Needy Guests, Reluctant Hosts: The Plight of Rumanians in Poland

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Roma in the Crossfire

Gypsies, who call themselves Roma [1] have historically been Europe's most disadvantaged and discriminated against ethnic group. With an estimated five million people in southeastern and Eastern Europe and another two million in the West, Gypsies are Europe's largest minority (Bourne, 1993) and an obvious target of persecution. In several Eastern European countries, Roma, with their distinctive appearance, way of life, and sometimes also religion, provide a convenient scapegoat and focus for old prejudices and new frustrations. In the past couple of years, a continent-wide ascension of racism swept the newly democratized East. In Western Europe the targets are Jews, Muslims, and immigrants generally. In Eastern Europe, the racist attacks are directed primarily at the Roma.

Anti-Gypsy violence escalated particularly dramatically in Rumania during the last couple of years. "Rumania's roughly 2.5 million Roma have been caught in the crossfire between the nationalities, on the one hand, and social tensions emanating from the country's economic disintegration, on the other. The country's largest minority, more than ten percent of the population, has to pay for the post-totalitarian freedom as no other people in Rumania" (Hockenos, 1993: 201).

Hatred and wrath against the Roma comes from all segments of society and from across the political spectrum, not just the ultra-right groups. Shafir and Ionescu (1991) report violent acts against Roma by members of many ethnic and minority groups, including Romanians, Hungarians, Germans (in Transylvania), and Macedonian Romanians (in Dobruja). The results: Roma houses burnt down by non-Gypsy mobs and Roma inhabitants driven out of villages. Between 1989 and 1991, more than seventeen instances of mob violence left at least five Roma dead and unknown hundreds injured (Hockenos, 1993). The first pogrom struck in early January of 1989 in the village of Turu Lung, where approximately 1,000 villagers went on a rampage.
burning 38 of the 41 Roma dwellings to the ground and attacking the Roma with makeshift weapons (Helsinki Watch Report, 1991).

One reason of the new wave of violence against the Roma is Rumanians' frustration with their own economic deprivation, and their fear of crime and social disorder. The Roma, traditional traders and dealers, represent the spirit of the free market with its profit-oriented, often speculative, business dealings. With private enterprise no longer a crime in Rumania, Roma have been the first to identify profitable opportunities offered by the free market economy. Although Romany entrepreneurs constitute a tiny minority of the Roma population, Rumanians have directed their hostility and resentment against them.

The newly elected government not only feeds the feelings of prejudice, but is actively leading the nationalistic crusade. When gangs of miners were shipped into Bucharest in 1990 to put down anti-government dissent, Roma were singled out for special treatment and the miners went on the rampage in their homes for an evening of vicious outrages, before leaving the capital with the President's praise ringing in their ears (Fraser, 1992).

Obviously, the government claims innocence. In July 1991 a report released by a special governmental commission and a document circulated by the Rumanian delegation at the Geneva conference on minorities denied any ethnic or racial grounds for the latest attacks on Roma communities in Rumania. Social background and in particular the emergence of a group of well-to-do Roma involved in the black market economy were cited as a cause of the resentment against them. The number of Roma nouveau riches is, however, insignificant. Most Roma have apparently remained as destitute and on the margins of society as they were under Ceausescu. The majority of them have difficulty finding jobs and housing (Shafir and Ionescu, 1991).

The Roma play a useful role for the government as a political scapegoat. Of the 31 people investigated in connection with the March 1990 Tigru-Mures violence, 24 were Roma, five were ethnic Hungarians, and two were ethnic Rumanian. The court convicted seven Roma alone citing offenses such as public disturbance and possession of illegal weapons. Similarly, in August 1990, after an onslaught of miners on Bucharest, it was a handful of Roma that were shown on TV as the guilty parties.

The ever present hostility combined with growing unemployment, grinding poverty, and one of the lowest standards of living in Eastern Europe, has prompted thousands of Rumanian Roma to flee Rumania. Where do they go and what awaits them there?
Cygan in Transit

Thousands of Rumanian Roma have left for the West, especially for Germany, despite the fact that Skinheads await them there with Molotov cocktails. The mass exodus is causing immense problems for the "front-line" states of Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Poland.

Poland, for many decades a refugee producing country, is now becoming a country of refuge for many different groups, including Roma from Rumania. The estimates how many Roma from Rumania crossed the Polish border vary. the First Secretary of the Rumanian Embassy in Poland estimates their number at 2,000 people, while the Polish Ministry of Internal Affairs claims that 32,000 Rumanian citizens, 90 percent of whom were Roma, were stopped trying to cross the border illegally in 1992 alone (Gajdzinski, 1993). Another source cites 1,000 Roma crossing the Polish southern frontier a week (Nazarewicz, 1992).

Statistics aside, Poland is a major transit point on the illegal Roma emigration route from Romania into Germany. Many Romany families live temporarily on trash dumps and in railway stations after being refused entry into Germany, awaiting a chance to cross the frontiers illegally. German officials reported that during 1991 between 50 and 100 Roma were trying to enter Germany illegally. German border guards return illegal entrants to the Polish authorities who are obliged under a bilateral treaty with Germany to deport them to their country of origin. However, the Polish police is not equipped to enforce deportation orders sending Roma back to Rumania (Joly, 1992). They stay in Poland hoping to try again. But how do they survive in the meantime?

Theater of Poverty

An older Rumanian Gypsy is sitting at the corner of Fredry Street, opposite a busy department store, in Poznan, Poland. Her 3-year old granddaughter is playing on her lap. The woman's name is Marija.[2] She has been in Poland for two weeks now. She hopes to stay for another three or four weeks.

What's going to happen later, I ask. "Later? If I manage to save for the airfare, we will go back." Why did she come to Poland? She is 70 years . Why is she begging in the streets? "There is incredible poverty in Rumania and no work. My son died during the revolution. The new authorities are not interested in the fate of the Roma." I will soon find out that Marija is lying...
I have many questions. Where do they sleep? How do they take care of their basic needs? How much do they earn? Where are their husbands and brothers? So far, I have only seen women and children in the streets. How many Roma came to Poland? How many will follow? Why are they teaching their children to beg? Did they come as refugees? Or are they here as tourists? Who sent them invitations?

I am waiting for answers. The replies are slow and often evasive. The little girl got 50,000 zlotys. Marija quickly takes the note. Why? Why can't the child enjoy what she received? "No, no. She has to know that a bigger note has to be hidden quickly and deeply." The girl can hold on to her koperniki, these small notes arouse compassion...

We come in groups. More Roma will come to Poland, because there is money to be made here. We sit in the busiest parts of the city, because that is where you can earn most. We all know each other, but we position ourselves in such a way that we cannot maintain eye contact. However, should anything happen to one of us, we are here to help. The older children act as messengers and scouts. They warn us about an approaching policeman. If I want to go and have a bite to eat, my granddaughter stays and guards our place.

The children left in the street are very poorly dressed, unwashed, their hair uncombed. They often play with a banana peel or an empty juice box or search the trash bins. They stare at pedestrians with their big, beautiful, sad, black eyes. Dirty, shabby blankets and coats, and notes written in poor Polish saying "... my Rumanian are poor and persecuted, please help. I need to buy some bread for my child)--constitute the inherently present props.

Is this really true? Marija nods. Reluctantly, however, since she knows that the whole "theater of poverty" is a survival technique. The notes written on pieces of cardboard boxes are a part of a whole industry. Standard texts are written with magic markers or ball-point pens. Clumsily put together sentences are often composed by Poles who write them in exchange for a beer. Groups of Polish niebieskie ptaki ("adventurers" or literally "Blue birds") are in close contact with panhandling Roma. I have learned that from the owners of kantors, money exchange kiosks.
The Polish "protectors" of the Rumanian Gypsies are also involved in the exchange of zlotys obtained by the begging Roma women and children into American dollars or German marks. Foreigners are not allowed to purchase hard currency. However, a "volunteer" can always be found to do it for half a liter of vodka. The kantar owners are helpless since it is a Polish citizen who buys the dollars. And, thus, the Roma get the only currency they are interested in. I am told in one downtown kantar that a Romany woman can make as much as $150 a day. The Chair of the Anthropology Department in Poznan makes that much in a month.

Marija gets up. Her granddaughter does not protest. She picks up a cardboard note and a photograph displayed for everyone to see. I ask about the people in the picture. "This is my son who was killed during the revolution. The mourners are surrounding the coffin. When the regime was abolished, many Roma were killed. We are very poor." Today I have seen the same photograph in five different parts of the city. I have no idea how many copies of this picture are circulating around town. The photographer did not pay attention to the details: the mourners look far from being poor, nicely dressed in suits, white shirts and ties.

As an elder of the group, Marija takes care of the younger women and supervises their work. She assigns them their posts. She also keeps their passports. Her daughter is panhandling in the next street. A little further down Marija's grandson sits with his little sister. Next to then, on a newspaper there is a piece of bread, a half eaten apple, and an empty milk carton. "My father and grandfather came to Poland with us. What do they do? Nothing. They won't tell and if I tell I will be beaten. Our elders said we might be here a year or two. Poland is a good country. Rumania is very beautiful, but here is a different life. We will save to go to Germany or America, because there is no poor Rumania there."

Down the street another Roma woman is begging in front of a church. "People in Poznan are nice, they bring food and clothing, but we don't want that." They want money. "Our husbands and brothers are working Poland under the table. Where do we live in Rumania? At the Hungarian border, in the woods. But the elders take our money and they live well. There are rules when and who can go aboard. I can't tell you our secrets. Go away."

After a day's work, the women and children go to previously appointed meeting places. After dark, they are not visible in the streets. They meet in hotels where the men live and rarely in the apartments of Polish Gypsies. The women and children usually sleep in abandoned houses.
or apartment buildings or in warmer weather in parks. Those that can afford it buy a round trip
ticket and spend the night on the train to return to the same spot the following morning.

The women tell me that

the ethnic Rumanians persecute them, the Bulgarians hate them, that all that went
wrong in the communist Romania is blamed on the Roma. We don't want much--
they add--only freedom, we learn how to appear poor, it helps to beg to help the
better Rumanian Roma to become somebody. Many of us cannot write or read,
many don't speak Rumanian, only the language of their village. We know how to
panhandle, but why are you surprised, many Poles panhandle nearby.

"Leave Us Alone Till Spring"

The children appeared very suddenly. Their hands extended, they pinch me, pull my
sleeves, and cry. "Pani, give some money, I am hungry"--begs a little boy, standing in a puddle,
his bare, dirty feet in mud up to his ankles.

A row of cardboard "houses" faces an old warehouse. Several hundred meters away is the
train station of East Warsaw. At first, the makeshift houses seem unoccupied, but after a couple
of minutes, a blanket hanging in the doorway is lifted and a young woman with a baby in her
arms comes out. Does she live here alone? "No, no. About one hundred Roma live in this
settlement. They are all Kortorari. Came here from the same village in Alba County, near
Bucharest." Do they intend to stay in Warsaw? "No! We want to go to Germany. My family tried
several times to cross the border. the helicopter spotted us. We will try again in the Spring." More women are coming. they re returning from "the city." They take out 100 and 200 zloty
notes. A group of men appear suddenly and pocket the money quickly. The "chief" of the camp
offers an explanation: "I don't want to steal and go to jail, it's better that my wife makes money
panhandling."

It is November, the weather is getting cold, winter will be here soon. Despite the cold,
they sleep on dirt floors. Only some of the "tents" are "furnished" with old mattresses, broken
couches or piles of blankets. before the police chased them away, they slept on benches in a
nearby train station.
In Strzeszyn, a suburb of Poznan, 12 dug-outs are inhabited by 68 Roma from Rumania. Half of them are children, including three babies born a couple of days ago. Their living conditions are atrocious. A ditch serves them as a toilet. They get their water from a nearby well. Another group of Roma settled in Naramowice. This "family" consists of 38 people, including 20 children under the age of 10. they occupy nine dug-outs and two tents. Some of the Roma that lived in this settlement left when the local authorities and the mass media got interested in their fate. The ones that remained have only one request of the authorities: "Leave us alone until Spring. We will leave Poland then."

Do the Polish authorities leave them alone? Is the government providing any assistance? And what about the attitudes of the average Pole to the "Gypsy problem"?
The Host Society: Friend or Foe?

Desperate efforts of the Polish government to deport Rumanian Roma are fruitless: most of them escape and trains arrive at the border empty. Now the problem is complicated by the stance Ukraine, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic have taken--they do not want Rumanian Gypsies in their countries either and return them to Poland.

"They do not come to us for assistance--says Radoslaw Wrobel of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. One person came once, by mistake. They are very well organized and do not ask Polish organizations for assistance." "The reason Rumanian Gypsies do not seek assistance--explains Krzysztof Lewandowski, the spokesman for the Refugee Bureau--they do not know about us. They have virtually no contacts with Poles. They don't speak any other language than Rumanian or Romany, and their poverty and dirty clothes are met with disgust, people turn away from them."

Polish Roma do not maintain relationships with Rumanian Gypsies. They do not see any reason to support panhandling and do not want the image of a dirty, begging Roma woman to be ingrained in the social mentality in a country that has known anti-Gypsy pogroms. "They are not my brothers--says one Polish Rom who asked not to be identified. We are very different from them, we couldn't beg in the streets. We are not dependent on anybody. We have earned our place here. Our women are clean, and children washed. We build houses and don't sleep on the floor. Rumanian Gypsies bring us shame."

The situation of Polish Roma is not enviable either. The 15,000 or so Roma seem to be leaving Poland en masse, aggravated by indigenous racism against them. In the immediate
aftermath of the mob attack on Roma in Mlawa on June 26, 1991, over 1,000 fled to Sweden but we turned back by the Swedish authorities (McQuaid, 1991). However, many succeeded in crossing illegally into Germany (Joly, 1992).

The general sentiment is to deport the Rumanian Roma from Poland and, thus, solve the "Gypsy problem" once and for all. There are, however, exceptions to these attitudes. The actors of the Theater of the Eighth Day in Poznan empathize with the plight of the Roma and are categorically opposing their deportation from Poland. The Theater has launched an aid program to assist the Rumanian Roma that live in the woods in Strzeszyn and Naramowice, two suburbs of Poznan.

The local chapter of the Polish Red Cross in Poznan is also providing aid. I saw a couple of nurses and a representative of the police precinct, accompanied by two interpreters, pay a visit in one of the Roma "settlements." They brought 100 loaves of bread, two sacks of potatoes, some vegetables, and other staples with them. The policeman warned the Roma that if they do not stop cutting down trees they will be fined. The wood from the trees is used for cooking over an open fire. Children and several women, each nursing a baby, came out of the makeshift huts and dug-outs. They all reached for the bread and potatoes. Everybody wants to tell the story about the prevailing poverty in Rumania. One of the women says: "It was much better for us under Ceausescu. Now we are third-class citizens. We don't have anything, now work, no home, no money. The Rumanians are first, the Hungarians second, and we are at the very bottom."

Ita, a two year old boy from Rumania, is being treated at the Children's Hospital in Poznan. He suffers from a terrible skin infection, he has frostbite on his cheeks, and liver problems. When his parents brought him to the hospital he also had lice. It is a second Roma child from Rumania admitted to this hospital. His predecessor, an eight months old Nicolae, was taken by his mother from the hospital despite the fact that he suffered from pneumonia. After the uproar surrounding the so-called "Gypsy problem" that erupted in late December of 1993, his parents left Poznan. A 10 year old girl and her uncle were admitted to the hospital in Ludwikowo. They are both diagnosed with tuberculosis.

Many people in Poznan do not approve of the efforts of the actors, nurses, and hospital personnel who provide assistance to the Roma from Rumania. "There is so much poverty in Poland and you are not moved by it, but you have pity for those dirty wanderers. It is their own
fault. They should work and help themselves"--these are the arguments expressed by may "concerned" Poles (Sygidus, 1994).

Conclusions

The Roma of Eastern Europe are facing a very uncertain future, particularly if popular prejudice compels the region's new democracies to legislate against them. The parliament of the Czech Republic, for example, is already torn by the controversy surrounding a draft law that will limit Roma rights of movement and residence and even restrict their education (Bourne, 1993). Other governments in the region are pressured to adopt similar measures.

The situation in Western Europe is not any better. As the tensions over refugees and immigrant workers heighten, the European Community is moving towards "more standardized policing of entry of non-EC nationals, as a counterpart to the opening of internal borders to free circulation of EC citizens -- a freedom which, however, does not necessarily do away with national restrictions on the ability to work or move around, like the French carnet de circulation" (Fraser, 1992: 290).

Despite the dark picture painted of the Roma experience in Eastern Europe, some authors see hopeful signs, particularly on the international scene, indicating that some positive changes are possible in the future (Crowe, 1991; Gheorghe, 1991). The agents of change, however, are not to be found among the reluctant hosts, but rather the needy guests. "The most promising is the work of the international Romany Union, which over the past two decades has tried to make other international humanitarian and human rights organizations more aware of Romany losses in the Porjamos, and of violations of Gypsy civil and human rights not only in Eastern Europe, but elsewhere in the world. Hopefully, this pressure combined with the political and social transformations taking place in Eastern Europe, will lead to a change in governmental policies that will finally give the Romany full minority status, based on their unique cultural and linguistic heritage that has been so much a part of the history of that part of Europe" (Crowe, 1991: 157).
References


Nazarewicz, Katarzyna, 1992, Tekturowe domy. Wprost, October 11, 41: 42-44.


Notes

1. The endonym, the name accepted by the people themselves, is Rom (pl. Roma), which in their Sanskrit-based language, Romany, means "man," "married male," "husband," and in a more general sense, "person belonging to our group," to "u," as opposed to Gadzo, Gadze, "they," non-Roma. An appropriate English equivalent of this ethnonym is Romanies (Gheorghe, 1991; Fraser, 1992).

2. Marija is a Rumanian Gypsy woman I met in Poznan and spent a few days with, following her as she went about her days in the streets. She first pointed to herself and said Rom, but later used the Polish word Cyganka (Gypsy woman) when she talked about herself or other women panhandling in the streets.