ARTICLES

Migration of Roma to Western Europe Under the Iron Curtain in the Light of Memories of the Witnesses

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This article applies the slow memory approach to the study of the pre-1989 migration of Roma from Czechoslovakia to the West. It focuses on reconstructing this phenomenon from memories of Romani[1] witnesses. It analyses the ways in which the process of migration to the West was remembered, described and interpreted by the witnesses. The emigration of Roma from communist Czechoslovakia to Western Europe is almost entirely absent in Romani studies and migration studies literature, with only a few random references by some authors. There is no data about the number of Romani migrants, and, generally, the topic is very under-researched. Oral historical methods and studies of memories of Romani witnesses who emigrated to Western countries present a unique possibility with which to research this phenomenon. The concept of slow memory enables the researcher to focus on how the Roma remember sociocultural and political events in the past and how they interpret them. Their testimonies showed a variety of motifs and descriptions of events that had various coinciding elements. Using the slow memory approach thus offers new perspectives on past events, especially by considering the marginalised and under-represented perspective of the Roma, which emphasises mainly the role of kinship and social networks and the big role of Romani solidarity in these stories.

Keywords: Roma, communism, Czechoslovakia, collective memories, individual memories, slow memory, migration, oral history

1 In my article, I use these terms: a *Rom* (noun, sg.) *Roma* (noun, pl.) and *Romani* (adjective). I am aware that in English both adjective Roma and Romani are possible (Descriptive Glossary of terms relating to Roma issues, 2012: 8), but together with my other colleagues from the Seminary on Romani Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, we systematically prefer using the adjective *Romani*.

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

This article attempts to apply the slow memory approach to the study of a social and historical phenomenon that has not yet been the subject of a separate study: the migration of Roma from the former Czechoslovakia to the West[2] in the time of communism. It focuses on reconstructing this phenomenon based on memories and narratives of Romani witnesses, who described their views on the issue of pre-1989 migration. It focuses on the course of these journeys, their motivations and the consequences and events that followed. With its theme, it fits in a gap pertaining to both the scholarship on migrations and the migration of Central and East European Roma. The need to focus on discovering and recovering forgotten and marginalised pathways is directly mentioned in the slow memory manifesto (Memorandum of Understanding, 2021: 5–6).

As the call for papers to this special issue of Slovak Ethnology stated, the perspective of the slow memory approach enables the scholars to concentrate primarily on significant or extreme past events and the meaning given to them in the present within the interdisciplinary field. My idea was to apply this concept to research the migration of Roma under communism. The approach of slow memory can allow us to look from new angles at how the Roma who escaped to the West remember the past and how they interpret their past motivation and other circumstances. According to Jenny Wüstenberg, 'Slow memory brings us an emergent concept that can help us to think from new angles about how societies and individuals remember the pasts that meaningfully affect their present situation.'[3] The concept of slow memory encourages slowing down scientific work at a time when world events, technological development and digital networks are undergoing very rapid evolution.[4] It thus encourages focusing on phenomena that are not a reflection of this rapid acceleration. This approach is therefore well suited to research in the field of Romani studies, offering the opposite of the approaches often applied by linking different events to certain historical milestones and events with which certain

2 This term comes from the Cold War perspective, which distinguished the countries of the 'East' belonging to the pro-Soviet communist regime and the countries of the 'West', symbolised by capitalism and liberalism. The term was commonly used in Czechoslovakia to refer to the countries in Europe that were not socialist states, but also, for example, to Canada, the USA, Australia and other countries, even though they might not be directly geographically located in the Western direction (Goodman, 1961: 95–98).

3 https://www.jennywustenberg.com/slow-memory/ (accessed 8 April 2024)

4 https://www.eu.avcr.cz/en/about-us/depentsartm/department-of-mobility-and-migration/slow-memory/(accessed 16 June 2024)

interpretative concepts are associated and are then adapted to the prevailing interpretation of history.

The slow memory concept builds on an interdisciplinary approach, which in the case of this manuscript covers mainly social anthropology, migration studies and oral history, together with a bottom-up principle in the work with the testimonies of the Roma. It is drawn upon migration biographies conducted with a total of twelve Romani witnesses who had their own experience migrating to the West during Communism. These narratives were acquired between 2008 and 2020 through multiple research activities. Eyewitness testimonies are also supplemented by archival research, especially for the 1940s/1950s period, from which there are not enough narratives.

In addition to this, the author finds the critical definition of 'Romani migration' by Magazzini and Piemontese very inspiring. According to them, this term should be understood as a kind of generalising category that emerged in the interplay between media narratives, institutional categories, and integration policies which challenge the idea that all Romani migrants share common characteristics and that 'Romani migration' is a phenomenon that is 'somehow organised, cohesive or coordinated amongst different groups and countries' (Magazzini, Piemontese, 2019: 3). 'Migration of Roma' should be seen as being composed of the individual motivations of persons to leave the country, not necessarily based on organised migration. The different motivations and emigration strategies of individual families are also evident in the narratives of Roma with pre-1989 migration experiences.

Researchers working on contemporary migration of Roma from Slovakia and the Czech Republic to Western countries (Uherek, 2018; Ort, Dobruská, 2018; Hajská, 2017) focus on an analysis of kinship units situated on a transnational social field and propose to perceive various local Romani communities as part of transnational Romani networks. The observed pre-1989 migration of Czechoslovak Roma should be similarly seen as being part of a transnational migration, crossing the borders of nation-states (Glick Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton, 1995; Wimmer, Glick Schiller, 2002). This approach emphasises the interconnectedness of different points in migration and the tracing of transnational social networks, in which kinship ties play a particularly prominent role.

2. The pre-1989 migration of Roma to the West

2.1. Unknown role of Roma in pre-1989 migration

The migration of Roma to Western countries before 1989 is almost absent in Romani studies literature, with only a few random citations of some authors with incidental references, such as the information about a prominent figure of Romani origin, Ján Cibula, a doctor and Romani activist who emigrated to Switzerland in 1968

(Hübschmannová, *Ed.*, 2005: 120–126). Generally, in the historical descriptions and analyses of the migration from Czechoslovakia, the Roma are not mentioned as one of the groups involved in the emigration waves to the West. Research on the topic based on collecting testimonies from Roma themselves has not yet been conducted.

Most researchers of the migration of Roma from former Czechoslovakia believe that one can speak about their migration to Western countries only after the fall of the Iron Curtain (Uherek, 2018: 84; Uherek, 2007: 746; Vašečka, Vašečka, 2003: 33–34). This migration only came to the forefront of scientific interest and the general public's awareness towards the late 1990s in connection with media attention brought about by this migration, mainly to Belgium, Canada, and later the UK (Uherek, 2007: 75). However, another situation was that of other Eastern Bloc countries. The Bulgarian Kalderash created functional family networks in the West even before the fall of communism – in the 1980s – which facilitated the migration of Romani family members to Western states (Marushiakova, Popov, Decheva, 2004). Roma migration before 1989 can also be observed happening in the former Yugoslavian countries (Uherek, 2007: 752). In the case of Poland, there was an important anthropological study by Ignacy-Marek Kaminski (1980), who focused on a migratory journey of a dozen Kalderash families from Poland to Sweden in the early 1970s, who formed a significant migratory community there. In the case of Hungary, András Kováts assumes that a lot of Roma migrated from Hungary in the 1980s and 1990s, when roughly 10,000 inhabitants a year were leaving the country (Kováts, 2002: 14).

In the area of former Czechoslovakia, the topic of Romani migration mainly appears in two contexts: the first is research on the post-war migration of Roma from Slovakia to the Czech lands, especially to the borderland left empty after the resettlement of the Germans.[5] The second direction of investigation is studies dealing with post-communist Romani migration from the Czech and Slovak Republics to Western European countries since the 1990s, which gave rise to a relatively extensive body of literature.[6]

2.2. Migration of Roma from Czechoslovakia in the communist decades

Nevertheless, narratives of Romani witnesses show that a pre-1989 migration also occurred from Czechoslovakia. The escaping Roma primarily had the status of Czechoslovak citizens, and it is therefore important to look at their departure within period-based, societal processes. In general, emigration from the former Czechoslovakia is often divided by historians into two large waves: after February 1948 and after August 1968 (Tomeš, 1994). No data exists to help us quantify the numbers of Roma who left Czechoslovakia during communism. The problem with

5 Sadílková, 2018; Sidiropulu Janků, Ed., 2015.

6 Uherek, 2007, 2018; Ort, Dobruská, 2018; Hajská, 2017; Grill, 2012 or Vidra, *Ed.*, 2013.

the absence of accurate data generally accompanies the whole area of migration research. As Uherek states in connection with Romani migration movements in the 1990s, their migration cannot be adequately statistically captured. The only existing data concerns people who encountered migration commissions or passed through asylum or refugee camps. In these facilities, the Roma were documented primarily as citizens of the individual states and often did not declare their ethnicity (Uherek, 2007: 748). What is more, we must consider whether stating their Roma identity was beneficial or threatening for the migrant. These mechanisms are valid also for the whole communist era.

2.3. Migration to the West after February 1948

Generally, the first wave of migration from Czechoslovakia came about immediately after February 1948 in connection with disagreements or concerns about the onset of communism. According to historians, there were not many economic reasons for leaving during this wave – almost all migrants were political exiles. In terms of the sociological composition of this exodus, it has been stated that politicians, diplomats, scientists, artists, and soldiers left more than any other groups (Tomeš, 1994: 53). Throughout this time, the Roma were not at all thought of as a possible group of emigrants.

The fact that the Roma had already appeared among the emigrants from Czechoslovakia in the post-coup wave of migration (after February 1948) was researched by the historian Ari Joskowicz (2016). Joskowicz analysed 573 files of individuals who were identified as 'Gypsies' and who applied for IRO assistance in refugee camps in West Germany and Italy in the late 1940s and 1950s. Of all the applicants that the IRO registered as 'Gypsies' in post-war Germany, 30 per cent were born in Czechoslovakia (99 immigrants), two-thirds of whom came from Bohemia and Moravia (Ibid.: 9, 18). It can be assumed that the total number of Roma refugees from Czechoslovakia was much higher in the considered period; Joskowicz himself points out that 'only a small number of Europe's Romanies sought the IRO's support' (Ibid.: 7).

The direct testimonies of witnesses, either those who fled Czechoslovakia after 1948 or their descendants, are little known and difficult to trace. In addition to the generation gap, the fact that these refugees and their families apparently never returned to Czechoslovakia is also a factor. Testimony of Milena P. (b. 1943 in Prague) captures the life story of her father, Jan Fröhlich (b. 1917 in Trautmannsdorf), who comes from an extended family of Sinti origin:

> *My father left Czechoslovakia in '49. His whole family went to Germany in the years after the war. They may have been shunted off to Germany during the expulsion of the Germans, as German Roma were considered Germans. But the others in the family fled to join them, as did my dad. My dad promised my mom that he would*

come back for us. And, indeed, he sent a man to bring us across the border, and my mother said she had taken a hatchet and drove him away, that in no way would she just go there in this way with an unknown stranger.[7]

In this sample, several aspects are mentioned that deserve deeper analysis. Particularly interesting is the outlined removal of the original 'Czech Sinti',[8] identified by post-war Czechoslovak officials as German-speaking ethnic Germans. Such a procedure would mean that people who were victims of Nazi persecution and cruelty during the war as 'Zigeuner', including imprisonment in concentration camps, were displaced as ethnic Germans after the war. Milena P.'s statement testifies to the migration of her entire extended family, which included several tens of people, as well as to the effort to relocate all family members from Czechoslovakia to (Western) Germany. The mention of a man (a smuggler) who came to Czechoslovakia for her mother living with seven small children tells us that they were likely to leave for the West using escape routes through what were still not completely impenetrable borders with the help of smugglers. At that time, there was an extensive network of smugglers along the border in Czechoslovakia, i.e., persons who actively helped people with crossing the border illegally and who knew the terrain well, often poachers, gamekeepers or forest workers. The mother's expulsion of the smuggler can be interpreted as a culturally relevant reaction of a married Romani woman who did not want to risk losing her honour (*paťiv*) and exposing herself to shame (*ladž)* by running away alone with a strange man.

The application form of Jan Fröhlich from February 1949, accessible in the online Bad Arolsen archive, which documents his request for assistance from the IRO, shows that Jan Fröhlich was admitted to the camp in Würzburg as a person who had illegally crossed the border, and proceedings were initiated against him regarding his stay in Germany. Fröhlich listed his brother Stefan Fröhlich's apartment in Hannover as his intended residence. He declared he was previously a seller and musician, deprived in November 1948 by the Communists of his trade, and all his goods were confiscated without any reason. 'Besides, I was informed that I should be given into the forced labour camp in Kladno. As I was afraid of this recent persecution, I decided to leave my family and country and fled on the 12 February to Germany.'[9] He stated he was not a member of the Communist Party and voted against Communists in May 1948. However, Fröhlich did not state in his application that he is a Roma/Gypsy, even though, according to his daughter, he commonly identified himself as such. He apparently did so out of fear or concern that this fact might make it difficult for him to be granted asylum in Germany. In doing so, he misjudged his chances of obtaining

7 Milena P., b. 1943 in Prague, 20. 6. 2018 in Prague.

8 The Sinti formed an important subgroup of Romani people, traditionally itinerant in German speaking and Central European countries, often German speaking (instead of their dialect of Romani). On the territory of former Czechoslovakia, only dozens of them survived WWII.

9 ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen. Doc Id 79098018.

status based on declaring his Romani identity. As Joskowicz explains, Czech Roma had a solid record of acceptance, and this category did not constitute a disadvantage in granting asylum in comparison to non-Romani Czechs, who were often rejected during the late 1940s as mere economic refugees (Joskowicz, 2016: 26). We can conclude that although Fröhlich stated mainly political reasons for his asylum in Germany, his main motivation was to join his relatives. He finally stayed in West Germany, and his family still led a relatively traditional Romani lifestyle there in the late 1960s and 1970s, staying in caravans and making their living in the carpet trade. At the end of the 1960s, Jan Fröhlich tried to help his children to emigrate from Czechoslovakia to Germany, accommodated them and helped them to obtain legal status.

Based on the forms of application for IRO assistance, other Czech Roma also escaped in 1949 over the state border with Germany and reached the US Zone. There was a request of Berta Holomková (*1928, Holešov),[10] her son and her companion Sebastian Daniel (*1922, Holešov),[11] and besides them a form of Františka Krauz (*1920, Prague)[12] and her daughter and a separate request of her companion Robert Raminius (*1926, Znojmo).[13] According to their individual application forms, the adult applicants all declared their Gypsy origin. All of them stated that they were in several concentration camps (in Poland and Germany) during the war, and after the war were imprisoned in the forced labour camp in Dolní Jiřetín near Most, from where they managed to escape. They crossed the Czechoslovak-German border near Aš on the same day, 11 July 1949, with the help of smugglers. All of them stated that they wished to be reunited with Stefan Fröhlich (the brother of Jan Fröhlich) living in Hannover, who they all identified as their relative (a cousin or a brother-in-law). These refugees were Czech and Moravian Roma, with distinct roots in different Romani families who were itinerant in different parts of Czechoslovakia in the pre-war period. It may be assumed that they were probably not close relatives with the Fröhlich family, whose roots were related to the former Austrian borderland. However, their willingness to reunite with Stefan Fröhlich shows a nice example of the occurrence of a functional solidarity network between a limited number of survived original Czech and Moravian Roma.

2.4. Transborder activities of the Roma in the late 1960s

This situation changed in the next decade. According to Celia Donert, Western states were 'forbidden territory after 1948. During the 1950s, citizens of Czechoslovakia experienced the imposition of strict limits on foreign travel' (Donert, 2017: 140). The

10 Ibid. Doc Id 79186247.
11 Ibid. Doc Id 79765804.
12 Ibid. Doc Id 79341682.
13 Ibid. Doc Id 79638990.

impossibility of further border crossings cut off the opportunities for Czechoslovak Roma and Sinti to join their families abroad for many years. A relaxation began in the second half of the 1960s in connection with the society-wide transformations and changes in Communist Party policy, whereby it gradually became easier to travel abroad. In 1965 Czechoslovak citizens, including Roma, regained the right to apply for a passport to travel outside the Soviet bloc for private visits unconnected with their jobs. This change also influenced the mobility and economic activities of the Roma.

A specific type of migration was cross-border 'trafficking', an activity that was illegal under communism. During normalisation,[14] the image of Roma as smugglers and traders in contraband such as denim jeans and digital watches (Donert, 2017: 142), would become a familiar part of Czechoslovak pop culture, but this also reignited stereotypes about Gypsies' involvement in black market trading. Such activities involved many Romani families, for example, members of extended Vlax Romani (Lovara) families from Ostrava who, until their forced settlement in 1958, made a living by trading horses along with buying, selling, and reselling various commodities, which was related to their itinerant way of life. The possibility of cross-border 'peddling', i.e., buying and then reselling a certain assortment of goods (clothing, dishes, blankets, watches, etc.), especially in nearby Poland, but also in other Eastern bloc countries, represented a continuation of a traditional profession (peddling) for the Vlax Roma in which they could excel thanks to their skills and contacts. However, such activities were outlawed under communism and were viewed as criminal acts. Štefánie Stojková, a Lovara woman from Ostrava, described this way of earning money:

> *During the Communist era, our Romani went shopping for clothes in Hungary and Romania. We didn't have a car then; we took the train. T-shirts from Hungary were the best sellers. We always bought bags full of nice clothes, and then we sold them quickly here. A lot of Romani people used to go like that; whoever was lucky drove a car. You could make good money doing that.*[15]

According to historian Tomáš Zapletal, the trafficking activities registered by the Public Security Office in Ostrava recorded that since 1965 there was an unprecedented increase in interest in emigration among the Roma, especially to Poland, and that gradually these activities were to expand to the destinations of Hungary, Bulgaria, and Yugoslavia (Zapletal, 2010: 52–54). As Donert describes, since these activities were seen as a 'new form of nomadism connected with criminal

14 Normalisation is a term commonly given to the period following the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, with the political aim to restore of firm rule of the Communist party and the reestablishment of Czechoslovakia's position in the socialist bloc.

15 Štefánia Stojková, b. 1936 in Prašice, 30. 3. 2017 in Ostrava.

activities', the state police had taken preventative measures such as instructing the state travel agency Čedok not to issue Gypsies with travel documents. Although this fact and the constant police surveillance made it difficult for the Vlax Roma to travel abroad, members of this community were also very active in migration to the West in the following decades.

2.5. Migration in the years 1968-1989

Generally, a sharp rise in emigration occurred after the August occupation in 1968, with the most massive wave of departures lasting until 1969, after which it was harder to get across the border. In the period after 1968, people left Czechoslovakia for political reasons, especially those who opposed the new normalisation regime, such as artists, writers, journalists and athletes; however, there were also economic reasons to go to the West for a 'better life'. In addition to the common geographically close countries such as Austria, Germany, and Switzerland, the most frequently targeted countries in this period were countries such as Canada, the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Holland, and the Scandinavian states (Tomeš, 1994: 53). The economic conditions of this emigration wave were much better than post-coup because the target countries had much better economic conditions and were better prepared to receive refugees. Again, there is no data about the number of Romani migrants from Communist Czechoslovakia. The strategies used to migrate to the West used by the Roma were like those of other emigrants from the Communist era. Except for the cross-border escapes and family member invitations, which were already used in the post-February migration, there were other modes of migration, such as escapes from holidays and business trips. This strategy was used by Michal Čonka, a Slovak Roma living in Ostrava in the 1980s, who had to leave Czechoslovakia due to increasing political pressure at the state company where he worked. Čonka took advantage of the fact that he had obtained a permit as an engineer to sail on a ship to Hamburg and decided to stay in Germany, with the help of a Vlax Roma from Ostrava who helped him with accommodation and contacts.

According to their narratives, the Roma frequently used the 'East route' to the West, mainly across Hungary, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, from where most of them escaped to Austria or Italy, and subsequently to other Western countries. Josef Kudrik from Ostrava escaped in this way in the early 1980s:

> *I fled the country under the communists. I went to Hungary. There I met a Yugoslav who took a picture of me and gave me a Yugoslav passport. With this passport, I went to Germany, where I met Roma who I knew from Ostrava. We found a German there who gave me a German passport, and I stuck my photo on it and flew to America to visit my uncles. They went to America in 1968 when Dubček resigned. The Roma did not have a good life under the communists. All the Vlax Roma who had the opportunity fled to the West under the Communists. When*

democracy came I wasn't afraid anymore and I went home again, and all my uncles came home with me.[16]

In 1980, Viktor Salinas, a Vlax Roma living in Prague, decided to emigrate to the West with his wife and eight children:

We made our passports, registered our children in them, and left for Bulgaria. There, Vlax Roma from Canada came to us and brought us endorsements and passports so that we could go to Yugoslavia. We went there, but we couldn't find anyone in Yugoslavia with a typewriter in Latin; they all had machines with Cyrillic. Finally, we found one old partisan who cursed the communists terribly, and he wrote it to us. A Rom from Canada made false stamps in our passports so we could go to Austria. It took a very long time, it's hard to tell how long, the children were small, but we went by train. We got across the border and went to the refugee camp in Vienna. They gave us accommodation there, and we waited there for three years for our application for political asylum to be processed. Then we got an apartment in Vienna. We were in Austria for five years, but we were not happy there. We decided to go to Germany, later to Belgium, and finally to Sweden, but even there it didn't work out, so we returned to Austria again at the end of the 1980s.[17]

The migration route through the countries of the Eastern Bloc, with the former Yugoslavia of significant importance, was also used by a relatively large kinship group of Vlax Roma with roots in eastern Slovakia who left for Sweden between the 1960s and1980s:

I escaped on someone else's passport. A passport of a completely different person! I was in Košice; I went to Hungary and Bulgaria. When I came to Yugoslavia it was no longer a problem, my uncle also escaped the same way. There were whole gropus of Roma escaping in this way! But everyone was afraid.[18]

As in the above-mentioned stories, these narratives also feature Roma with whom the fleeing Romani families came into contact in the foreign country and who helped them by providing contacts, translation, and –, not exceptionally – accommodation in their homes, sometimes for extended periods of time. The Romani language played a crucial role in these stories as it allowed the Roma to communicate with each other in the new environment. The testimonies of other Roma show that the first successful migrants from Czechoslovakia created a migration bridge to Sweden in the late 1960s that was used and maintained by their relatives in future decades:

16 Josef Kudrik 'Thulo', b. 1958 in Studénka, 30. 3. 2017 in Ostrava.
17 Viktor Salinas, b. 1941 in Dolná Seč, 31.1.2017 in Prague.
18 Josef Makula, b. 1952 in Prešov, 29.7.2009 in Helsinborg, Sweden.

In 1982 I came to join my brother, who had already been here since the late 1960s. We all had fake documents. In Yugoslavia, someone reported us because we wanted to flee. We were really lucky they didn't put us in jail. They just took us to Hungary across the border. We spent one year in the apartment of completely unknown Romani family in Budapest. When our papers were done, we went across Yugoslavia and Austria to Germany, from Germany to Denmark, and from Denmark, we came here with the help of the Red Cross. And we had no problem. I had a document like a diplomat, because I was a political refugee.[19]

As soon as some members of the family managed to establish themselves in the new country a migratory bridge was created. This allowed other relatives to follow the migratory route, from Czechoslovakia to Austria, Germany, France, Belgium, Sweden, or even to far-away countries such as the USA or Canada. These migration chains were not only built on family networks but also on contacts with intermediaries in individual countries.

The testimony of Romani witnesses shows that in the case of some kinship units, the roots of today's migratory communities of Roma abroad can be found in the communist era. In many ways, the pre-1989 migration of Roma to the West represents a continuum with their migration in the late 1990s and the following years. Some narrators were not able to unambiguously determine whether they left for their destination under communism or democracy. František Makula (*1950), who came from Jablonec nad Nisou to Sweden, was not able to precisely time his arrival in Sweden, citing a combination of reasons such as the poor political situation and the resulting suffering of the Roma in Czech(oslovak) society. The same motivation was given by Terézia Gažiová (*1951), who emigrated with her family to Paris at about the same time, and again she was unable to pinpoint whether the emigration took place in 1989 or after 1990.

3. Conclusion

The migration of Roma in the years 1968–1989 can be seen primarily as part of a broader strategy of social mobility, with the aim of improving one's position in a new environment, but also in one's home community. Only rarely was the goal a definitive departure to another place. Although the economic factor and the search for a 'better life' were predominant, another reason for the escape was that in these decades the Roma felt discriminated against and restricted in their basic civil rights in the Czechoslovak society, based on their Romani affiliation. According to Uherek, these motivations became the main reasons for Romani refugees to the West seeking

19 'Boja' Makulová, b. 1948 in Rožkovany, 28.7.2009 in Helsinborg, Sweden. The community of Vlax Roma is living in southwestern Sweden up to date.

political asylum from the 1990s onwards (Uherek, 2007: 753). As this article shows, manifestations of widespread anti-Gypsyism, racial discrimination and institutional racism were repeatedly encountered by most of the Roma and cited as one of the main reasons for fleeing the country in the period before 1989. The concept of slow memory enables us to focus on emphasising the dynamics of memories and analysing how specific historical events are remembered. Within this approach, the article was searching for memories of 'slow-moving', diffused and symptomless events which could be represented by the example of life under Communism, in which individuals and families decided in a certain moment to leave. Although their decisions often cannot simply be attributed to a particular date and event, they significantly affected people's futures. This approach allows us to track changes in the interpretation of motivations for their leaving and the course of events over not just decades, but also across generations.

The testimonies of Romani witnesses on the escapes from Communist Czechoslovakia often showed a variety of motifs and descriptions of events that had various coinciding elements. These included a negative assessment of the communist regime and the opinion that Roma fared poorly under communism or were directly discriminated against in contemporary Czechoslovakia, especially of the Roms, who were labelled as 'travelling Gypsies': the Vlax Roma and Sinti. The suffering of Roma under communism represented one of the push-up factors in migration to the West. The decision to leave Czechoslovakia was often described as a reaction of the Roma to the deep-rooted anti-Gypsyism in the society of the time.

Descriptions of the migration from Czechoslovakia showed certain significant patterns. These include the escapes of large families with children, often as part of a chain migration aiming to join other family members abroad. In this way, entire local or kinship communities were replaced. Roma often escaped without knowing any foreign languages, without contacts, or even without having any knowledge about the geography and political context of the destination country. Especially in the period between 1968 and 1989, a large part of the migratory routes of the Roma to the West was carried out via the so-called Eastern route, in which Yugoslavia played an important role.

Analysis of the narratives shows the moments that were emphasised by them and what kind of importance and interpretation was given to those moments. Using the principle of the slow memory approach, it offers new perspectives on past events, especially by considering the marginalised and under-represented perspective of the Roma themselves, which emphasises the role of kinship and social networks and Romani solidarity in these stories. The Roma in these stories found themselves abroad in a hopeless situation, which they managed to overcome with the help of other (foreign) Roma, though they were often forced to choose an illegal path to resolve their situation. Romani ethnicity was crucial for contact with another Roma living abroad. While the Roma were just one of many groups of Czechoslovakia citizens fleeing to the West in search of a better life and freedom, the Romani language

very often played an important role in these stories and offered an opportunity for expressions of Romani solidarity and mutual aid.

The concept of slow memory enables us to focus on how the Roma remember sociocultural and political events in the past and how they interpret them. This approach offers new perspectives on past events, especially by considering the marginalised and under-represented perspective of the Roma themselves, which mainly emphasises the role of kinship and social networks and the large role of Romani solidarity in these stories. Besides this, slow memory offers the opposite to approaches often applied by linking different events to certain historical milestones and events connected with certain interpretative concepts and then adapting these to the prevailing interpretation of history. This can be applied to analyse the perspective of the Roma and their perception of the continuity of past events. As I have shown, some narrators were not sure whether they emigrated before or after 1989, which speaks to the interconnectedness and continuity of these cross-border movements. Such a conception of history, neglecting the perception of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 as a turning point, then defies the official conception of modern history. The testimonies of Romani witnesses showed the narrators put less emphasis on the importance of the boundaries between historical periods than historians and social scientists tend to attach to them. From the perspective of the Roma themselves, their life stories should be structured by entirely different events. They often described their lives as a continuous sequence of circumstances shaped by various life events, which do not always reflect the official milestones recognised by historians. The generally common understanding of events on the timeline as belonging to individual historical periods was not always notable in the memories of Romani witnesses.

As I have shown, the approach of slow memory makes it possible to focus on the manifestations of the continuity of distinctive Romani identity, including the view of the Roma themselves of historical events and their own situation, which is often different from the majority view and is still under-represented in scholarly research. The perception of historical developments and processes from the perspective of the Roma, as well as the discovery of the participation and position of Roma in certain historical processes in which their role is not discussed by historians, as in the case with the pre-1989 migration to the West, undoubtedly belongs to this concept. The need to focus on discovering and recovering forgotten and marginalised pathways is directly mentioned in the slow memory manifesto (Memorandum of Understanding, 2021: 5–6). The perception of historical developments and processes from the perspective of the Roma and the discovery of the participation and position of Roma in certain historical processes in which their role is not discussed by historians undoubtedly belong to this concept.

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