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### **Roma/Gypsy Museum – Challenging the Museum's Traditions in Central and South-Eastern Europe**

The social and economical transition in the region of Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe after the collapse of the communist regime in the 90ies of the twentieth century reflected also in the field of museum work. Although the communist ideology, which dominated the previous historical period, in theory proclaimed as leading the principles of internationalism and denied nationalism, in practice each of the countries of former Eastern bloc consistently conducted its national policy, whose main strategic goals were set already in early nineteenth century, when the ethno-national ideologies of the modern era emerged.

In all countries of the region dominated the understanding of folk traditions as an expression of "Volksgeist [national spirit]" (according to the well known definition of Herder) and respectively the Museums of Ethnography there were perceived as an important tool for building and strengthening of national identity. The National Museums of Ethnography in Central and South-Eastern Europe are perceived as important symbol of the emerging nations in the modern era, as places where the old, authentic, original and core national traditions are presented. The National Museums of Ethnography together with folklore are understood as essential features of those nations, which are needed for Nation consolidation and affirmation.

This exemptional role of the National Ethnographic Museums in Central and South-Eastern Europe is also confirmed by the time of their creation, which in many cases preceded the emergence of the nation-state and coincides with a period of national emancipation. In some cases these museums emerge as complex museums, bringing together into one whole archeology, history and ethnography, in some cases even the natural sciences, from which then gradually separate the actual national ethnographic museums; in other cases they may be established initially as specialized ethnographic museums, but in any case this does not change their essential functions from point of view of development of the respective nations.

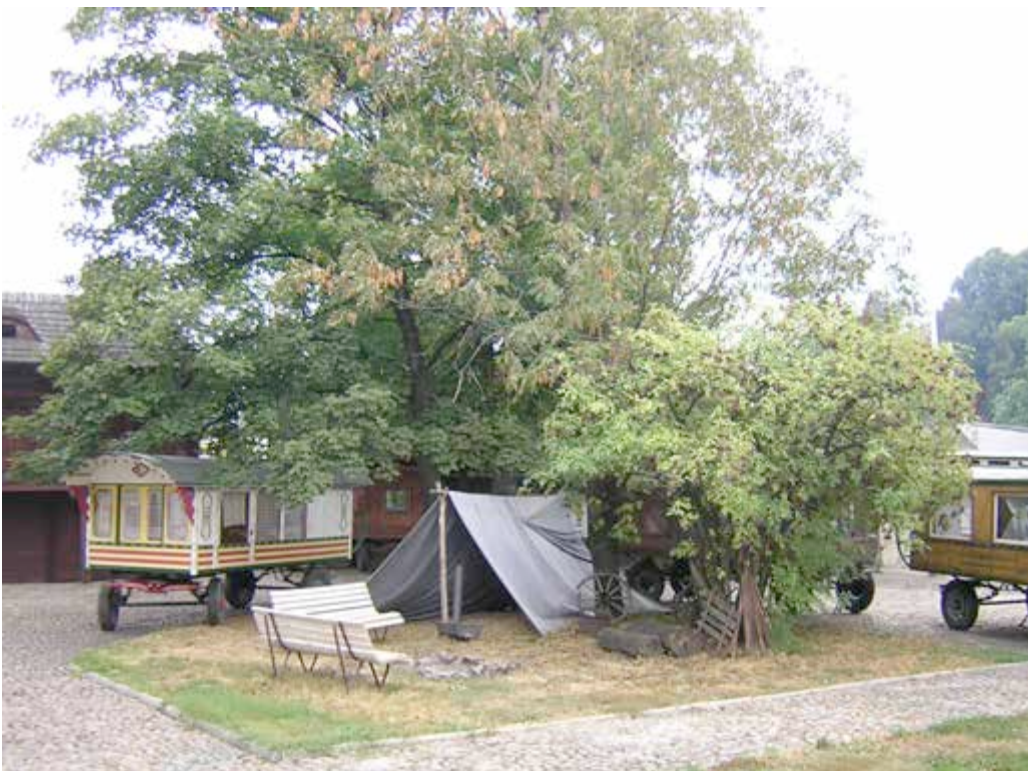
The first museums of this type are created in the nineteenth century in terms of the Austro-Hungarian Empire when the new Central European nations began to be consolidated and the processes of national emancipation are flowing. Museums of this type are National Museum in Prague (now Czech Republic), founded back in 1818; Natural History Museum in Ljubljana, founded in 1821; National Museum in Zagreb, officially opened in 1846, National Museum of folk art and ethnography in Budapest (Hungary today), established in 1872; National Ethnographic Museum of Slovakia, established in Martin in 1893. In today's Poland, which at that time was divided between three empires (Russian, Austro-Hungarian and German) during this period were create two such museums - in Warsaw in 1888 and in Krakow in 1905. In other cases, the National Ethnographic Museums arise only when given nation is liberated from foreign domination (as in the case of the Ottoman Empire, where there was no suitable conditions for their occurrence) and created own state, such are the cases with Serbia, where in 1844 opened the National Museum in Belgrade, and Bulgaria, where the National Ethnographic Museum in Sofia was established in 1893.

Dominant ideological concept in the creation and in the development of ethnographic museums in the countries of Central and South-eastern Europe over the years remains the promotion of ethno-national traditions and values. Completely natural is, that within this concept the images of "others" (in the ethnic term) always remain in rear positions (or, more frequent case did not even enter the main exhibitions). In this general ideological context Gypsies perfectly logical are hardly present in the ethnographic museums of the countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. The museum have included samples of their ethnic culture in their funds, but the construction of permanent, "official" exhibitions as well as temporary, thematic exhibitions, they usually did not enter (or very occasionally appear on the rear edge). An additional factor in this regard is a historic and established throughout the region in question unequal treatment of Gypsies and neglecting (in best case) attitude towards them as a people without a distinctive ethnic culture or as a people with inferior culture incompatible with the high culture of their surrounding population.

Over the past two decades in time of overall socio-economic transition in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, the situation of Gypsies, or Roma (as it is already established their politically correct name) and the impact of their ethnic culture in ethnographic museums gradually changed.

From today perspective we can identify two trends in the development of the presentation of the Roma ethnic culture in museums in Central and South-Eastern Europe.

The first of these trend started in 1990, in direct connection with the conduct of the Fourth Congress of the International Romani Union in Warsaw. During the Congress the creation of special Roma museum as a detached part of District Museum in Tarnow city in southern Poland was declared.



This museum still exists to this day and its director, Adam Bartosz, actually is the main initiator of its creation. The museum has its own building, various collections, a permanent exhibition (part of it under the open sky) , and is active in various directions - the organization of field expeditions to collect samples of Roma ethnic culture, presentation of museum exhibitions in different countries, publishing of international journal *Studia Romologica*, hosting various cultural events, the annual tour of memorable places of Roma victims of the Holocaust in Poland, etc. The museum works closely with Roma organizations.

The same model, 12 years later, leads to the creation of the Museum of Roma Culture in the city of Martin, Slovakia.



The Museum of Roma Culture in the city of Martin, Slovakia emerged in 2002 as a specialised branch museum of the Slovak National Museum, is situated in frames of the Slovak Open Air Village Museum SNM in Martin. Its establishment is linked to the radical change in basic ideological concept of the Slovak National Museum, which already presents in his exhibitions not only the traditional culture of the Slovaks, but of all ethnic communities living in Slovakia today.



While in Poland and the Slovak Republic the Roma museums are created "from top to bottom", initiated by the existing state museums, that targets the Gypsy community; in the Czech Republic we see opposite way - the Gypsy community itself initiated creation of Roma museum and approaches the state institutions in order to affirm and sustain it. In 1991, the well known Romani studies scholar Dr. Eva Davidova donated his personal collection of artefacts of Roma ethnic culture from former Czechoslovakia to the newly created Society of Friends of the Romani Museum, headed by the famous Roma activist Karel Holomek. At this initial stage, the Roma Museum exists as an NGO, which local authorities provide abandoned tumbledown building, and the state - irregular subsidies for specific projects. In course of time the museum has managed to evolve significantly, to enrich the collections, and in 2005 to receive the status of a public, state museum with guaranteed financial support from the Ministry of Culture.



Today the Museum of Roma Culture, with Director Dr. Jana Horvathova (Roma women herself) is now a well-known museum with rich collections of artefacts on the history of the Gypsies and their ethnic culture, permanent exhibitions, a library, rooms for working with students and wide range of activities.

Established in 2009 the Museum of Roma Culture in Belgrade, Serbia, chose to follow the same path.

Muzej Romske Kulture <http://www.romamuseum.rs/izložba2.html>

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Neke romske porodice slave Bibiju na Veliki petak, kada je kod pravoslavnih strogi post i zato slavani tada kuvaju samo na vodi, bez životinjskih i biljnih masti i ulja.

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Na koni se Bibija predstavlja kao tipična Romkinja okružena decom i drugim Romkinjama u karakterističnoj nošnji i sa upadljivo velikim naušnicama. U drugoj verziji svetiteljka raširenih ruku stoji ispod krošnje kruške dok joj prilazi mnoštvo dece.

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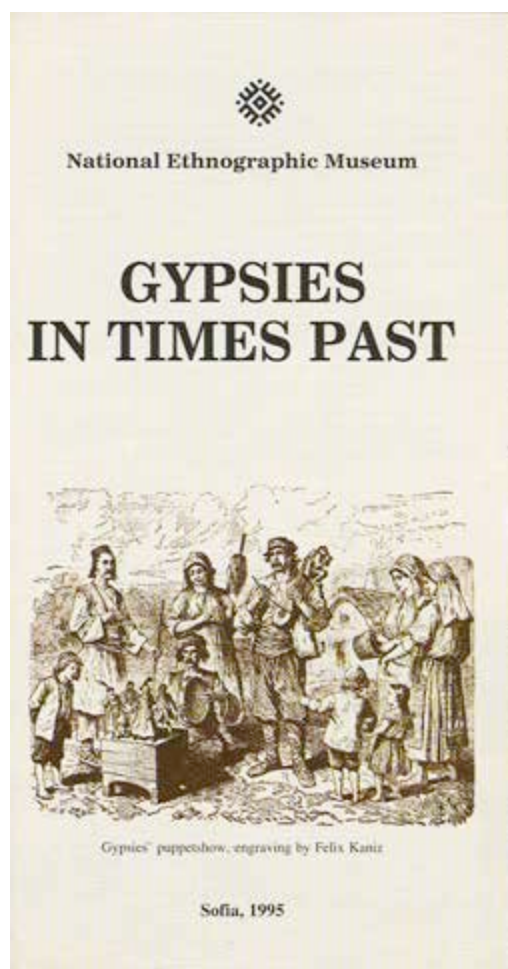
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The Museum of Roma Culture in Belgrade, Serbia has the status of an NGO, has not a permanent building and exhibition, but in spite of this develops a variety of activities - is set virtual museum, conducted several exhibitions, participate in international museum networks and projects. The ambition of its founder and chair, the famous Roma activist and intellectual Dragoljub Ackovic, is the museum to receive state accreditation and subsidy.

In some countries of Central and South-Eastern European the Gypsy ethnic culture presence in museums is realized in another way - by creating separate Roma funds in the structure of existing national or regional museums. A typical example of this approach is the case of Bulgaria with the National Ethnographic Museum, part of the Ethnographic Institute and Museum at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences.

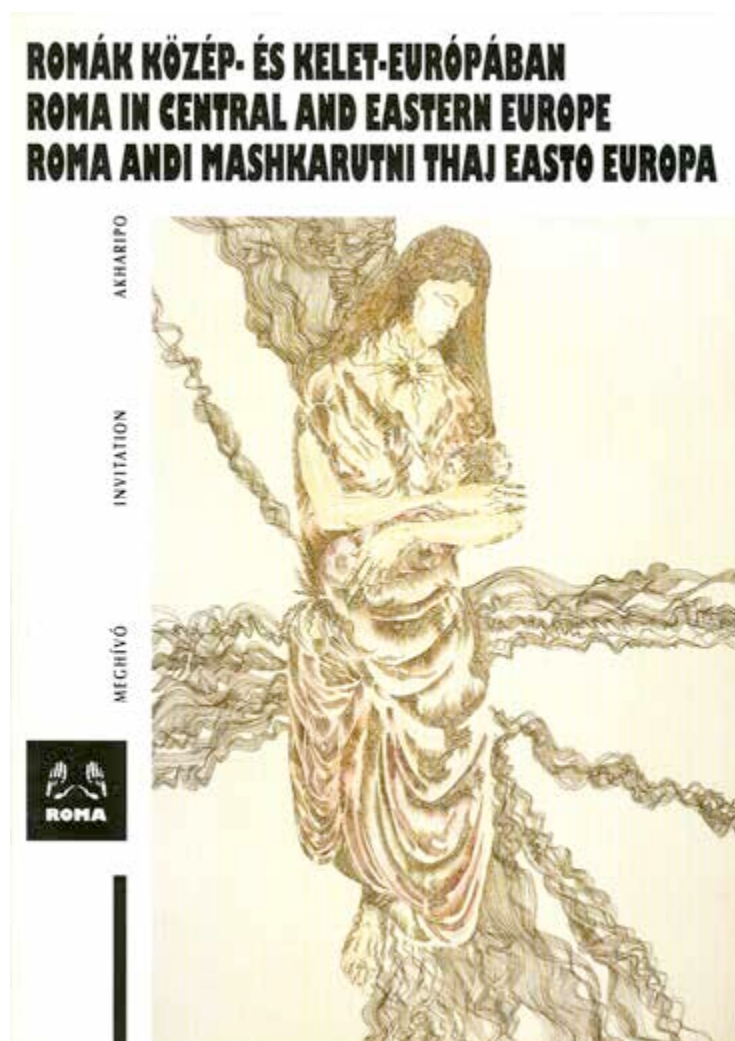


There in 1995 the National Ethnographic Museum together with NGO "Minority Studies Society Studii Romani" was conducted exhibition "Gypsies in Old Times".



For several years this exhibition was presented in different cities around the country and the gathered for the preparation artefacts were included into the funds of the National Ethnographic Museum, and in this way the arefacts presenting Gypsy ethnic culture were included in the general national museum system.

Quite similar approach was selected in Hungary and Romania. Again, at the initiative of "Minority Studies Society Studii Romani" in Budapest, in 1998, in the building of Néprajzi Múzeum (Ethnographic Museum) was presented exhibition "The Gypsies / Roma in Central and Eastern Europe", that was realised with the co-operation of museums and Roma organisations from seven countries (Bulgaria, Hungary, Ukraine, Rumania, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia) and its exhibition time was two time prolonged because of high visitors interests. To organize this exhibition were collected numerous artefacts, which were later in conjunction with artifacts collected during previous periods brought in detached funds of Néprajzi Múzeum in Budapest (Hungary) and the ASTRA National Museum Complex in Sibiu (Romania).





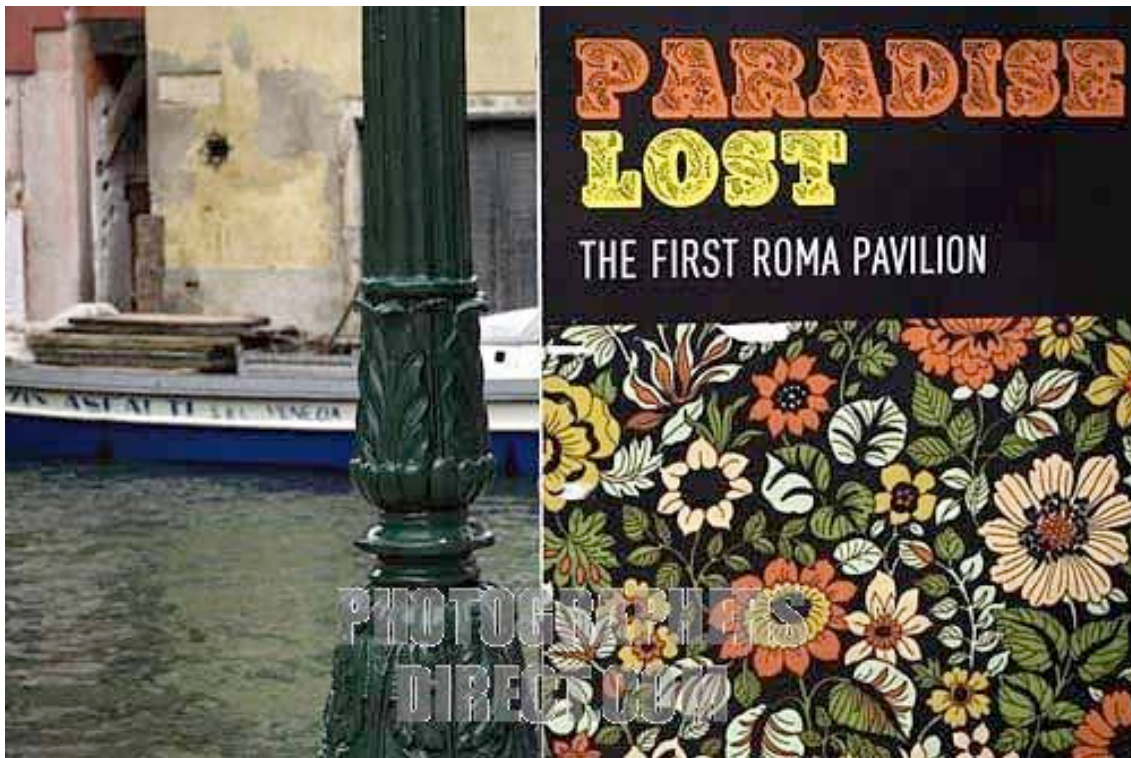
Seen in more generalising way, the introduction of the Gypsies/Roma in Central and South-Eastern European museums largely correspondent to the general ideological concepts of museums in the region set already in time of their establishment. Ethnographic museum exhibitions (permanent or temporary) of this type generally are focused on a specific segment of the respective ethnic culture of a nation, that is considered as "traditional one" (this principle is repeated also in exhibitions dedicated to the Gypsies), but in case of Gypsies they are usually based on a more comprehensive presentation of their history - from the origin (in the case of Gypsies this is Ancient India) and major events of its history (in the case of Gypsies - their historical migrations, and especially the Holocaust during World War II), and until today's public manifestations (in this case - a presentation of existing Roma NGOs). Summarizing we could say that the presentation of the Gypsy culture in museum exhibitions is conducted along the old patterns of ethno-national museums, but now this is done in museums, which are organised and modernised according to the ideological concept of civic nation.

In many cases, the exhibitions dedicated to the Gypsies, often go beyond the "classic" for the region ethnographic exhibitions and are supplemented with separate segments devoted to contemporary fine arts (e.g. work of contemporary painters and sculptors of Gypsy origin). In this context it becomes clear why in a typical ethnographic museum such as e.g. the Museum of the Romanian Peasant in Bucharest, in 2009 was presented art exhibition "Through our eyes - Roma in their pictures", with rich collection of works by Roma painters and why in the exhibition «Paradise Lost», presented in special Roma pavilion at the Biennale in Venice in 2007 along with the works of modernist Roma painters and sculptors were included also materials devoted to the Holocaust of the Gypsies, along with samples of their traditional culture.

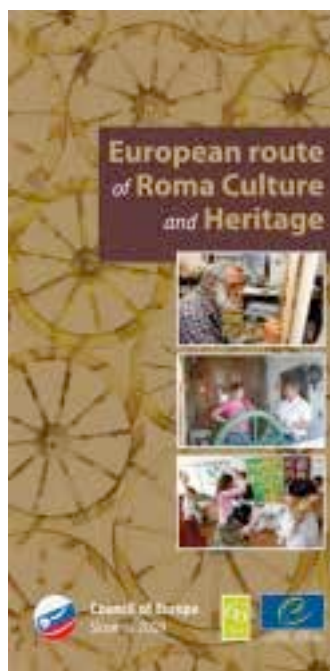
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With the advent of the new millennium and after accession of the majority of Central and South-Eastern European countries to the European Union the place of the Gypsies in museums from the regions began to be influenced by a new factor - the ideology of pan-European unity, realized at policy level by means of Euro-projects. A concrete example in this respect is the project of Council of Europe entitled "European Route of Roma Culture and Heritage", which was launched in 2008, and which includes partners from Slovenia, Greece, Germany, Great Britain, Spain, France and Romania.



Through the project "European Route of Roma Culture and Heritage", various activities are implemented with diverse functions, e.g. the exhibition *You See Me, I See You: Cultural Diversity through the Roma Eyes*, that was presented in 2009 at Palais de l'Europe in Strasbourg; some of the activities from other Council of Europe projects became also part of the *European Route of Roma Culture and Heritage* project, such as campaign against prejudices towards the Roma and Sinti in Slovenia in frames of the Joint project, entitled DOSTA! of the Council of Europe and the European Roma and Travellers Forum; month of Roma culture *Romano Čhon* again in 2010 Slovenia, which entered also the context of the Decade of Roma Inclusion, etc.

At first glance, the selection of partners in *European Route of Roma Culture and Heritage* project seems a bit strange, especially from the perspective of countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe, where the vast majority (at least  $\frac{3}{4}$ ) of the Gypsy population of united Europe lives. The partners are not from the countries where the Gypsies are most numerous and not from museums with already established traditions of exhibiting of Roma culture. The partners are Slovenia (the country with the lowest number of local Gypsies in the region), and selected partner museums from Greece and Romania, are with no experience of working with Gypsies (Greece is represented by The Byzantine and Christian Museum; and Romania - by Maramures County Museum, as in Maramures region live most insignificant number of Gypsies in frames of the country). This paradox is, however, CONSEQUENTIAL, if analyzed in the context of the conceptual idea of the project – Roma culture is not seen as part of the culture of their countries, but as an European cultural minority.

The review we made of various variants of presentation of Gypsies/Roma in museums in Central and South-Eastern Europe allows us to make a direct link between the different concepts about Gypsies/Roma as type of social entity in terms of different ideologies and the way of their coverage in museums.

Schematically this link may be presented as follows:

- The concept of independent Romani museum as an expression of the concept of Roma as a distinct ethno-nation;
- The concept of detached and/or integral Roma departments, collections, etc. within existing national or regional museums as an expression of the concept about Roma as an integral part of their respective civil nation (part of the nation in the country where they live);
- The concept of traveling Roma exhibitions as an expression of the concept of Roma as a trans-European minority, which is not bound to the specific countries.

These basic concepts about the prospects of development of the Gypsies/Roma as an individual nation are from decades in the focus of debate among Roma activists themselves (within individual countries or on the level of international Romani organizations) and among non-Gypsies who realize different policies and projects on various levels (national or European) as well.

Till now there is no single and unambiguous answer to the question which concept of Gypsies/Roma and relevant policies towards them will prevail in future, so there is no and can't be a clear answer which concept of place of Gypsies in the museums of the united Europe will be the most popular and leading one (at least in the near future).