

Fifty years researching Roma: Interview with Will Guy



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Since then he has continued to make regular research trips to East-Central Europe and the Balkans and has published widely, mainly on Roma, editing in 2001 a comprehensive volume on the situation of Roma in these regions and co-editing in 2004 a study of Roma migration for the Ethnological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences. As well as academic research he has carried out Roma-related investigations for various international NGOs and also for the European Commission, evaluating EU-funded Roma programmes in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Spain and Croatia. He is a member of the editorial board of the *Ethnicities* journal and of the editorial board of *Český lid*.

How did you come to be in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s?

My arrival in Czechoslovakia in early 1966 at the age of twenty-five had nothing to do with Roma. At that time the Czechoslovak government was seeking to modernise the economy and had recently bought some computers from the UK. The British manufacturer, for which I was working as a systems analyst, proposed to send me at short notice to the North Moravian city of Ostrava as on-site support. I was given the weekend to make a decision and impulsively accepted the offer.

There was no time to do any research in those pre-Google days, so I went to the Czechoslovak travel agency (*Čedok*) in London and asked if they had any tourist brochures of Ostrava. The young man behind the desk paused for a few moments, then summoned his colleagues from the back office to join him before asking me to repeat



my question. When I did, they all burst out laughing. I later learnt that this heavy industrial centre, with its steelworks, coal mines, chemical works and slag heaps, was the most polluted city in Czechoslovakia — hardly a tourist destination. My role there would be to give advice to two of the largest steelworks in Europe — the Nová hut' Klementa Gottwalda and the Vítkovické železářny.

Why did you decide to carry out research in Czechoslovakia in the 1970s? How did you cope with the Czech language?

Eventually I spent three and a half years at my computer job in Ostrava, Prague and then Brno, working with Czechs and gradually learning their language. My first Czech boss had falsely assured my company that he understood English but he refused to use any of his subordinates as interpreters. This made effective communication between us almost impossible but fortunately some others spoke French, German or English. In the meantime I studied my politically approved Czech grammar book and delighted my workmates by declaiming examples from it, such as: 'Čest práce, soudruzi! Tento měsíc musíme překročit výrobní normy' (Hail work, comrades! This month we must exceed the production norms'). Taking my cue from this, I bought a Mao Tse-Tung suit and, equipped with the little red book of his quotations and wearing a badge from the Chinese restaurant in Prague, appointed myself political commissar for our department.

These were the tumultuous years of gradual liberalisation, the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion, followed by the stifling aftermath of 'normalisation'. During this period I shared my Czech friends' deep emotions of exhilaration, pain and subsequent disillusion. My deepening involvement with these events led me to give up my well-paid computer job and use my savings to study for a PhD, drawing on my experience in Czechoslovakia for a thesis. My initial idea was prompted by the occasion when an Ostrava miner friend had asked me to interpret for a visiting group of Scottish miners. The Scots — from the then staunchly Communist area of Fife — believed they were coming to a socialist promised land, while the Czechs, to the contrary, were eager to hear of life in a consumer paradise. These totally contradictory perceptions did not make my interpreter's role an easy one.

Soon afterwards, I came across Clébert's study *The Gypsies* where I read: 'Czechoslovakia seems in fact to be the first country to solve this delicate problem of [Gypsy] integration in accordance with humane standards'.¹ I then recalled the dark-skinned labourers I had seen in Ostrava and a Czech colleague's sarcastic term for them — 'uzení Slováci' (smoked Slovaks). This immediately suggested an entirely different research topic.

When you were carrying out your research in Czechoslovakia, did you get into contact with any Czech scholars involved in studying Roma? Who were they and how did you cooperate with them?

During my last six months as a systems analyst I stole as much time as I could away from work to search in bookshops for any books about Roma. One of the most im-

1 Clébert, J.-P. (1967) *The Gypsies*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 255.

portant was Eva Davidová's *Bez kolíb a šiatrov*. Meanwhile Eva had heard of a strange Englishman seeking information on her own topic. When we eventually met we had so much in common that we enthusiastically agreed to collaborate. With her encouragement, an anthropology professor provided a letter legitimating my research that enabled me to obtain a study visa.

Now working with Eva, this allowed us access to the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs where she and I were invited to help ourselves from heaps of documents about Roma policy. Understandably I felt very apprehensive walking past the armed guard at the door of the ministry building with a bagful of documents, some of which were stamped '*jen pro úřední potřebu*' (for official use only) or '*přísně tajné*' (strictly secret).

During the period of my PhD research I met with the inspiring Milena Hübšmannová and a fellow post-graduate student Tomáš Haišman, who then went on to be a researcher at the Ethnographic Institute in Prague before becoming an official in the Ministry of the Interior. Also, before starting my studies in 1969, I became friendly with Karel Holomek, later President of the Moravian Roma Association. But in the early years my main contacts were officials involved with Roma policy rather than academics. Much later I met many Czech and Slovak academics, especially Zdeněk Uherek and Renata Weinerová with whom I edited a book on Roma migration, as well as Jiřina Šiklová, Anna Jurová and others.

Did Czechoslovak authorities limit your research or publication activities in any way? Did they follow your activities or contacts?

From 1958 onwards the official policy goal had been to assimilate Roma on the grounds that they were insufficiently developed to form a nationality. Unlike Czechs and Slovaks, Roma were deemed not to possess any culture worth preserving. A 1959 government handbook for local authorities argued that 'all measures which revive gypsy national [sic] consciousness ... preserve the present isolation and separation of gypsies ... and help conserve the old, primitive gypsy way of life with all its bad habits'.² The plan was therefore to disperse the Roma population but this was frustrated by the migration of many Roma from Slovakia to form new concentrations in Czech industrial areas and cities. Like migrant workers elsewhere, their aim was simply to obtain better paid work than was available in their rural home areas.

From the documents we had obtained from the ministry, Eva and I learnt that Czech local authorities had increasingly denied residence permits to these Roma newcomers, making them illegal squatters. However, as a 1967 official report pointed out, the illegality was on the part of local authorities since their refusal to register Roma was a clear breach of citizens' constitutional rights. Yet, in acting in this way, local authorities were only following government guidelines.

I was soon made aware of the problem of trying to publish such sensitive material. In the meantime I had met the head of the National Statistical Office that was producing reports on the Roma population. He invited me to write a guest article for

2 Czechoslovak Government (1959) *Práce mezi cikánským obyvatelstvem* (Work among the gypsy population), Edice časopisu Národní výbory (Handbook for local authorities), Prague: Úřad předsednictva vlády, 28.



their journal *Demografie* but returned my contribution, regretfully informing me that it was completely unpublishable due to my forthright criticism of government policy.

At the time Eva was working on a technical report about Roma migration to Ostrava for the Research Institute of Construction and Architecture. This 300-page document was to be duplicated on poor quality paper and seemed to us a suitable, low-profile outlet. Therefore I wrote a critical section, buried near the end. The next stage was more risky when Eva was invited to write an article for the UK journal *Race Today*. We wrote this together citing Eva's Ostrava report as the already published source but also mentioning the relevant government documents. In an attempt to mask our criticism we entitled the article *Czechoslovakia Solves its Gypsy Problem* and the ambiguous conclusion was 'Czechoslovakia's ... experience can serve as an example to other states'.

To our relief these publications did not result in any retribution from the authorities, although our other activities did attract their attention.

The failure of the dispersal programme coincided with the political liberalisation of the Prague Spring, allowing the 1958 assimilation campaign to be reassessed. In a reversal of previous policy, Roma activists were allowed to form their own social and economic organisations and in 1971 a delegation was permitted to travel to the first World Roma Congress near London. Eva went as a founder member of the Czech Roma association and I accompanied them to assist with interpreting.

A few months later I was surprised to be invited to the Czechoslovak Embassy to the annual celebration of the founding of the republic but this was followed by a more worrying invitation to a personal meeting with an embassy official. Evidently the Roma delegates must have praised my help and reported me as a 'friend of the republic'. Puzzlingly, I was not asked any questions about my Roma research but only about my position at the University of Bristol and my contacts there. Apprehensive that I was being vetted as a potential 'sleeper', I tried to minimise my importance while appearing cooperative. I must have succeeded because although we parted with mutual assurances of keeping in touch, to my relief I was not contacted again — nor invited to further embassy celebrations. Much later I learnt that the embassy had indeed been engaged in recruiting UK university staff as potential 'fellow travellers'.

However, surveillance was not entirely one-sided. Years later I was told by a friend that, in his interview for promotion to a higher UK ministry rank, he was asked questions about me.

From Eva's Ostrava study we learnt that almost 57 percent of the current Roma inhabitants had been born in Eastern Slovakia and, of these, over a third came from the district of Spišská Nová Ves. Following a trip to check on potential fieldwork locations, we eventually chose two adjacent villages and booked rooms in a nearby cheap hotel. The manageress was very friendly and after a few weeks confided that, much to her annoyance, a secret policeman was periodically searching our rooms. I had with me a copy of Lenin's *The Right of Nations to Self-Determination* and left this on my bedside table. However, the countryside is a small world and the manageress not only knew the policeman's family but also that he was afraid of his dominating mother. A threat to report to her his irritating visits was enough to bring them to an end.



Over a year later we learnt of further surveillance. We had been invited to a Roma wedding in a neighbouring village and the bus driver who had conveyed our party to the dance hall became tipsy and complained angrily to us that he and his fellow drivers were fed up at having to record all our bus journeys. It was a hot summer's night and all the guests were in shirtsleeves or light dresses. At this point a mysterious Slovak, dressed incongruously in a double-breasted, belted raincoat, walked briskly up to us and asked my opinion of the attractions of the Slovak countryside. Shortly before, some of the Roma had nodded in his direction and tapped the side of their noses to indicate he was some form of spy. He certainly looked like an archetypal character from a B-movie. Eventually someone managed to drag away the inebriated bus driver.

Shortly afterwards I was summoned to the district police headquarters, ostensibly because I had failed to register my stay in their area. I explained I had done this in Prague and thought this was sufficient. After a coffee and yet another conversation about the beautiful landscape of the region, the officer dropped her guard and reprimanded me, saying it had been 'inappropriate' (*nevhodný*) for me to have borrowed a suit from a Gypsy to attend the wedding. I maintained this was necessary since I did not possess a suit but that, in any case, as a representative of socialist Czechoslovakia, she should be proud that Gypsies in her country had attained such high living standards that they were in a position to lend fine suits to visitors from the capitalist West. The young woman gave me a level, cold look and the subject was dropped.

Although these incidents appeared comical — and we treated them as such — they were also unsettling as we were aware that in Communist Czechoslovakia political joking carried risks, as Milan Kundera's 1967 novel *Žert* (The Joke) made all too clear. In 1969 an English colleague from my computer company was arrested and expelled as an *agent provocateur* for ignoring a barrier at a protest demonstration in Brno. He had claimed facetiously that he could not understand its warning notice in Czech.

Social science in Czechoslovakia had been largely isolated from the developments in the West for several decades. Some disciplines, e.g. social anthropology, were completely absent. How did this affect Czech (Slovak) Roma studies?

1969 was a good time to start research on Roma. Several important books had appeared shortly before, including Clébert's 1967 study *The Gypsies*. Although social anthropology — as a distinct discipline — was not recognised in Czechoslovakia at that time, a few years earlier Emilie Horváthová had published her comprehensive historical study *Cigáni na Slovensku*³ and other historical studies included Zdenka Jamnická-Šmerglová's *Dějiny našich cikánů*.⁴ Moreover, other researchers based their writings on ethnographic fieldwork, such as Eva Davidová's 1965 *Bez kolíb a šiatrov*⁵ and various publications of Milena Hübschmannová. However, although anthropological-type coverage of Roma in Czechoslovakia was very limited, much the same was true of the British Isles where the romanticised views of folklorists were prevalent.

3 Horváthová, E. (1964) *Cigáni na Slovensku*, Bratislava: Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied.

4 Jamnická-Šmerglová, Z. (1955) *Dějiny našich cikánů*, Praha: Orbis.

5 Davidová, E. (1965) *Bez kolíb a šiatrov*, Košice: Východoslovenské vydavateľstvo.



In the 1960s there was a surge of interest in researching Gypsies and Travellers. In England and Wales the government commissioned a research study of Travellers to provide more insight to improve policy in the aftermath of the first national census of this population in 1965⁶ and the subsequent 1968 Caravan Sites Act. This eventually led to a book in 1975⁷ and a few years later another by the principal researcher, the anthropologist Judith Okely.⁸ This was based on her extensive field work. In Scotland a similar policy study was led by Hugh Gentleman⁹ and the first Scottish local authority caravan site was established in 1975. Meanwhile, in 1959 the Irish government had established a Commission on Itinerancy, which reported in 1963.¹⁰ This based its policy recommendations on practice in the Netherlands, which was to assimilate Travellers by settling them in fixed dwellings. The practice of officials deciding what was in the Travellers' best interests was eventually replaced by the Travelling People Review Body (1981–83). This body included Traveller members and advocated integration rather than assimilation, with provision for serviced halting sites.¹¹ At the same time George and Sharon Gmelch were carrying out anthropological field research with Irish Travellers¹².

Judith Okely asserts that it was you who introduced her to Fredrik Barth's 'Ethnic Groups and Boundaries'. What was the impact of this publication on the study of Roma?

In 1971 Thomas Acton convened a conference at Oxford of international scholars carrying out research on Roma, Gypsies and Travellers in various countries. He had been working with the (English) Gypsy Council since 1967.¹³ A principal issue was whether we were studying the same people since the cultures of different groups bearing these and other related names appeared quite different. In particular, the predominant pattern in Western European countries was for these people to pursue a nomadic way of life, while in Eastern Europe the vast majority had long been settled. This dichotomy raised questions about whether there were any defining characteristics of Gypsies.

Some Western European writers proclaimed the 'true Gypsy' as nomadic, whereas settled Gypsies were seen as debased. In spite of acknowledging the differences in

6 Ministry of Housing and Local Government/Welsh Office (1967) *Gypsies and Other Travellers*, London: HMSO.

7 Adams, B., Okely, J., Morgan, D. and Smith, D. (1975) *Gypsies and Government Policy in England: A Study of the Travellers' Way of Life in Relation to the Policies and Practices of Central and Local Government*, London: Heinemann.

8 Okely, J. (1983) *The Traveller-Gypsies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

9 Gentleman, H. and Swift, S. (1971) *Scotland's Travelling People: Problems and Solutions*, Edinburgh: Scottish Office.

10 Commission on Itinerancy (1963) *Report*, Official publications Pr.7272, Dublin: Stationery Office <<http://opac.oireachtas.ie/AWDData/Library3/Library2/DL013441.pdf>>.

11 Travelling people review body (1983) *Report*, Official publications Pl.1520, Dublin: Stationery Office <<http://opac.oireachtas.ie/AWDData/Library3/Library2/DL035416.pdf>>.

12 Gmelch, G. (1977) *The Irish Tinkers: The Urbanization of an Itinerant People*, Menlo Park: Cummings Pub. Co.; Gmelch, S. (1975) *Tinkers and Travellers: Ireland's Nomads*, Dublin: O'Brien Press.

13 See: Acton, T. (1974) *Gypsy Politics and Social Change*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.



appearance, occupations and customs, Clébert had declared: ‘The Gypsy is primarily and above all else a nomad. ... The sedentary Gypsies are generally ‘excluded’ people ... who have been banned from the clans or made *marime*, that is, ‘unclean’, because of serious violations of the Tradition’.¹⁴ This disqualified most Roma inhabitants living in Eastern Europe and Spain from legitimate claims to be ‘true Gypsies’.

In this context, the approach in Fredrik Barth’s 1970 book was a revelation for it addressed the problem of ethnic communities that undergo radical cultural change and yet maintain their identity. Barth argued that this apparent difficulty could be avoided if, instead of adopting the conventional view that ethnic groups have distinct cultures that distinguish them from others, ‘the critical focus of investigation ... becomes the ethnic boundary that defines a group, not the cultural stuff it encloses’.¹⁵ In this way the role of cultural features is thereby transferred from passive to active, where they become capable of manipulation by group members and by those with whom these minorities interact. Therefore, the critical feature of an ethnic community is that it possesses ‘a membership which identifies itself, and is identified by others, as constituting a category distinguishable from other categories of the same order’. Consequently, ‘the sharing of a common culture is ... an implication or result, rather than a primary and definitional characteristic of ethnic group organisation’.¹⁶

You cooperated with a Czech photographer Josef Koudelka, and wrote an introduction to his book Gypsies.¹⁷ What was it like to cooperate with this photographer, who was already internationally well-known as a member of the prestigious photographic cooperative Magnum since 1971? How did you meet him?

I am not sure how Josef first heard of me but he had sought political asylum in Britain in 1970 following the anonymous publication of his stunning images of the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia. Most probably, the then chair of the Gypsy Council, Grattan Puxon, had told him about my research on Roma in Czechoslovakia leading to our meeting in the early 1970s.

Josef had brought with him negatives of Roma whom he had photographed between 1962 and 1968 in Czechoslovakia and Romania and wanted a text for his proposed book that would be quite different to romantic musing about ‘mysterious yet carefree Gypsies’. Instead, his model was the commentary accompanying Dorothea Lange’s photographs of the internment of US Japanese American citizens during the Second World War. This gave an objective account of the enforced relocation of these families to remote camps — even though in some cases their menfolk were serving with US forces fighting against Japan. Apparently the publishers were unhappy about this dry, factual approach but Josef insisted that this was how it had to be.

Josef usually lets his images speak for themselves, restricting his captions to just place names and the date on which the pictures were taken. But in this case he wanted

¹⁴ Clébert (op. cit.), 246.

¹⁵ Barth, F. (1970) *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, London: George Allen and Unwin, 15.

¹⁶ Ibid. 11.

¹⁷ Koudelka, J. (1975) *Koudelka Gypsies* (text by W. Guy), London: Thames and Hudson.



a historical account at the end, not at the beginning, and interrogated me on the precise meaning of my text. This was problematic as our working language was Czech since at that time his English was limited. We worked very intensively for perhaps a week or two in the London flat of a Magnum colleague, only breaking for simple working lunches of his favourite boiled potatoes with caraway seeds and sour cream.

In spite of Josef's clear ideas about the layout of the first version of the book, it was not produced to his satisfaction and so he was determined that the new edition¹⁸ would be entirely as he had originally intended. This time we communicated by phone but once more Josef had precise queries — this time in English — about what I had written. By now, the Communist regime had long collapsed and I was able to include the scathing 1979 verdict on Communist Czechoslovakia's Gypsy policy by the Charter 77 movement¹⁹ — led by the future Czech president Václav Havel. Sadly the successor post-Communist governments did not share Havel's humanism. By a cruel irony the advent of liberal democracy made the situation of Roma even worse in many ways, driving many of them to emigrate to Western European countries and some to Canada. Nor has the intervention of the European Commission — for which I worked as an advisor for over a decade — been effective in furthering the integration of Roma.

Between 2000 and 2010 you worked for the European Commission.²⁰ How do you think academic discourse about Roma differs from political discourse about them? In your opinion, do these spheres cooperate or conflict? In what ways?

My aim — in producing reports for the European Commission on the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Croatia, Spain and Greece — was to review existing policy towards Roma, to evaluate the extent to which this was leading to greater integration of indigenous Roma populations and to make recommendations. This was at a time when the former Communist countries were applying to join the European Union and were apprehensive that the multiply disadvantaged situation of Roma violated the entry criterion that candidate countries should have established institutions 'guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of democracy'.²¹

In the case of the Czech Republic and Slovakia I was able to supplement documentary research, visits to specific locations and interviews with key personnel with my earlier participant observation fieldwork. Similarly with my research on Scottish Travellers in the mid-1970s, as well as contributing to government reports and helping to establish the first local authority campsite for Travellers in 1975, I lived among

18 Koudelka, J. (2011) *Koudelka Gypsies*, (text by W. Guy), London: Thames and Hudson.

19 Charta 77 (1979) 'Dokument 23 o situaci Cikánů v Československu', *Listy* 2, 47, Prague: Charta 77. (English translation by Jackson, M. (1979) *Labour Focus*, March/April and May/June).

20 E.g. Guy, W., Liebich, A. and Marushiakova, E. (2010) *Improving the Tools for the Social Inclusion and Non-Discrimination of Roma in the EU*, Luxembourg: European Commission.

21 European Commission (1999) *Enlargement Briefing: EU support for Roma communities in central and eastern Europe*, Brussels: European Commission, December, 4.



them, worked with them at fruit picking and potato lifting and travelled with them between winter and summer camping grounds.

A problem with political discourse about Roma is that theoretical arguments are sometimes not sufficiently grounded in the diverse realities of Roma experience. Unsurprisingly, those adopting political science or policy related perspectives can ignore empirical evidence inconvenient for their oversimplified models. A case in point is the common assumption that nomadism is an intrinsic cultural characteristic of all Roma. This can have serious consequences, as when a Council of Europe spokesperson was misled into characterising the migration of Roma from former Communist countries to Western Europe in the 1990s as ‘merely a return to the normal mobility of Gypsies’ rather than flight from mounting racist attacks.²² Such an analysis negated the legitimate claims of these Roma for political asylum. A corrective viewpoint emphasised that ‘the extraordinary feature of Romani migration is that so many [Central and East European] Roma are prepared to take the risks of migrating *despite their lack of nomadic traditions*’.²³

Academic discourse about Roma is extremely diverse but much is narrowly focused on debates within the discipline. While this can be relevant to political debates and policy issues — as in the example of nomadism — it often seems as though there is little overlap between disciplines, which inhabit their own separate worlds.

Many scholars/intellectuals see a universal remedy for the ‘Roma issue’ in the Roma national emancipation. Don’t you think that in this way many traits would be lost of the traditional Roma culture, to which the modern principle of nationality is alien? Is it not true that many Roma would be left in the position of double marginality — marginal to both the majority society and to the Roma national society?

Together with Eva Davidová, I was present at the first World Romani Congress in 1971 where Roma delegates from fourteen countries proclaimed their shared identity and marked this by adopting a flag and the anthem *Gelem, gelem* (We travelled on). This landmark event led to the foundation of the International Romani Union.²⁴ In 2000 I also attended the fifth World Romani Congress in Prague, where Eva was a delegate. Shortly afterwards the IRU President, the Czech Roma Emil Ščuka, issued his *Declaration of a Nation*. This document called for all Roma to be recognised as a non-territorial nation, that is a ‘[n]ation which does not want to become a state’.²⁵

In part this demand was a delayed reaction to the widespread, but not universal, official policy during much of the Communist era of attempting to eradicate Romani

22 Verspaget, G. (1995) *The Situation of Gypsies (Roma and Sinti) in Europe*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe, 13.

23 Matras, Y. (2000) ‘Roma migrations in the post-Communist era: Their historical and political significance’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 2, 32, emphasis in original.

24 Acton, T. and Klímová, I. (2001) ‘The International Romani Union: An East European answer to West European questions’, in W. Guy (ed.) *Between Past and Future: the Roma of Central & Eastern Europe*, Hatfield: University of Hertfordshire Press, 58.

25 Ibid: 216–7.



ethnic identity by denying its existence. As in the eighteenth-century attempts to enforce assimilation by the Habsburg monarchs Maria Theresa and Joseph II, the hope was that Roma would blend into wider society as productive workers. To a certain extent this was achieved but ultimately in a counter-productive way. State socialist societies required all able-bodied adults of working age to be employed but the mostly unqualified Roma were only regarded as suitable for labouring and other unskilled manual jobs.

When growing economic stagnation and political implosion led to the collapse of Communist regimes from 1989, the grim prediction of a Charter 77 report of a decade earlier was fulfilled. This was that Roma would suffer massive unemployment if the economy were to modernise. Roma were not the only victims of these seismic political and economic transformations. Non-Roma in industrial areas — the archetypal shock-workers of Communist iconography — as well as agricultural workers also suffered heavy job losses. Perhaps they gained some comfort from the fact that, unlike them, Roma were required to perform stigmatised outdoor menial tasks to qualify for social benefits.²⁶ Nevertheless, resentment of non-Roma at welfare payments made to unemployed Roma families fuelled mounting racism.

Although Roma were recognised as a nationality by Yugoslavia in 1981 and as a cultural group by Hungary in 1986, the assimilationist approach was only fully abandoned with the ending of Communist rule. However, the subsequent classification of Roma populations as ‘national minorities’, the emergence of Roma political parties and state encouragement of cultural events such as festivals have been criticised as ‘the promotion of “difference”’,²⁷ as a means of containment and a cheap alternative to substantial state investment in development funds that would have been required to make a significant improvement to Roma lives and prospects. Even when EU structural funds became available their impact was disappointing.

Undoubtedly, many Roma have taken pride in asserting their newly legitimised identity but this was meaningful predominantly among the small proportion who had gained qualifications and jobs, especially in the civil service and NGOs — described cynically by some as the ‘gypsy industry’. For those forced to exist on welfare, with little prospect of employment, they have been indeed doubly marginalised.

What is the difference in the attitude of politicians towards Roma and Travellers, in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and in the United Kingdom, respectively?

In 1993, when the former federal republic split into two separate states, the Czech Republic deliberately introduced stringent conditions to deny Czech citizenship to many Roma, even if they had been born in the Czech lands. Premier Václav Klaus scornfully dismissed criticism as ‘insignificant’. In the same year the Slovak premier, Vladimír Mečiar, proposed reducing family allowances of Roma to help cut ‘extended reproduction of the socially unadaptable and mentally backward population’.²⁸ The

26 Škobla, D. and Filcak, R. (2018) *Towards Racialised Workfare: ‘Labour Activation’ and Roma in Slovakia*, Abstract for Gypsy Lore Society Conference, Bucharest.

27 Kovats, M. (2001) ‘Hungary: Politics, difference and equality’, in W. Guy (ed.) (op. cit.), 346.

28 Greenberg, S. (1993) ‘Mečiar turns on the media’, *The Guardian*, 27 September.

policy for Roma recommended by Ján Slota, another party leader in the Slovak governing coalition, was ‘a small yard and a long whip’.²⁹

After entering the EU and having gaining access to substantial funding to promote Roma integration, it might have been hoped that such attitudes would have changed. However, anti-Roma rhetoric remained a vote winner. The centre-right Czech premier from 2010 to June 2013, Petr Nečas, blamed current economic difficulties on the welfare dependency of ‘scroungers’ — an unambiguous reference to Roma. In fact Eurostat figures suggested that the relatively prosperous Czech Republic was spending about half the EU average on unemployment and disability-related benefits. One of Nečas’ first acts after taking power was to abolish the post of minister for human rights and minorities as ‘a “luxury” the country could not afford’.³⁰ In 2007 a Czech mayor, Jiří Čunek, was elected to the senate with a massive majority after having evicted Roma families from the town centre. He described his actions as ‘the removal of an ulcer’.³¹ Čunek then became leader of the Christian Democratic Party and deputy prime minister and in 2012 was implausibly elected as chair of the Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights and Equal Opportunities.³²

During his 2002 election campaign, Robert Fico, prime minister of Slovakia from 2006 until 2010 and again from 2014 until March 2018, promised to ‘actively control the irresponsible growth in the birth rate of the Romany population’ by cutting their family allowances.³³ He accused Roma of having children for profit and warned that unless such measures were taken he could guarantee that in a decade their numbers would rise to one million. The 2013 Atlas of Roma Communities estimated Slovakia’s Roma population to be 402,810.³⁴ Such inflammatory speeches were the context for the initiative taken by some medical staff, in Slovakia and elsewhere, to sterilise Roma women without their consent or knowledge.³⁵ As the Council of Europe’s Hu-

29 ERRC (2004) *Written Comments of the ERRC Concerning the Slovak Republic for Consideration by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination [CERD]*, Budapest: European Roma Rights Centre, 30 July.

30 Albert, G. (2010) ‘On the chopping block’, *Prague Post*, 21 July. <<http://www.praguepost.cz/opinion/5111-on-the-chopping-block.html>>.

31 Asiedu, D. (2007) ‘Are the Deputy Prime Minister’s offensive remarks about the Roma influencing ordinary citizens?’ *Radio Prague*, 8 April <<http://www.radio.cz/en/section/letter/are-the-deputy-prime-ministers-offensive-remarks-about-the-roma-influencing-ordinary-citizens>>.

32 Balážová, J. (2012) ‘Czech Senator Čunek chairing Senate Subcommittee on Human Rights’, *Romea*, 10 December <<http://www.romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-senator-cunek-chairing-senate-subcommittee-on-human-rights>>.

33 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (2003) *Family Allowance Cut in Slovakia Following Racist Statements Towards Roma*, Budapest: ERRC, 10 May <<http://www.errc.org/article/family-allowance-cut-in-slovakia-following-racist-statements-towards-roma/1393>>

34 Mušinka, A. and Matlovičová, K. (2014) *Atlas rómskych komunit na Slovensku 2013*, Prešov: Prešov University <http://www.uet.sav.sk/files/cbs_ii_4_musinka_matlovicova_225-247.pdf>.

35 Albert, G. (2011) ‘Forced sterilization and Romani women’s resistance in Central Europe’, *Different Takes*, Amhurst: Population and Development Programme, Summer <<http://pop-dev.hampshire.edu/sites/default/files/uploads/u4763/DT%2071%20Albert.pdf>>



man Rights Commissioner noted in 2011, 'racist and notably anti-Roma discourse, sometimes of a distinctly aggressive nature, is still common among mainstream politicians in Slovakia'.³⁶

Given such prejudice on the part of political leaders — and the evident appeal this has for their electorate — it is hardly surprising that little significant progress has been made in Roma integration in the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the years following EU membership, in spite of the available funding and the constant efforts of NGOs.

In the United Kingdom there has always been strong popular prejudice against nomadic Gypsies and Travellers. Until the 1976 Race Relations Act it was not uncommon to see notices in pubs and shops saying 'No Gypsies'. A private members' bill, put forward by the Liberal Party MP Eric Lubbock, resulted in the 1968 Caravan Sites Act. This legislation provided 400 halting sites in England and Wales, whereas previously there had been no local authority sites for Travellers. Nevertheless, proposals to establish camping grounds almost invariably provoked protests from nearby residents, even though these sites were usually located in the most undesirable surroundings.

The 1968 act was effectively overturned by the Conservative Party with its 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act that 'withdrew the former duty [of local authorities] to provide adequate sites for Gypsies whilst simultaneously rendering unauthorised sites liable to peremptory evictions'.³⁷ Consequently a nomadic lifestyle became criminalised and increasingly unviable, making confrontations inevitable. The most notorious case was the destruction in 2011 of part of one of the largest Traveller sites in the UK, Dale Farm near Basildon in Essex, which at one time was home to over a thousand people. The forcible eviction of Travellers was carried out by bailiffs supported by police at an estimated cost of £4.8 million.³⁸

Popular anti-Gypsy sentiments were further inflamed in the autumn of 1997, when Czech Roma travelled to the UK seeking asylum. The British media immediately characterised their arrival as an 'invasion' and a 'tidal wave', even though the number of Roma migrants — estimated at around 1,500 — represented less than four per cent of all refugees to the UK in that year. Coverage was almost universally xenophobic and intimidating. Media and politicians alike immediately assumed that the Roma were economic migrants, referred to as 'bogus asylum seekers', who were motivated solely by high UK benefit payments. The Labour Foreign Minister, Jack Straw, took the same view and explicitly warned that Britain was no 'soft touch for Czech Gypsies'.³⁹ To the contrary, interviews with these Roma found that their main motive in migrating was to flee racist attacks in their homelands.⁴⁰

36 Council of Europe (2011) *Report of the Commissioner for Human Rights Following His Visit to Slovakia*, 20 December <<https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1885987>>.

37 Murdoch, A. (1998) *The Impact of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 on Britain's Travellers*, PhD thesis for Bristol University, i <<https://research-information.bristol.ac.uk/files/34490939/300705.pdf>>.

38 BBC (2012) 'Dale Farm travellers: Council eviction bill tops £4.8m', *BBC News*, 3 February.

39 *Daily Telegraph*, 28 November 1997.

40 Člověk v tísní (2000) *Zpráva z Doveru* (Report from Dover), Prague: Člověk v tísní (People in Need), January and April.



The following year more Roma asylum seekers arrived in the UK from Slovakia, and later from Romania, to a familiar outcry from the populist press. Between 7 September 1999 and 11 July 2000 alone, the right-wing tabloid *Daily Mail* published over 200 articles on asylum seekers and refugees.⁴¹ Refugees became an important political issue before the May 2000 local elections, the Conservative manifesto warning that asylum seekers were ‘flooding into Britain’.

This marked a broadening of the xenophobic discourse where Roma had served as a stalking horse for all denigrated immigrants. In April 2001 a Labour ministerial order permitted ‘discrimination [by immigration officials] on the grounds of ethnic or national origin’ against specified groups, whose asylum claims were assumed to be *prima facie* spurious. These included ‘a) Kurd b) Roma c) Albanian d) Tamil ...g) Afghan’, all of whom were to be sent home to their supposedly ‘safe’ countries of origin.⁴²

Stoking popular fears of growing levels of immigration has remained high on the agenda of the Conservative Party. In 2013, while she was Home Secretary, the current prime minister Theresa May introduced a bill to ‘create a really hostile environment for illegal migrants’ and authorised the strategy of sending vans with billboards to drive around communities with substantial ethnic minorities. These warned undocumented immigrants: ‘Go home or face arrest’. Further changes to immigration rules in 2014 led to many Caribbean migrants and their families being deemed illegal. This ignored the fact that between 1948 and 1973 such people had been encouraged to settle in the UK to help rebuild Britain after the Second World War. ‘Some have been threatened with deportation, lost their jobs or been denied medical treatment’.⁴³ Others at risk are Commonwealth and even EU citizens — including Czech and Slovak Roma.

You have followed the development of the ‘Roma issue’ in the Czech(oslovak) Republic for almost 50 years. What do you think are the major shifts in this field? What has been a success and what is yet to be done?

By the end of the 1980s, in spite of the Communist attempts at assimilation, most Roma continued to live as separate communities — either in urban ghettos or rural segregated settlements. Meanwhile educational segregation remained a problem and increasing numbers of Roma children were consigned to special schools for those with learning difficulties from which they emerged without qualifications.

The watershed was the ending of Communist rule followed by the application by the Czech Republic and Slovakia for membership of the European Union. These momentous events transformed not only the political environment for Roma policy but also required the adoption of completely new legal frameworks to conform to EU norms. Meanwhile, paradoxically, economic restructuring swept away the previous means by which some Roma manual workers and their families had been slowly integrating into wider society. Exceptionally, some younger, better-educated Roma managed to gain new opportunities.

41 Bouquet, T. and Moller, D. (2000) ‘Are we a tolerant nation?’ *Readers Digest UK*, September.

42 Young, H. (2001) ‘Labour’s law of ethnic punishment shames us all’, *The Guardian*, 8 May.

43 Crerar, P. and Gentleman, A. (2018) ‘UK citizenship for Windrush generation’, *The Guardian*, 24 April, 1.



Anti-Roma antagonism had always been present during the Communist era — both in officialdom and in wider society — but emerged in more overt and virulent forms after 1989 as skinhead gangs attacked Roma and daubed neo-Nazi graffiti while extremist, far-right politicians won popular support. Such attacks prompted Czech and Slovak Roma to flee abroad, especially to the UK. Perhaps more disturbing was that mainstream political leaders also blatantly appealed to racist sentiments (see above).

More recently anti-Roma sentiment has become subsumed in widespread hostility to immigrants in general. I am sad to be pessimistic but the rise of populism and the disinterest — or worse — of politicians do not provide much ground for hope in the near future. These developments appear part of a wider political malaise. In the spring of 2018 the leaders of both the Czech Republic and Slovakia were forced to stand down, following a financial scandal in the former and the mafia-related murders of an investigative journalist and his partner in the latter. Meanwhile political developments in Hungary, Poland — and the UK — are hardly reassuring.

Best books about Roma/Gypsies according to Will Guy?

That's a hard question to answer. There are so many books — but that's not the reason. Barth is an obvious choice but you get insights from so many places as well as books — and not all of these sources are about Roma.

A remark in Clébert's book altered my original intention to write about miners but I disagreed with his romanticised view of Roma in claiming that 'the Gypsy is primarily and above all else a nomad'. Articles on the chain migration of Kentucky mountaineers to American cities⁴⁴ provided a much better explanation of the movement of Roma from Slovakia to Czech industrial areas as something not unique to Romani 'culture'. Also I found Erving Goffman⁴⁵ and especially the Caribbean author Franz Fanon, writing about the subordinate position of Black people,⁴⁶ highly relevant for understanding the situation and self-perception of Roma and for throwing light on the songs of Czechoslovak Roma, collected by Milena Hübschmannová,⁴⁷. Even the account of working class formation in England by social historian E. P. Thompson was useful.⁴⁸

Two significant sources of academic writing on Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia are the Institute of Ethnology of the Czech Academy of Sciences⁴⁹ and the many volumes written or edited by Marek Jakoubek and Lenka Budilová⁵⁰ and their

44 Brown, J. S., Schwarzweiler, H. K. and Mangalam, J. J. (1970) 'Mountain migration and the stem-family: An American variation on a theme by Le Play', in C. J. Jansen (ed.), *Readings in the Sociology of Migration*, Oxford: Pergamon.

45 Goffman, E. (1968) *Stigma*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

46 Fanon, F. (1970) *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Paladin.

47 Hübschmannová, M. (1960) *Cikánské písně*, Prague: Mladá fronta.

48 Thompson, E. P. (1968) *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

49 E.g. Guy, W., Uherek, Z. and Weinerová, R. (2004) *Roma Migration in Europe: Case Studies*, Münster: LIT Verlag.

50 E.g. Budilová, L. and Jakoubek, M. eds., (2007) *Cikánská rodina a přibuzenství*, Plzeň: Vydavatelství a nakladatelství Vlasty Králové; Jakoubek, M. and Budilová, L. eds., (2009) *Cikánské skupiny a jejich sociální organizace*, Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury.



colleagues, then based at the University of West Bohemia. The latter also provided a valuable service in publishing articles by foreign scholars in Czech.

Other important publications include those by NGOs such as the Czech Socioklub, especially the 1999 compendium study *Romové v České republice 1945–1998*,⁵¹ and by the Slovak Institute of Public Affairs, with its 2002 equivalent collection *Čačipen pal o Roma*.⁵² Also significant are human rights NGOs such as the Czech *Člověk v tísni* (People in need) and the Slovak *Nadácia Milana Šimečku* (Milan Šimečka Foundation). Meanwhile, the contributions of international NGOs such as the European Roma Rights Centre and the UNDP are too numerous to list.

Much of my reading has been of policy documents and research reports, which often yield crucial insights. For example, the Slovak sociologist Imrich Vašečka argued that ‘a particular Roma community’s degree of integration depends on whether the neighbouring non-Roma local community is socially stabilised and non-anomic’.⁵³ In my Slovak fieldwork with Eva Davidová we found that in the main village we studied — a backwater — the poor relations between Roma and non-Roma was related to the low esteem of the non-Roma villagers. In the neighbouring, much larger village — seen as a regional hub — Roma/non-Roma relations were far better. There, the Slovak mayor assured us that they felt they had the best Roma in the region.

News outlets are also invaluable sources of information, such as the Czech-based *Romea* website for which Gwendoline Albert is an indefatigable contributor and the Roma-friendly *Slovak Spectator*. Important Roma magazines include *Romano hangos* (Romani Voice), *Romano vodi* (Romani Spirit) and *Amaro gendalos* (Our Mirror).

Is there any research question/problem you would like to address in the future?

I still have much unpublished material to draw on. In the case of my PhD dissertation and related publications I felt the need to bring as much official documentation about Czechoslovak government policy as possible into the public domain and analyse this. The same is true of my years of writing many reports for the European Commission during the period of EU enlargement where the focus was on policy issues. Consequently I have not made sufficient use of my fieldwork notes reflecting the Roma’s own experience and would like to rectify this. The need to present the human story of the Roma has intensified in the contemporary toxic atmosphere where politicians crudely appeal to the fears of their core constituency by denigrating ‘outsiders’. Instead, we need to find ways of emphasising our shared humanity.

51 Lisá, H. (ed.) (1999) *Romové v České republice 1945–1998*, Prague: Socioklub.

52 Vašečka, M. (ed.) (2002) *Čačipen pal o Roma: Súhrnná správa o Rómoch na Slovensku* (A Global Report on Roma in Slovakia), Bratislava: Institute for Public Affairs.

53 Vašečka, I. (2000) ‘Profile and situation of asylum seekers and potential migrants into EU member states from the Slovak Republic’, in M. Vašečka, R. Džambazovič, I. Repová, I. Vašečka and K. Pišútová, *Social and Economic Situation of Potential Asylum Seekers from the Slovak Republic*, Bratislava: IOM, June, 163.



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