amount in dollars or Deutsche marks, the host of the lodging notified her friend – a border guard officer. The latter arrived with a set of relevant stamps, including those borrowed from Slovak border guard officers participating in these operations and “legalized” the further stay.

In cases when the stamp of an administrative visa containing an order to leave Poland and preventing re-entry to its territory for a specific period of time was put in the passport, attempts were most often made to obtain a new document with the altered surname; in the case of women living in informal marriages, based only on a customary Romani wedding, the simplest, most frequently used and most natural effort was to conclude civil marriage and to replace the woman’s maiden surname with her husband’s surname. Men having problems related to an administrative visa adopted the surnames of their wives when concluding a civil wedding. In situations when problems concerning passports stamped with administrative visas affected both spouses, formal or actually fictitious marriages were concluded, often being preceded with formal or equally fictitious divorces. In general, the aim was to replace surnames with completely different ones that were not the surnames of actual or fictitious husbands or wives. This was not always easy and simple to carry out because in the community of the Romanian Roms even persons not related to each other by any means very often bear the same surnames that are popular among them. This might be a heritage of the Romani slavery in Romania, connected with the fact that they often received surnames referring most often to old crafts and professions from their owners, although in many cases they also were real cognates.

Specific features of the form of immigration

The primary aim of the migration of the Romanian Roms, irrespective of their official tourist status, was to earn financial income. There was a common belief supported by press information that, because of this, only Western European countries, mainly united Germany, had been target countries for them since the very beginning of their migration in 1990. Indeed, a large part of these migrants treated Poland only as a transit country in their further journey to the West. At that time, settling in Germany was an attractive solution for them because of the possibility of obtaining asylum and various kinds of social benefits. However, the legal crossing of the border was difficult, which resulted in numerous attempts to cross it in an illegal and dangerous way that required getting to the other side of border rivers. Therefore, a large number of Romani migrants treated Poland as a sort of waiting room before making an attempt to cross the border.



An empty encampment in the Łęg district in Kraków, 1990s.



Paweł Lechowski interprets for Roma woman in Kraków's hospital, 1990s.



Roma family in Paweł Lechowski's apartment, 1990s.



Railway security guard wakes up Roma in the old train station in Kraków, 1990s.



Roma boy playing music in the Nowa Huta district of Kraków, 1990s.

While staying in Poland, they received information, very often from close relatives, about complications being introduced for emigrants from Romania in Germany and about an increasing number of deportations.³ All of this effectively discouraged and prevented them from making risky attempts to cross the Polish-German border, particularly because this usually concerned multi-generation families including elderly persons, women, and children. In this situation, Poland became a country of target residence for a large part of Romani migrants.

Personal close contacts with very many Romanian Romani people staying in Poland during that period suggest that at least half of them did not try or even did not intend to cross the Polish-German border, and further incomers assumed staying in Poland as a target country in advance. They were encouraged to do so by the attitude of Polish society in the initial period of their migration to Poland. This is well illustrated by a situation observed on the Bazar Różyckiego market in Warsaw at the end of August and at the beginning of September 1990: while adults were engaged in ordinary small-scale trading in cheap Romanian alcoholic beverages, their children started to beg near the entrance to the market of their own initiative, without much conviction and presumably for entertainment. Smaller and bigger children, mostly girls, dressed in typical 'Gypsy' clothes, moved around the crowd with their hands stretched out, wailing for money in their own language. Their "harvest" turned out to be so rich that even they were apparently surprised, handing them over to their parents every so often and treating their activity more and more loosely as a kind of fun. Already at that time, the scene suggested that a bigger inflow of Romani people from Romania should be expected, including beggars, although it did not foreshadow the scale of this phenomenon.

MOST OFTEN WHOLE families arrived in Poland. The standard family was comprised of spouses with children, but there were also many cases of multi-generation families with the oldest grandfathers and grandmothers and recently born infants. This was a consequence of the quickly spreading opinion about the possibility of obtaining a large income from begging on streets and near churches in Poland. Therefore, each family member increased the potential income from this activity. Also in Poland, members of these multi-generation families very often tried to stay together or at least in the neighborhood with other families close to them, thus replicating family/clan groups from their country. Visiting Romania from the mid-1990s, one could see Roma settlements where a large part, sometimes even half, of poor houses stood empty because their inhabitants were staying abroad at that time. Houses were also often resold or mortgaged for a loan for the purpose of obtaining cash to cover passport and foreign travel costs.

Initially, the only way to reach and cross the Polish border legally was to travel by train through Hungary and Slovakia. An additional benefit of this means of communication was the possibility of taking a larger quantity of carry-on property, mainly clothes and various kinds of blankets and covers for sleeping purposes. As time went by, Romani people arriving in

Poland found out that there was also bus service from Suceava to Przemyśl via Ukraine. As their financial resources grew, they also started purchasing relatively cheap, strongly worn cars. These were almost entirely cars of Romanian brands, such as Dacia (passenger car) or Aro (all-terrain vehicle). Increasingly, they often became the means of transport for successive families arriving in Poland and a source of income for their owners from leasing.

One of the characteristic signs of these “tourist” trips was also the fact that, in spite of compulsory school education in Romania, at least on the primary school level, children and school-age young people arrived and stayed here at every time of the year. This clearly meant that parents did not attach any importance to the education of their children. Today, from the perspective of time, it cannot be excluded that many of them assumed that they would never return to Romania. This is also suggested by the fact that many children and young people born in Poland and staying here for a longer time do not speak Romanian at all, even though they are formally Romanian citizens. Their natural languages that they use every day are Romani and Polish.

Structure of settlement in Poland

The first waves of Romani migrants began to appear in the late autumn of 1990. Because they usually arrived by train, at least in the first years, railway stations were most often the first places of their “accommodation”. This was convenient for them because they had a roof over their head in the autumn-winter period. Even though temporary beddings on cardboard spread on the floor did not ensure comfortable sleep, they at least stayed in more or less heated premises. They had access to water and toilets there. Thanks to payphones on the railway station premises, they could keep in touch with relatives staying in Romania or in other Polish cities. Apart from that, railway stations in big cities were also the most convenient contact points and places where people still arriving from Romania could be met. Later, when they left railway stations and settled in camps that they built themselves, they appreciated also another advantage of their previous “lodgings”. Staying at railway stations, in a public place near a crowd of people and usually near police or railway guard stations, they were simply safer. From the moment they moved to camps on the outskirts of cities, they started becoming targets of attacks of extremely nationalistic groups of young people.

However, Romani people occupying railway stations began to cause increasingly more inconvenience to passengers. For example, in the first half of the 1990s, the main waiting room of the Dworzec Wschodni station in Warsaw changed into one huge camp and became utterly inaccessible to travelers for many months. Therefore, the police and other security services took

actions to liquidate such camps from time to time and tried to prevent the reoccupation of railway station premises, for example, by closing the railway station building for the night. This, in turn, led to situations when a large group of people, including women and children, spent the night outside, in Kraków near the post office building located close to the railway station for several days in the winter period.

Already in the second year of their stay in Poland, a part of Romani immigrants began living in camps they arranged on the outskirts of cities, but within city limits and close to public transport services, from spring to autumn. This resulted from the fact that begging in city centers or near churches was the primary source of income for most of them, so they tried to have convenient access to their “workplaces”. Camps consisted of a few, or up to a few dozen *koliba* [primitive huts] built partly of branches collected on the spot, which were used for building a skeleton covered with various kinds of materials: blankets, quilts, old carpets, cardboard and rainproof film.

Smaller camps were usually located in less conspicuous areas for the purpose of avoiding a visit from potential aggressors or the police. However, a majority of people preferred living in larger camps, whose sizes ranged from a dozen to more than thirty huts. Although these camps could not be masked and hidden, their inhabitants assumed that they would manage to deter potential aggressors with their number.

AN IMPORTANT ADVANTAGE of living in self-made huts was that the costs of stay were limited, for there were no fees for renting a flat. This was so important that a large part of Romani migrants lived in self-made barracks even in the winter. They have done so till now; in Wrocław, for example, two settlements consisting of such makeshift barracks have been inhabited for a few years. They are built of various kinds of wooden elements collected as waste for disposal and reuse, such as old planks and furniture,

used wooden construction elements, etc. These small, low single-room households with completely flat or highly flattened gable roofs are additionally covered with various textiles or old carpets that provide thermal insulation. Apart from that, they contain stoves made of old tin containers that are used both for cooking and heating the room. These stoves are made by experienced men

who performed tinsmithing and roofing jobs in Romania.

Apart from camps of this kind, some Romani migrants tried to live in cheap hotels or in private lodgings from the beginning. In the case of families with children, this was quite difficult to do because owners of hotels and private lodging very often refused to let their premises for fear of devastation of furnishings. There were also cases of large family groups living in former workers’ hostels that offered cheap accommodation

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after privatization. Lodging in private houses or flats was available mainly to single families with the smallest possible number of children.

As a general rule, migrants lived in a city, or at least in its immediate surroundings. Sometimes, however, circumstances forced them to rent premises in villages, far away from the city. Such cases occurred, for example, in Western Pomerania in the 1990s, where many families lived in extremely cheap lodgings in the villages where huge state-owned agricultural farms collapsed and whose poor and unemployed inhabitants took every opportunity to earn money. In this case, however, it was also important that villages inhabited by the Romanian Roms were situated along the main railway line providing access to all larger cities along the coastline.

In the 1990s, virtually every provincial city in Poland was inhabited by Romani people from Romania for a longer or shorter time. Their population may have been more concentrated along the western border. Today, groups of Romanian Roms are not as numerous as in the 1990s. They are certainly larger in cities such as Wrocław, Poznań, Tri-City, Łódź and Kraków.

Internal mobility

Arriving in Poland most often by train from the south via Hungary and Slovakia, the Romanian Roms usually tried to get off on railway stations in larger cities. At the first moment, they did not even know the name of the city and could only rely on the view from the window and the appearance of the railway station to check whether the city and the railway station looked imposing enough. This was because many of them were illiterate, so they could not read the names of stations even in Romanian, let alone in Polish.

Their inability to communicate with Poles involved serious difficulties in getting accurate information where and when to get off or to transfer to another train to reach a city that they had already heard of, such as Warsaw. Thus, the place where immigrants put their first steps on the Polish land was very often chosen randomly.

THE MUTUAL INABILITY to communicate also involved a phenomenon that could be classified as a classic cultural shock. A huge number of persons from the older generation of migrants who had received a passport for the first time and had arrived in another country for the first time in their life and in a reality different from the one they had known in Romania were virtually shocked by the fact that they could not communicate in Romanian in that country.⁴ Of course, in these family groups of migrants, there were also persons, usually very young people or even children, who had undergone compulsory education to a smaller or larger extent in Ceausescu's times. Being able to write and read in Romanian and sometimes having an elementary command of French, they assumed the role of intermediaries or even guides in an entirely new environment in some cases.

In the first phase of migration to Poland, the movement of incomers was primarily a blind search for an appropriate place to

settle and earn money, most often in the form of begging. Those who decided to reach Germany at the beginning or in some moment acted more consciously. They tried to move towards the west, close to the border. Therefore, the cities that were "settled" most quickly by the Romanian Roms included not only Warsaw and Kraków, but also Szczecin, Gorzów Wielkopolski, Zgorzelec and a number of smaller cities and towns along the Polish-German border.

THE MOBILITY OF MIGRANTS in Poland remained basically on a steady level during the last decade of the previous century, without any major clearly visible fluctuations. Already when the first immigrants were becoming accustomed to living in particular cities, a phenomenon of movement between their groups began and has lasted continuously until today, becoming a characteristic feature of this environment. This movement refers both to individuals, families and whole groups of families. The frequency and directions of their movement can be very different and virtually impossible to systematize. In general, their entire spatial mobility has been evidently connected with a permanent flow of information. News about favorable conditions of stay and possibilities of making a living (begging) in a given place, or about a vacant "house" in a camp or place near a church were usually the impulse to make a sudden and spontaneous departure. Apart from news usually concerning financial matters, another equally important reason to move may be information concerning migrants' social and family life. It may be, for instance, news about the establishment of a *Kris*⁵ in a certain matter, about someone's wedding, baptism or funeral.

In the first period of migrants' stay in Poland, the flow of information was largely determined by mobility (information was passed on by traveling people), but the then-existing telephone system was quickly put into use. Although this was quite complicated and time-consuming in the 1990s, this method of communication was used more and more widely both in Poland and for contact with persons in Romania or other European countries. For the last several years, mobile phones have been used commonly by the Romanian Roms staying in Poland. In theory, this technological invention could eliminate or at least reduce the need to move personally in many cases. However, no such tendency is visible. The fact that the level of mobility remains the same can be attributed to the increasing availability of relatively cheap secondhand cars that increasingly often appear in Roma camps.

Forms of professional activity and places of work

Initially, in the summer of 1990, the Romanian Roms arriving in Poland engaged in small market trade, just like other citizens of this country (and Bulgaria). Apart from clothes and shoes, they sold mainly alcoholic beverages imported from Romania. However, they soon found out that, as citizens of the country that had been liberated from Ceausescu's regime as a result of a revolution a year earlier, they could count not only on sympathy and compassion, but also on human generosity. This was checked

in practice by children arriving with parents, who began asking passers-by for money, although rather out of boredom and for fun. This encouraged adults to try this method of earning money, too. In the autumn of the same year, older men and women dressed usually in dark shabby clothes began to appear on the streets of Polish cities; kneeling or sitting on pavements and wailing in Romani or Romanian, they asked for money. In successive months, the number of beggars grew, and begging (in Romani: *manglimo*, which literally means a request) became the dominant method of earning money. A tendency to bring the entire family soon emerged, because each person “working” in this manner multiplied profits. Attempts were made to bring both older persons, if their health allowed them to travel from Romania to Poland and work in this way, and families with children, often very little ones or even infants.

Here it becomes necessary to question a number of myths disseminated by the media in those times and based on the stereotype of “Romanian Gypsies – professional beggars cruelly making use of children and women”. Later, along with the appearance of disabled and crippled persons with visible disabilities and injuries, it was even suggested in the press that they had been crippled deliberately. Actually, however, there were no professional beggars among them, at least in the first half of the 1990s. It is rather unlikely that people engaged in professional begging in Romania would be able to meet financial requirements concerning obtaining a passport and travel costs. This is confirmed by the fact that later, in the second half of the 1990s, these people were “imported” from Romania by more ruthless and enterprising persons who paid their passport and travel costs, which often resulted in their total and long-lasting dependence on their “benefactors”. The first immigrants, however, were by no means the poorest ones. Those who could afford the related costs came.

AS RELATIVES REMAINING in Romania received encouraging news from Poland about the possibility of earning a large amount of cash in an easy manner, they decided to come, too. On that occasion, they often sold or mortgaged their livestock (pigs, cows, horses) or even the whole house in order to cover travel costs. Among the immigrants, there were members of various Romani groups and communities from different regions of Romania, but the Romani people from Transylvania, including also representatives of the Kalderash and other subgroups associated with Roma Romane, prevailed. However, the dominant group were the so-called Rumungro Roms.

Roma Romane is a self-definition of the Roms coming from the native Romanian territories of Moldova and Wallachia. According to them, this definition means the “genuine, authentic

Romani people” or the “Romanian Roms”. The second community is formed by the Roms from Transylvania (annexed to Romania after World War I) whom *Roma Romane* call “Romungro” (*Rom-Ungro*, which literally means Romani-Hungarian). Currently, as a result of internal migrations, both of these communities are territorially mixed to a large extent and meet also outside the territory of Romania. However, a sense of belonging to one of them is always the most important criterion in mutual relations between them. In general, Roma Romane regard themselves (and are perceived by others) as more traditional people who maintain their internal social structure, observe Roma standards and customs, speak Romani, and cultivate the traditions of Roma crafts, particularly those relating to the processing of metals. In their view, the Romungro Roms are almost non-Roms, or Roms of a much worse kind, because their community is largely assimilated, generally yielding to Hungarian influence, not familiar with the Romani language (in practice, this is not always so), no longer observing Roma principles and devoid of everything that makes up the term *romanipen* (Romani-ness). In the opinions expressed by Roma Romane, the term “Romungro” itself acquired a very pejorative, almost derogatory sense. Therefore, the Roms to which it is supposed to refer absolutely avoid using it for the purpose of self-identification today.

The beggar’s profession

An overwhelming majority of immigrants became beggars only in Poland. In Romania, this profession would hardly be profitable for them, being exposed to constant competition and aggression from a large group of disabled and crippled persons for whom beggary was a source of income, and would involve too much risk because of the police and law enforcement services. Moreover, in the case of the Kalderash and other related subgroups, earning money in this manner was considered to be

unsuitable for their position in the Roma community. Only among the Romungro were there some persons who had already earned money through beggary in Romania. In most cases, however, the vision of improving their financial situation entirely overcame their resistance only here, in Poland.

People coming to Poland from Romania had lost their jobs as a result of the rapid social and economic transforma-

tion and had not been able to maintain their previous standard of living. Those who engaged in beggary, including both women and men, had usually been employed as seasonal unskilled agricultural workers in state-owned farms in Romania. This group also included former workers from various branches of state industry, for example, from armaments plants (some persons had their old employee identification cards). Because of the liquidation of many plants or the restructuring and reduction of person-

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Romanian Roma family begging in Kraków, 1990s.



Romanian Roma on a religious pilgrimage to a shrine in Limanowa 1995.

nel, Romanian citizens, including the Romani people, lost their jobs. For the Roms, begging in neighboring countries – Hungary, Czechoslovakia and primarily Poland – became an alternative.

The beggar's profession was practiced mainly by women of every age, older men, and school-age children. However, contrary to the media's suggestions, this was not a consequence of specific Romani customs in most cases (although such cases cannot be excluded). This resulted mainly from their personal experiences and reactions of Polish society. For families earning money in this way, every pair of hands begging for money counted. For this reason, production-age men tried begging, too. However, they soon found out that in their situation, without any apparent signs of disability, Polish society would not be as generous for them as it was for women with children and elderly people. They were also most often targets of interventions by the police and other law enforcement services. Apart from that, being perceived as capable of working, they experienced increasing disapproval, or sometimes even aggression, from Polish citizens. Thus, the participation of men in begging activity was considerably limited. Their role was reduced mainly to the supervision of begging women and children and to the collection of money gathered by them from time to time. This, in turn, was sometimes interpreted by the Polish media as a sign of their abuse and exploitation by ruthless men. Such cases cannot be entirely ruled out, but in general, such supervision and collection of "receipts" was an attempt to provide safety to begging people and prevent their loss of the daily "wage".

THE GENEROSITY OF Polish society towards the begging Romanian Roms is often emphasized in Poland. It did exist, indeed. But we can also state with full certainty that nobody seems to realize how often these people were subject to aggression from certain groups of Polish citizens. In Kraków, such situations occurred almost every day in the mid-1990s, when the biggest number of the Roms stayed there. Most often they were beaten and robbed of collected money, or at least there were attempts to do so. The

victims included not only men or young boys, but also women and children. For fear of deportation, they did not report such cases to the police.⁶ Besides, money was often taken over by police officers and city guards, too.

The profession of Romani beggars involved also some forms of behavior and relevant clothing. From the very beginning, Romani immigrants wanted to be identified as Romanians. Initially, when they appeared in the role of beggars in the autumn and winter of 1990, this did not create any major problems. Dressed casually in shabby winter clothes, men wore hats (including black sheepskin hats that are perceived as characteristic Romanian head coverings in Poland) and women wore headscarves tied under the chin and held children wrapped tightly in blankets in their hands. As warmer days approached, elements of clothes that could be associated with the Romani people began to appear from under winter coverings. Some people, especially middle-aged adults and older men, displayed not only standard Kalderash hats, but also characteristic wide straps (*haravli*) worn usually on shirts or sweaters let loose on pants. Women and girls from the Kalderash and similar groups began wearing long and spacious colorful dresses. Their hair was plaited, often with colorful ribbons traditionally braided in between. In spite of this, however, they were perceived as ethnic Romanians by Polish society for some time. As time went by, however, this belief began to be verified and yielded to the awareness that most of these immigrants, particularly beggars, are almost entirely Romanian Romani people.

On the other hand, being aware that their actual ethnic origin was revealed, begging persons made some attempts to mask their Romani identity. Women and girls began to take off all kinds of earrings and ribbons braided into plaits, and younger women and girls started unplaiting their hair, too. Plaits began to be replaced by ponytails, and hair was often bleached and dyed. Representatives of the Romungro group even decided to have their hair trimmed; for traditional Roma Romane, this was out of the question. Alongside dark single-color headscarves tied

under the chin, older and middle-aged women started wearing various head coverings: baseball caps, small hats, berets. Spacious dresses and aprons in bright colors were replaced with ordinary dark single-color dresses (usually in black, navy blue and light gray colors). Younger and middle-aged representatives of the Romungro group increasingly often wore pants. From time to time, when going out to beg on the streets, Kalderash girls even wore pants under dresses hiding them from the eyes of their family and other household members; having left their place of residence, they took off their dresses and put them on again when coming back to their families. Here, as far as possible in their place of accommodation (a makeshift hut called a *koliba*, or a rented room or flat), they had to comply with Roma principles concerning clothes, behavior and specifically perceived hygiene. Adult and married girls coming back in pants hidden under long dresses tried to take these pants off discreetly and as quickly as possible, at the same time putting on another outer dress or apron serving as “insulation” for the dress adhering directly to the woman’s body or slip – a polluting layer according to Roma customs. This did not apply to girls considered to be too immature to marry and, therefore, having no polluting properties. In their case, going around in pants was tolerated both at home and outside.

IN GENERAL, the following principle could be noticed in the case of traditional Romani people: outside their “home” (camp, rented lodging), among non-Romani people (*gadje*), they were allowed, or even obliged at the time of begging, to look extremely shabby and impoverished and, consequently, arouse pity and sympathy. Actually, they often could not show restraint in this respect. Their outer clothes, both among men and women, were often dirty and shabby to an excessively ostentatious degree. Their behavior in public places (littering around themselves and allowing children to satisfy physiological needs at the place of begging, etc.) was also inconsistent with standards approved in Polish society. This most widely available image of begging Romanian Romani people reinforced their common reputation of exceptional slobs and slovens. Consequently, Poles very often expressed dislike and disgust instead of pity and sympathy towards the Roms, contrary to the latter’s expectations.

As opposed to older generations, young people began to attach more importance to having a modest, non-Roma and neater look also on the outside when they became aware that their excessively shabby appearance might be too disgusting and decrease income from their begging activity. Apart from that, it was not very important for them how they were perceived by *gadje*. The outer clothes, preferably the same as worn by *gadje*, which covered or replaced the proper Roma clothes (pants worn by girls), was supposed not only to mask the beggars’ origin,

but also to protect them against the dirt of the external world of *gadje* – perceived both literally and ritually according to Roma customs. Therefore, the fact that these outer clothes might be dirty and shabby was regarded as absolutely natural by them. It was important not to break applicable standards and principles in one’s own environment, also with regard to clothes, appearance and hygiene, because it is principally improper to be regarded as a slob and sloven by one’s own people.

CONTRARY TO OUR common beliefs that were reinforced by daily views of begging persons and media reports (photographs, TV reportages, press articles), caring about personal hygiene is natural and obvious among them. Even under the most extremely dirty and shabby outer clothes, which are taken off after coming “home”, there is an obligation to be clean and tidy. Clothing should also be clean, including underwear adhering directly to the body, and the “proper” Roma clothes worn at the place of residence and among family. This is not easy in overcrowded makeshift huts (*koliby*) and barracks, where it is difficult to have even a minimum degree of intimacy and water has to be brought most often from more or less distant sources. In spite of this, it is significant that one of the texts about the traditional Romanian Roms from a camp in Szczecin, which was published in the daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* at the beginning of the 1990s, also quoted the opinions of people from the healthcare sector who were pleasantly surprised by the personal hygiene of these Romani patients.

This can also be confirmed by personal observations and experiences. Paweł Lechowski, who has acted very often as an intermediary and interpreter between the Romanian Roms and the Polish healthcare sector from 1990 till today and has informed them about all kinds of diagnoses, remarks and recommendations from doctors, has never heard any critical opinions concerning the per-

sonal hygiene of these adult patients. Things were sometimes different in the case of children (usually boys) who required urgent medical aid and whose parents had no time or possibility to prepare the little patient for a medical visit.

Ritual purity

Physical hygiene is closely related to ritual purity. In order to ensure it, women are obliged to wear an apron or a second outer dress. Both of these elements protect the proper clothes (dress) against external physical dirt and prevent men and all objects from direct contact with the ritually polluting proper dress adhering directly to the woman’s body. Wearing an apron is observed rigorously, particularly during the preparation of meals. The apron protects vessels and food products against contact with the dress and, at the same time, can be used for wiping or holding a hot vessel, wiping hands, etc. The wearing of heads-

“PHYSICAL HYGIENE IS CLOSELY RELATED TO RITUAL PURITY. IN ORDER TO ENSURE IT, WOMEN ARE OBLIGED TO WEAR AN APRON OR A SECOND OUTER DRESS.”



carves by women and girls preparing meals is also observed rigorously to prevent hair from falling into food, which would make it unfit for consumption.

In more traditional groups of Romanian Roms, similar rules referring to clothes are practiced also by men. Men living in better conditions, for example in cheap hotels, rented flats or even rooms, put on another pair of pants when going out in order to protect the proper clothes (*ziuzie kalcy* – literally: clean pants) against contact with all kinds of dirt of the non-Roma environment. At home, among one's own, this outer pair is taken off, and lying on a made bed or couch or even sleeping in sheets is possible without removing *ziuzie kalcy*, which is considered to be sufficiently clean.

ANOTHER CATEGORY of ritual and hygiene rules refers to the preparation of food. In the case of women, there is a strictly observed rule that they absolutely must not engage in kitchen work during the menstruation period. Vessels used for the preparation of meals or for washing the dishes must not be used for any other purposes, such as washing or doing the laundry. Otherwise, it would become *spurkate*, i.e., ritually impure, polluted and unfit for use. An example of very strict observance of this principle can be a situation when there was only one running water intake – a tap over the bathtub – in the place of accommodation of a Romani family. All users took utmost care to ensure that a vessel being filled up with water for consumption purpose, such as a kettle, was not situated below the edge of the bathtub, i.e., inside a “vessel” to be used for washing. Any items like vessels, spoons or forks that fell into this bathtub were subsequently destroyed and discarded as absolutely useless.

The 1990s was a period of most intense beggary by the Romanian Roms. In the years 2006–2007, the number of Romani immigrants from Romania decreased considerably. Consequently, the begging Roms almost entirely disappeared from Polish streets and church entrances. Although a small number of them survived in Poland until the accession of Romania to the European Union, they did not form any larger conspicuous groups. Their characteristic extensive camps on the outskirts of cities almost entirely disappeared during that period.

Those who remained in Poland in spite of intense checks by the police and border services tried to rent private lodgings, trying to avoid places of mass accommodation, such as hotels or hostels. Those who failed to find any private lodging, particularly for the winter period, ultimately settled in relatively small and extremely masked camps. Going out to work as beggars, they also tried to mask their Romani-Romanian identity. For this purpose, they were dressed so as not to stand out from the Polish environment, for example by putting on fake glasses; primarily, however, they tried to speak Polish within the limits of their abili-

ties in public places, particularly at the time of begging.

After the accession of Romania to the European Union in January 2007, when their fears of deportations began to vanish, it also started to turn out that there were actually more Romani persons, including full families, that had survived in Poland up to that time than it might seem at the beginning of the 2000s. An example of such a situation is Wrocław, where a few families who had survived there till 2007 built two large camps that were settled by their relatives and friends arriving already as a part of visa-free traffic.

Both the remaining representatives of the first migration wave of the 1990s and subsequent immigrants have intended to earn money mainly in the role of beggars. They have decided that it is the easiest and, in some cases, the only available profession that is also acceptable in their community. Seeing no other possibilities of making a living, they continue this activity in spite of frequent and increasingly harsher obstacles. In the first place, they have painfully experienced changes in the attitude of Polish society towards them and, consequently, a considerable decrease of their income from beggary as compared to previous years. It is increasingly difficult, often even impossible, to put aside some capital for various family investments from this income, which was the case in the 1990s. Even maintaining large families with many children and buying food for them has frequently become a problem.

ANOTHER DIFFICULTY is the increasingly strict treatment of beggars by law enforcement services. Their interventions sometimes assume the form of regular harassment aimed at discouraging them entirely from continuing this profession or at least abandoning their current places of work. In Kraków, for example, a City Guard officer regularly fined one of the Romanian Romani women for “persistent beggary” near St. Mary's Church.

“VESSELS USED FOR THE PREPARATION OF MEALS OR FOR WASHING THE DISHES MUST NOT BE USED FOR ANY OTHER PURPOSES, SUCH AS WASHING OR DOING THE LAUNDRY.”

Apart from the fact that the accusation of “persistence” was evidently unjustified, both the punished woman and a number of witnesses claim that she fell into disfavor with this guard for having refused to pay protection money to him, unlike other people begging there. As a result of this, applications were sent to the court and the woman was punished

twice on the basis of court sentences (a few days of arrest and 48 hours of community work).

In Wrocław, during meetings of representatives of various institutions and organizations concerning the solution of the problem of the local Romanian Romani camp, representatives of the City Guard almost officially announced the maximum harassment of all begging Romanian citizens under any possible pretext. In fact, the number of detentions, fines and motions for penalties sent to the court increased considerably. The final result, however, was as follows: for fear of imprisonment, the

Roms actually tried to pay fines imposed upon them. One of the persons trying to pay them was a Romani woman living in Kraków – the wife of an unemployed Polish citizen only performing odd jobs, who had four children to support, including two school-age children, one disabled child requiring permanent care and treatment and an infant, with only a few hundred Polish zlotys of allowance from the Municipal Center of Social Assistance. They tried to pay for themselves and the children of the Romani woman detained in Wrocław. However, in order to pay the fines for begging, they had to... beg even more. Having a family to support, charged with a financial penalty and endangered with the replacement of this penalty with arrest, they saw no other option but to continue or even reinforce their activity. In rare cases, such rigorous measures actually resulted in a change of the place of stay, but not the method of earning money. Some families discouraged by the consequences simply looked for a new place of work: in another district, in another city. All of these things call into question the effectiveness and advisability of such repressive actions aimed at eliminating the begging activity of Romani migrants.

From the very moment of arrival of Romani migrants in Poland, begging was their primary and most common, although not the only method of earning money. A separate profession, although similar in some respects, was the musical activity practiced by some of them. The analogy with begging comes to mind mainly because this method was often undertaken by persons without any musical background. Among such persons there were both male adults, young people, little children and teenagers – mostly boys, although girls did so from time to time, too. These persons usually tried to play accordions bought in Poland. These instruments were usually the first ones possessed by these “musicians”, which they used to try to play popular Polish tunes heard already in Poland. The level of musical performance of these tunes was often miserable, and the repertoire was often limited to one or several songs repeated over and over again. These concerts very often took place in trams, one of which – often the only song they knew – was sufficient for travel between two tram stops. Then the “musician” switched to another car of the tram and the same tune “entertained” passengers during their travel once again. Such “musicians” were very often accompanied by assistants – usually their younger brother or sister, who approached passers-by or passengers with a cup for contributions for the “musician” to be thrown into. It was this precise combination of a poor level of performing a tune and the frequently obtrusive passing of a small money container that could be associated with classic begging.

Authentic professional musicians

After around two-three years from the emergence of the first Romani migrants, authentic professional musicians also began to appear among them. This delay of several years can be at least partly attributed to the fact that, according to migrants’ reports, border services confiscated everything that could be used for the illegal earning of money in those days, including musical instruments. Only after some time, when they managed to smuggle



Romanian Romni begging in Kraków, 1990s.

their instruments across the border or purchased them in Poland, bands of several persons or individual musicians started to emerge. Initially, they tried to play mainly on central streets and squares of larger cities. However, as they were driven out of these places both by law enforcement services and competitive bands consisting of Polish citizens, including also Romani bands, they performed more frequently on all kinds of market squares and fairs, and individual musicians performed solo or in duos also in trams. They also began to venture onto less busy side streets or outlying housing estates more frequently, hoping to get money thrown from windows and balconies.

AT THE BEGINNING, the instrumental line-up of Roma bands was usually limited to a violin, guitar, accordion, or sometimes a clarinet – i.e., instruments that could easily be hidden in large baggage being brought to Poland (e.g. violin or clarinet) or purchased on the spot (guitar, accordion). From 2007, as citizens of the European Union, they began to arrive officially with more imposing instruments that were also typical of their musical culture: portable or table cymbals, or all kinds of brass instruments. With some exceptions, these musicians represented Lautars – a professional group of musicians that had emerged in Romanian lands at least as early as the 16th century, where this profession is inherited from generation to generation. This professional group does not consist only of the Roms, but it is dominated by them so much that even in Romania it is perceived most often as one of the Romani groups. Most of the musicians who arrived in Poland were actually ethnic Roms who declare this origin even in cases of almost full assimilation and lack of command of the Romani language.

Also, these professional musicians usually played popular Polish or international hits; they decided on their traditional repertoire rarely and only under special circumstances. Examples of such masking of their musical and ethnic identity can be seen in two extreme cases observed in Warsaw in 2009 and 2011: members of a duo playing in a tram not only played only Italian



A wedding of a Romanian Romni and a Polish Rom in Kraków 2014 or 2015.

tunes, but they also talked only in Italian, thus trying to create an absurd impression that they were Italians. In the second case, three musicians dressed like an ordinary Warsaw street and backyard band were playing the usual repertoire performed by bands of this kind on a café terrace near one of the main streets, arousing no doubts as to their “Warsaw” authenticity.

From among all Romani migrants from Romania, members of this ethnic and professional community had the biggest chance of adaptation and integration in the new environment. Such bands, particularly brass bands, playing their traditional music and currently popular Balkan motifs were often invited both to family events, primarily weddings, and many other social events by various kinds of youth clubs. A good example of such far-reaching integration can be a case from Kraków: the father of a large family playing with his eldest sons on the Kraków market square in the 1990s initially came into conflicts with a competitive band of local Roms from Nowa Huta. After a few years of chasing each other out, the “Romanians” were admitted to this band. Today, the entire family of five persons has permanent residence cards and lives in one of Kraków’s housing estates. One of the sons married a Romani woman from Nowa Huta, and the youngest son attends a Polish school. Apart from Romani and Romanian, everyone has quite a good command of Polish.

Actually, from the very beginning of the 1990s, in many families where begging was a source of income, some people, usually young men, also tried to gain income from small market trade. There have also been situations when a woman with children is begging near the entrance to the fair, and her husband or another family member on the market premises was selling goods literally from his hand or from a spacious market bag, or a temporary stand made of one or several cardboard boxes. The most popular type of goods was clothes and shoes of any kind,

which were purchased in bulk from Vietnamese tradesmen, for example in the shopping center in Tuszyn near Łódź. In the 1990s, another popular point of supply from the Vietnamese was the market located in a former sport stadium (*Stadion Dziesięciolecia*) in Warsaw.

Romani tradesmen tried to earn as quickly as possible enough money to buy a roadworthy secondhand car at a relatively cheap price. These vehicles were used both for the transport of purchased goods and for the movement of the entire family in search of the most convenient begging spots. They also gave their owner the possibility of providing transport services to persons and families that did not have their own car for a relevant fee. Most families did not have their own means of transport, often due to the lack of persons with a driving license, the demand for such services was high and had a permanent upward tendency.

THROUGHOUT THE 1990S, almost exclusively Romanian all-terrain vehicles “Aro” and passenger cars “Dacia” were purchased. After a longer or shorter time of their use in Poland, these cars were brought to Romania and sold there at a good profit. Because their buyers in Poland very often, maybe even most often, did not have a driving license, either their fellow citizens having such a driving license, very often Polish taxi drivers, were driving the cars across the border.

In the 1990s, small market trade was rather a casual, occasional occupation. The main reason for this was an excessively high risk of financial losses or even deportation. Presence on the premises of markets and fairs could also be risky because of frequent raids carried out by the police and the City Guard for the purpose of catching foreigners staying illegally in Poland. Trading outside the designated fair area resulted too often in a fine

from the City Guard or the police and usually the confiscation of goods. All of these things discouraged them and made them perceive begging as the safest and most secure occupation that guarantees basic income.

The EU enlargement

At present, the situation has changed since the accession of Romania to the European Union: begging is no longer the most profitable profession, and beggars are increasingly often subject to interventions of law enforcement services, financial penalties, and potentially also arrest. In Wrocław, for example, according to the latest information (from the Nomada Association), repressions against the begging Romanian Roms announced by the local City Guard are becoming more intense. On the other hand, trade in various forms has become an increasingly safer profession for them as EU citizens. It is not a mass phenomenon, as in the case of the Vietnamese or Armenians, but tradesmen appear individually or in small Romanian Romani families at all kinds of markets and fairs, both in big urban areas and in small towns (such as Bochnia, Myślenice or Proszowice near Kraków).

Their origin is not always so easy and obvious to identify. In the case of representatives of the Romungro group, this is often virtually impossible on the basis of their appearance itself. They usually do not differ from citizens of other countries engaged in this kind of trade in Poland: Armenians, Bulgarians, Moldovans, and Ukrainians. In some cases, it may even be difficult to distinguish them from Polish citizens at first sight, particularly because they happen to communicate in Polish not only with customers, but also among themselves so as not to attract other people's attention with their foreign origin. In such situations, only asking a question in Romanian or in Romani discreetly can dispel doubts.

These salesmen increasingly often occupy officially permanent stalls at market squares for payment of relevant fees, but they also continue to practice typical street peddler's trade.

After the accession of the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the European Union, many Romani people from these countries appeared in Polish cities.

This refers in particular to the Lovari offering various cheap industrial articles of unknown origin, including cosmetics, binoculars, video cameras, and various power tools. This form of trade was soon adopted also by the Romanian Roms, who slightly extended the range of products for sale with kitchenware, kitchen knife kits, woolen bedspreads, curtains, etc. Having no recognition as to the origin and citizenship of these traditionally annoying and intrusive salesmen, Polish citizens refer to all of them, also those from the Czech Republic and Slovakia, as "Romanians" or simply "Gypsies".

Among the Roms engaged in trade, representatives of the Kalderash and Gabor groups leave the smallest doubt as to their

"Romanian-Romani" origin, mainly due to their traditional clothes and the appearance of their women. In particular, members of the Gabor group have focused almost entirely on retail and wholesale trade since their arrival in Poland immediately after their country joined the European Union. This can be noticed in the Małopolska and Podkarpackie Provinces, where these Romani people live most frequently, renting lodgings for entire families in local towns (Myślenice, Rabka, Bochnia), and where they conduct their activity. Whereas women dressed in traditional Romani clothes sell kitchenware, knife kits, cutlery and similar household products in local fairs, men drive with cars loaded with goods in search of marketplaces where they can sell them, preferably in larger bulk quantities. Usually, in order not to emphasize their Romani identity, they do not wear their characteristic black hats on that occasion, and they often speak Hungarian, at least in the presence of potential buyers.

ACCORDING TO THEIR reports and opinions of the outside Romanian Roms, they sometimes imported container transports of large bulk quantities of kitchenware and other kitchen accessories from Hungary (where they have family ties). In Poland, they sought buyers mainly among owners of numerous guesthouses, hotels, restaurants and shops with household products in the Carpathian area and the Podkarpackie Province. These Romani people back in Romania in the 1990s began to focus on various kinds of trade, often on a large scale and among the remaining Romanian Roms, where they earned the reputation of being extremely enterprising and resourceful people who also express solidarity within the bounds of their own community. In fact, there were no representatives of this community, most of whom belong to evangelical denominations, among the begging Roms. In Romania, they specialized also in metal processing crafts: copersmithing and, primarily, tinsmithing-roofing. For this reason, after arriving in Poland, some of them looked for jobs involving the covering and repair of roofs, most often in villages and towns of southern Poland.

As opposed to the Gabor group, other Romani people generally do not even try to seek any employment in Poland. In the early 1990s, when arriving in Poland, they quite often considered this possibility, asking for seasonal work opportunities, e.g., fruit and vegetable picking jobs or work on

private building sites or in any other sphere, depending on the type of qualifications, if any (e.g., professions of a coppersmith, a tinsmith, a blacksmith, a horseshoer, etc.). However, they quickly became discouraged and successive incoming migrants did not even make any attempts in this direction any longer. This resulted from the following reasons: making use of the fact that almost all incoming migrants stayed in Poland illegally and faced the threat of deportation after the prolongation of their stay beyond three months, potential employers usually offered them

“IN MANY FAMILIES WHERE BEGGING WAS A SOURCE OF INCOME, SOME PEOPLE, USUALLY YOUNG MEN, ALSO TRIED TO GAIN INCOME FROM SMALL MARKET TRADE.”





Polish Roma NGO visits a Romanian Roma settlement in Kraków 2015.



Poznań. Anarchists host Roma in their squat, 2014.

the lowest rates of remuneration. And, seeing that income from begging at that time was much higher than the remuneration offered to them by employers, incoming migrants regarded any kind of employment as pointless and even absurd. This, in turn, reinforced their reputation of people who had “exaggerated requirements”, were unstable, lazy, reluctant to work and generally unfit for employment, so potential employers stopped taking them into consideration. Thus, at the present moment, apart from a few Gabor people working in their profession, it is impossible to indicate any cases of employment of these immigrants.

The Nomada Association

In this regard, the situation in Wrocław seems to be absolutely exceptional and the Nomada Association (www.nomada.info.pl) runs an experimental initiative based on the employment of the local Romanian Roms both by private persons and by organizations and institutions. Up till now, this initiative also seems to confirm the view that the Roms generally avoid employment under someone’s direction, under supervision, and on conditions imposing punctuality, systematicity, and all time frames limiting their freedom in this respect. They prefer employment that would allow them to decide personally on the time and intensity of their work, as in the case of crafts practiced in Romania, or work at piece rates. In Poland, the collecting and selling of metal scrap in Wrocław serves as a good example of their activity based on these principles. This was initiated by small boys and teenagers from the local Romani camp. They began to use prams thrown away by inhabitants of the local housing estate for transporting metal scrap collected by them and delivering it to scrap yards. This initiative, in turn, inspired adults who had recently engaged in the dismantling of old abandoned cars and the recovery of all non-ferrous metals, which are also sold after being collected in larger quantities.

To exhaust this topic, it is also worth mentioning the following issue: persons interested in the issue of Romani migrants from Romania in Poland often ask why there are no fortune-

tellers among Romanian Romani women and why they do not try earning money in Poland using this traditional profession, which is so common among the Polish Roms. Indeed, the only Romani fortune-tellers that could be met in parks, squares and other places, e.g. near the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw, have only been citizens of Poland. This does not mean, however, that there are none of them among Romani immigrants. In fact, there are quite many of them, but they are actually not visible. Among the older and middle-aged generation of the traditional Romanian Roms arriving in Poland, there are women who engaged professionally in fortune-telling and all kinds of magic that could be used for earning frequently large amounts of money in Romania. Moreover, it is Romanian Romani women who are regarded as the elite in this profession among all Romani people. So, why do they not practice fortune-telling in Poland? There may be a few reasons. One of them was – and still is, in a way – the language barrier. The older or even middle-aged generation of immigrants, living in greater isolation from Poles than their children and young people do, acquire the language of the country of their residence more slowly and reluctantly. Without the possibility of verbal communication, practicing this profession is almost impossible. Almost, because we can quote a single example of overcoming this barrier. In Kraków in the 1990s, a Romanian fortune-teller with a renowned reputation among her fellow people tried to refuse to provide fortune-telling service to a bothersome Polish customer because she did not know Polish. She agreed to do so only when the woman proposed engaging an interpreter. Another reason for refraining from this profession is probably the fact that it has already been dominated by Polish Romani women with whom incoming people do not want to enter into any conflicts. In general, feeling constantly endangered, the Romanian Roms try to avoid potential accusations of criminal activity and not to provoke opinions against themselves, which would certainly be generated by the activity of their fortune-tellers.



Inside a house in Kamiński Street settlement, Wrocław 2012.



Forms of activities for the benefit of one's own community

In the case of the Romanian Roms migrating to Poland, it is difficult to speak of any kind of organized activity in any field in favor of their own community of emigrants. While the Roms became very active in Romania itself shortly after the collapse of Ceausescu's regime and many social and political organizations were established at that time, such as "Partida Romilor" in 1990,⁷ migrants staying in Poland did not engage in any type of such activity whatsoever. During the entire decade of the 1990s, they seemed to be unaware of the fact that organizations of this kind were being established in their country in order to improve their economic and social situation. We know only one example of political activity of a Romani migrant (in the mid-1990s), when a Romanian Romani man returned to Poland after his short departure to Romania, announcing that he had joined "Partida Romilor" at that time and had even assumed a function in one of its local branches. After his return to Poland, however, he did not undertake any activity in this respect, still focusing along with his family only on the acquisition of financial income. Such an attitude has characterized the entire community of the Romanian Roms staying in Poland without exception until now.

The Roms who had lived in Romania in family-clan circles within which gainful activity was undertaken, sometimes leading to conflicts with other circles, continued exactly the same model of social life in Poland. However, because they were determined to achieve maximum profits within the shortest possible time in Poland, their rivalry in the foreign land often assumed very fierce forms, including physical confrontations between

such family and clan groups. This did not help to build any common coordinated activity that would encompass wider circles than these family communities. Moreover, in Poland, there were relatively small, yet very different groups representing almost all, or at least a majority of groups, or – as they call it – *Romani natsie* living in Romania, including those that traditionally do not maintain any relations. Therefore, the only type of activity that can be considered in this case was, and still is, economic (gainful) activity for the benefit of the smallest social unit – the family.

IN SPITE OF the best intentions, it is impossible to recognize any direct and conscious example of the Roms' activity for the benefit of the entire Romanian society. It is even difficult to speak of such direct and conscious activity of these emigrants for the benefit of their own Roma community. Their entire activity is actually reduced to the simplest economic activity: begging,

market trade, etc., for the benefit of their own families. Usually, however, only a part of members of large multi-generation Romani families have stayed in Poland, as well as in any other countries. Elderly people with ailing health and children being looked after by the remaining cousins usually stayed in the country of origin.

“ELDERLY PEOPLE WITH AILING HEALTH AND CHILDREN BEING LOOKED AFTER BY THE REMAINING COUSINS USUALLY STAYED IN THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN.”

The family members who have remained in Romania have been the only recipients of financial aid provided by those who earned money in Poland.

However, sending this aid to Romania was a problem. The Romani people who had already arrived in Poland, intending to stay for a long time in our country, avoided going to Romania as much as they could, reckoning the impossibility of re-entering Poland. Thus, those who had to travel to their country for various reasons were entrusted with a series of tasks. Particularly



valuable couriers were buyers of secondhand cars that were exported to Romania for the purpose of their sale. They delivered not only Deutschmarks or dollars, but also larger quantities of food products, cleaning supplies, clothes and other goods purchased in Poland to the family members remaining at home. In exceptional cases, the role of such a courier was entrusted to trustworthy Polish citizens, and all financial costs of their travel were covered. This option was preferred because it meant almost the entire elimination of the risk of a thorough border control and potential confiscation of sometimes large amounts of illegally transported currency, to which Romani citizens of Romania were subject. Such couriers were also almost always requested to bring various kinds of documents left in Romania that were necessary or sometimes even required in Poland, such as identity cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates, etc.

However, by delivering financial aid to their families left in Romania or investing in the purchase of a car or the purchase or construction of a house or a flat there, the Romanian Roms inadvertently and indirectly contributed to efforts aimed at improving the economic condition of the entire Roma community. To put it more trivially, we can say that, by bringing large numbers of cars from abroad, they could have contributed slightly to the

popularization of the automotive sector and the improvement of the availability of cars in Romania. In a similar, slightly trivial form, we can notice a certain cultural phenomenon regarding culinary habits and preferences. It is worth noting that the Romani people staying in Poland in the 1990s clearly contributed to the popularization of tea as a beverage and its placement on the market in Romania. Previously, as in the Balkans, “tea” had been associated

there only with herbal infusions used for healing various health problems. Having become accustomed to drinking tea in Poland, the Roms began to demand it also in Romania. Because tea did not exist in the tradition of this country and, therefore, was not available in shops, they started bringing express teas and supplied them also to private shops in places of their residence, where they were initially sold as a rarity in single bags.

Institutions that immigrants create or in which they act

The Roms have generally avoided contact with any state institutions, which they associate with supervision and interference in their social life, and much of this attitude has survived till today. Therefore, they have also shown an aversion to creating similar structures within the bounds of their own community and to acting within them. Various associations, organizations or Roma parties that proliferated in those days, also in Romania, were a completely new phenomenon. The Romani migrants

who arrived in Poland in the 1990s usually had no contact with Roma institutions of this kind that began to appear in Romania at that time. However, those who arrived in Poland in subsequent periods, for example, at the end of the 1990s or after 2007, even if they had joined some Roma organization before leaving Romania, lost contact with it after arriving in Poland, focusing only on the acquisition of financial income.

ACTUALLY, THE ONLY traditional form of Roma institution that we can acknowledge is the Roma common court that has existed at least since the 18th century.⁸ Its role is to regulate internal social life and to settle disputes between the Romani people without referring to domestic courts and similar outside institutions. These courts are recognized in various organizational forms and under various names, and their sentences are respected among a large part of the 8–12-million Romani people in the world. In Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, it is most frequently the *kris*, which exists among traditional Roma Romane, particularly among the Kalderash. It is a collective body consisting of several (up to a few dozen) older respected Romani men enjoying a good reputation, who are called *krisitora* or *krisnitori*.⁹

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Also, the Romanian Romani emigrants often refer to decisions of the *kris*. However while holding an assembly of the entire jury at a certain time and place is not a major problem in Romania, it may be quite difficult in a foreign country. In Romania, they usually know where to find persons qualifying for the role of a judge. In Poland, remaining in dispersion in incomplete family-clan groups and in a state of constant movement, they often did

not know where to look for proper candidates for this function at a given moment.

A case from the mid-1990s illustrates such a situation along with related departures from the applicable rules. In Jelenia Góra, a preliminary lowest-level negotiational and conciliatory *kris* concerning an overdue financial debt was scheduled to take place on an agreed day in the summer. One of the basic rules of the *kris* is that functions of *krisnitori* should be held only by fully empowered members of the Roma community speaking only Romani during the hearing.¹⁰ The jury had to consist of a minimum of three persons. After long and complicated searches covering almost the entire territory of Poland, two persons were found, one of whom was to act as presiding judge. Because the approaching deadline gave no chance to find a third member of the jury, one of the parties to the dispute proposed engaging an ethnically Polish citizen integrated with their environment and communicating with them in their language. Because of the very low rank of this *kris* and the relatively narrow and small circle of

related parties of the dispute, the proposal was accepted. The “hearing” took place on the glade of the grove near the railway station. Altogether, several persons participated in it, including the jury, the plaintiff (creditor), the defendant (debtor) and their families with children. An outside observer could associate the whole situation with a family meeting on the grass rather than with a session of any court. The final result of this “family meeting”, after a few hours of intense negotiations, was the immediate repayment of part of the debt, the coverage of “legal costs” (i.e., concerning the jury) and the obligation of the defendant to repay the balance of the debt within a certain period. The procedure also required this obligation to be confirmed and “sealed” by means of a relevant oath. A necessary part of this ritual is a cross. As none of the present persons had this object, one of the girls made it provisionally from two broken twigs laid in the shape of a cross and tied with a blade of grass. The fulfillment of this last formality, i.e., the making of a ritual oath called *colach*¹¹ concluded the “hearing”. This time, the debt was settled within the stipulated time-limit.

WHILE IT IS NATURAL that traditional Roma Romane staying in Poland referred to the method of resolution of disputes and conflicts that they had known from their country of origin, it may be surprising that it also began to be practiced by representatives of assimilated Romungro groups staying in Poland, who had long forgotten about this Romani institution in Romania. The most probable reason for this phenomenon is as follows: in Romania, most people from the Romungro group became accustomed to referring to official state institutions, including courts, if necessary. In Poland, which was a foreign country for them, they avoided contact with any state institutions (except the health-care sector), just like other Romani immigrants. Initially, such contacts were hampered by the language barrier, and the potential engagement of interpreters involved additional costs that they tried to limit as much as possible. The main reasons, however, were anxiety and excessive risk related to such contacts. This was because most of these people stayed in Poland illegally. As a result of this, each encounter with institutions like the police, courts or administration involved a lower or higher, but always real, threat of deportation. An alternative to the troublesome, expensive (interpreter’s costs) and mainly risky reference to the Polish judicature was the return to the traditional *kris*. Initially, representatives of traditional Romanian-Romani groups were engaged most frequently as a jury. As time went by, following the entire procedure practiced by these traditional Roma communities, these people started becoming independent by selecting the jury from among their own elders. ✕

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Note: All images by the authors.

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- 2 On the basis of Art. 288 of the Criminal Code of 1969, it is only a petty offence from 2005 – see Art. 49 of the Code of Petty Offences.
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