

# Constructing Identities over Time

“Bad Gypsies” and “Good Roma” in Russia and Hungary

JEKATYERINA DUNAJEVA



# **Constructing Identities over Time**

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*For Verry and Sasha*



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I dedicate this book to my children, Verny and Sasha, who I hope will grow up in a more inclusive and just world.



Part I

# Introduction



## Chapter 1

# Author's Purpose

### Personal Note

Ethnography is a highly personal research approach, and hence I begin my book with a personal note—a short self-reflection or a collection of autobiographical observations that reveal my biases, and help readers understand my purpose of writing this book. I also believe that full objectivity in research is hardly attainable, and my own subjective assessment may be apparent in some of the language I use in the book.

I have always had a hard time answering questions about my nationality, where I am from or what my mother tongue is. The expected answer is always short—a country, a national affiliation, a specific language. I noticed that my hesitation to answer led to the questioner's discomfort, usually offering their own answers, sometimes as specific as Zakarpattia in Ukraine, where a sizeable Hungarian diaspora lives, or more commonly guessing that one of my parents must be Hungarian and the other Russian. When I do engage in those kinds of conversations, and explain that I was born in Russia (the Soviet Union at the time, to be precise), grew up in Hungary and spent many formative years as a young adult in the United States, becoming a naturalized citizen, I usually receive a smile of disbelief: “everyone surely has a mother tongue and a country they consider their home!” There was rarely genuine interest (or patience) to listen.

I think back to my childhood as a constructive struggle to fit in to fixed and predetermined categories. The discomfort I felt about my inability to do so turned out to be the driving force of my academic inquisitiveness later in life. I remember certain clues were used to place me in a given category—my name spoke of my Russianness, my fluent Hungarian revealed my Hungarianness, and in the United States I was usually seen as second or third generation American. When I spoke to my Russian peers, I was a Russian until the moment I shared that I lived abroad, then a “foreign accent” surfaced all

of a sudden. I passed as a Hungarian in Hungary until I introduced myself by my name, and at that moment my audience allegedly heard a “slight Russian accent” that was just barely noticeable before. I had long discussions with people I know and did not know about how I do not consider any of my languages my mother tongue. I have languages that dominate in certain contexts: I can maintain an advanced conversation about mushrooms in Russian, but I am more comfortable talking about my feelings in Hungarian. I prefer to use English in teaching or talking about academic topics. “But if your mother’s language is Russian, then your mother tongue is Russian,” is the answer on many occasions. Any solution was acceptable as long as it fit into a standard category. But I did not seem to fit any of these labels neatly.

I distinctly remember the rigid and insensitive nature of the education system that I attended in Hungary, which became the first battleground of my identity struggle. My family was my “Russian world” and the school was my “Hungarian world.” There were no bridges between the two. The only connection was myself, which I resented as a child; I remember attending parental meetings as an “interpreter,” in order to link the two worlds and help my parents have a glance into my school environment. I also remember my creative lies to fit in. Conformity to “normal” is an important aspect of school socialization, and I felt like I lagged behind not celebrating the same holidays and not following the same traditions. I made up stories about Christmas gifts, which we in fact received for New Years. I invented presents for St. Nicholas Day, a holiday my parents never even heard about. All this to fit in and to become like others. I frowned upon my parents driving me to school because they had a foreign license plate, I asked them to drop me off at the corner where my classmates would not see. I once even considered going by “Katalin,” a Hungarian variant of my name, so my real name would no longer reveal my “secret.”

I often recall our history classes in early elementary school. Undoubtedly, being a Russian student in the 1990’s Eastern Europe was not going to make me a well-liked child, but with little historical or political awareness at that age, I was shaken when there was an image of a writing on a wall in our textbook: “ruszkik haza,” or “Russians, go home” as it is inaccurately translated in English language literature (e.g., Rothberg 2005; Flanders 2014). In fact, “ruszkik” is a pejorative for “orosok,” which means Russians in Hungarian. I remember everyone looking at me with an expression I could not decipher. What could *I* have done wrong? Since that day “ruszki” was flying around in the classroom during recess and other classes, with little attention from the teachers to address the issue.

Throughout this time my parents were very supportive. They repeatedly told me to be proud of who I was, encouraged me to use my skills to my advantage (“Speak in Russian and no one would understand!”), and assured me that one day I would feel unique, rather than different. They were right. They were also an integral part of not only helping me to become who I am today, but also in helping me feel comfortable about not fully fitting in. Every summer they planned long trips to Russia to visit our extended family. My mother, a teacher by training, made sure I was well educated in Russian grammar and literature; we also maintained all of our Russian traditions at home. Memories of my school years stayed with me and re-emerged when I began my academic study in the United States. I immersed myself in literature on minorities—I was particularly keen on learning how minorities maintain their identity, as well as how they relate to the state, to the majority society, and to their own group. I wondered how others feel in school when they do not fully belong to the majority society. I found myself inquiring more about how we construct our knowledge of others, and how this knowledge may, in turn, influence our relationship with these groups. I was curious how outsider groups construct and negotiate their own belonging in an environment that may actively exclude them. With that, my attention increasingly focused on the Roma minority.

The more I immersed myself in research about minorities, the more I understood about myself, in the process of trying to understand how we think of others and how we categorize, group, and simplify reality. As early as 1922, Walter Lippmann recognized our desire of “substituting order for the great blooming, buzzing of reality” (1997, 63)—a term he borrowed from William James, one of America’s most important philosophers, who was concerned with human mental activity and the way we think. Lippmann wrote: “in the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture” (*ibid.*, 55). It is not only cultures that define certain groups’ characteristics, but it is also “scientific” or “professional” knowledge that may contribute to our schematic thinking. A prime example of such knowledge is modes of political classifications produced by what Mihai Surdu, a sociologist who inquired about the way our knowledge of Roma is constructed and how Roma groupness is defined, calls “epistemic communities,”<sup>1</sup> or those “groups of professionals [with an] interest

1 Surdu borrowed the term “epistemic communities” from Peter Haas (1992) but provided his own understanding of the definition based on his study of Roma/Gypsy classification. He argues that various expert fields (*i.e.*, scientific, policy, and political) are difficult to disentangle.

in classifying” various groups, and whose classifications are legitimized (2016, 14). Classifications used in political and bureaucratic fields, which may also be objectified by academic studies and entire disciplines, tend to construct a homogenous narrative about certain groups, such as Roma (ibid., 15).

Indeed, categories are used to simplify and streamline information, to make broad inferences and generalizations about people, but in the process, they not only objectify, but simplify reality. They can also create stereotypes. Andrew Hancock, the Chair of the United Nations Expert Group on International Statistical Classifications wrote:

a primary purpose of a statistical classification is to provide a simplification of the real world and to provide a useful framework for collecting, organising and analysing data from both statistical and administrative collections, as well as providing a framework for international comparability of and reporting on statistics. (2013, 3)

Yet, these categories are seldom able to account for the “messy” reality. Looking closer at how people relate to these categories, think of these categories, and negotiate their own identity in the context of these categories is intriguing for many reasons. For one, it highlights human agency: these categories may be created from the top-down with the purpose of simplification, yet history proves that resistance and resentment to these categories led to problematizing and, at times, even changing such categories. Second, these actions are constituted by beliefs and meanings, which is a fascinating topic of analysis for interpretivist scholars (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006). Interpretivism is the approach to social sciences that I pursue in this book, as well as in my overall academic endeavors.

We categorize our identities on a daily basis and may become more aware of this practice when learning of “outliers.” Taking the category of nationality as an example, in a recent article from the *New York Times* for the thirtieth anniversary of Germany’s unification, readers shared their struggle to belong in Germany (Takenaga 2019). Among the 500 respondents, the majority reported to navigate several “national identities” at the same time. This collection of genuine and informative short stories is “buzzing of reality,” describing the lives of those whose identities can be hardly classified. One respondent was firm on their determination to not allow their “identity to be defined by national categories.” Another respondent, who was born in the Dominican Republic to a white German mother and a Dominican father, wrote that “being

German means being Afro-German,” although in his surrounding he experienced Germanness as a “racist assumption of a shared white experience and supremacy.” An Indian-German respondent said that others “do not accept me as German based on my physical features,” although he has a German identity as well. This compilation of testimonies reveals a path of negotiation: a constant struggle of understanding one’s own belonging in the context of relentless external messages. I identify very closely with this struggle and find childhood manifestations of this struggle a fascinating topic of inquiry.

This book stems from my personal life stories and ensuing curiosity. As my own experience shows, too many people provide their own answers to delicate questions concerning one’s affiliation with a specific nationality or ethnic group, belonging, or identity; by failing to listen, we disclose our preconceived notions and fall prey to schematic thinking. I became interested in the Roma group as they were the most visible minority in Hungary and across Europe; a group that everyone had a strongly negative opinion about, and yet barely anyone was willing to hear their voice. I began to see Roma as victims of ethnic clichés mindlessly spread around. Today, I think of myself as an ally in the long process of deconstructing stereotypes and assumptions, and, in turn, transforming perceptions and exploring ways to (re-)construct our societies on a just and nondiscriminatory foundation.

I was particularly fascinated with the role of schools, which is where I faced my “otherness” for the first time, especially the way education and educational curricula reinforces, or alternatively, challenges certain group perceptions. Certainly, schools do not exist in a vacuum, and in many ways mirror and perpetuate existing societal biases. Yet, schools can also be a springboard for some children, providing the guidance and support that leads them to a successful, enriching future. School environment, I always knew, was critical, but what are the mechanisms and instruments in schools that might support or exclude certain groups of students? How are the stereotypical views challenged or reinforced in a school environment? Was my experience in any way similar to other groups as well, like Roma?

When doing fieldwork, especially in schools, one of my main objectives was to listen. On nearly every occasion, I noticed my informants felt the need to tackle all the labels they assumed I would attach to them. Labels, categories, assumptions, or group categorizations that my informants expected to define them could be based on their nationality, ethnicity, or profession. For instance, some teachers who saw Western media portray them as racists assumed I was a Westerner who came to “tell them what to do” and treat them like they are

“nothing but racists.” Roma, keenly aware of the negative stereotypes, often presumed I came to see “their poverty and laziness,” at times viewing me as “one of them,” a Westerner. Before any meaningful conversation could take place, before real problems and issues could surface, and before I could really begin to listen, we had to make a significant effort to prove that our labels were not true. I was not a privileged Westerner who came to judge others, and my informants were not reduced to racists, victims, honest or dishonest people. Establishing genuine interest in listening and understanding, as simple as it may sound, took months. Understandably so. And through the cacophony of voices, each of which contributed to this book, I saw a coherent story emerging.

## Roma and Romani Studies

I intend this book for a broad audience, both academic and non-academic. To that end, a short introduction of Roma and the field of Romani Studies, an interdisciplinary academic field of inquiry that is concerned with understanding the Roma people, may be useful to some readers. Roma are the most numerous minority in Europe, who live in many countries of Europe and beyond. In Resolution 1203 of the Council of Europe, Roma are referred to as “a true European minority” who live “scattered all over Europe,” and “greatly contribute to the cultural diversity of Europe” (Council of Europe 1993). Without a doubt, everyone has heard about Roma or Gypsies, whether in popular music, TV shows, films, or news, or has met them in person. Much of the representation of Roma follows negative stereotypes, which have permeated our societies for centuries. Roma tend to be romanticized in popular culture as carefree nomads dancing in colorful costumes, while in general representation Roma are often stigmatized and stereotyped as criminals, liars, work-shy, dishonest, and unsocial people. Indeed, stereotypes are pervasive, loaded, and powerful. Indeed, there are definite patterns of prejudice that emerge from distinctive socio-economic and political environments along with broad, more universal stereotypes. Yet, all stereotypes reify, predetermine, and homogenize group identities, and “contribute to and perpetuate systemic differences in power and privilege” (Czopp, Kay and Cheryan 2015, 451).

Persistent racism against Roma is referred to as antigypsyism, which is defined as a specific form of racism that causes marginalization of Roma. I borrow the definition of antigypsyism from Jan Selling, an expert of Roma history, “as excluding and discriminating discursive practices, which are cen-

tered around the constructed image of a ‘conceptual Gypsy’” (Selling 2018, 47). These practices are perennial forms of injustice that Roma have endured, which collectively contributed, and continue to maintain, the negative representation of Roma, the Gypsy image. Angéla Kóczé, a prominent Hungarian Roma scholar, differentiated two forms of injustice: “epistemic violence” that exists because Roma are not allowed to speak up and theorize their own experience, and “symbolic violence,” which occurs when reproduction of societal inequalities is not questioned or acted upon (Kóczé 2014).

The field of Romani Studies has been accused of romanticizing and essentializing Roma in the past, effectively objectifying Roma and contributing to the “racist paradigm” (Selling 2018, 46). In a sense, critics maintain that the academic field itself in the past has engaged in othering Roma; a practice that Ken Lee calls Gypsyism: “Whilst Orientalism is the construction of the exotic Other outside Europe, Gypsyism is the construction of the exotic Other within Europe—Romanies are the ‘Orientals within’” (Lee 2000, 132). Gypsyism, Selling argues, is not limited to academia, however, but as “a discourse of othering . . . [is] being performed in literature, arts, mass media, scholarship, and other arenas of culture” (2018, 49). The criticism centers not only on the objectification of Roma, but also their exclusion from knowledge production (see Bogdán et al. 2015).

It is not my intention to enumerate here the various forms of discrimination and mistreatment of Roma—a topic widely covered by many scholars already—but instead, I wish to highlight in this section the importance of recognizing and addressing various forms of injustice, especially through initiatives that strive to provide a platform for unmediated Roma voices to emerge as a way to challenge stereotypes, narrate their own experience, and promote a dialogue between Roma and non-Roma.<sup>2</sup> A young man from a Hungarian Roma settlement captured remarkably well how stereotyping works and how it can be overcome:

The situation at the moment is that we [Gypsies] get immediately labeled and from then on, everything is determined: if you are a Gypsy, that must mean you are a murderer, serial killer, burglar . . . even though we might be normal people. Not much, just half an hour is what a *gadje* [non-Roma] must spend with Gypsies, and then we would understand a lot

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2 This form of resistance has been referred to as “subaltern challenge” (Selling 2018) or “speaking back” (hooks 1989).

more about each other. I think discrimination may even end then! (Field notes by author, Hungary, November 14, 2012)

In other words, to beat stereotypes, some communication must take place and a dialogue must develop. After all, it is “much harder to hate an Ilona than a Gypsy,” as a suggestive title of an article says, in which Roma youth propose to end prejudice by honest conversations with non-Roma (Balkányi and Simon 2014). By putting a human face to one’s experience, the hope is to improve empathy and solidarity, break down stereotypes, and promote diversity.

Roma voices increasingly appear in various non-academic platforms and forums. For instance, the European Commission published a compilation of stories from young Roma role models entitled “Stories about Roma People: Stopping Discrimination against Roma” (European Commission n.d.). The Council of Europe similarly produced a publication, “Where Roma Young People Share their Personal Stories about Multiple Discrimination” (Fremlova, Georgescu, and Hera 2014). A similar campaign has been launched in Hungary called “Everyday Roma Heroes,” presenting outstanding Roma people who serve as a positive example for society, Roma and non-Roma alike. These initiatives are focused on sharing personal experiences of Roma in order to break down negative societal perceptions and construct a positive image of Roma.

There are also projects that raise awareness and celebrate Roma culture as an effort to foreground the cultural and historical contribution of Roma people. For example, the RomArchive project, with its ten carefully curated archival sections, focuses on Roma self-representation and provides an invaluable glance into history, arts, culture, traditions, and other aspects of Roma life. The European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERAC) is concerned with recognizing Roma arts and culture and strives to “increase the self-esteem of Roma and to decrease negative prejudice of the majority population towards the Roma by means of arts, culture, history, and media” (ERAC 2020; see also RomArchive 2020). These are examples of projects that also engage in constructing a counter-history or counter-discourse, which Michel Foucault defined as “clearing a space in which the formerly voiceless might begin to articulate their desires, to counter the domination of prevailing authoritative discourses” (Moussa and Scapp 1996, 88).

A “critical turn” emerged within the discipline of Romani Studies as well. The evolving field of Critical Romani Studies is aimed at problematizing, recognizing, and in turn, overcoming various forms of injustice that Roma face in scholarship. Put differently, the “critical turn,”

was due to a more critical (self-)examination by Romani Studies researcher of how and what knowledge they produced. Over the past decades, within the field of Romani Studies, inquiries into the role of researcher and researched, and, as a consequence, the inclusion of Romani scholars and self-critical perspectives in the field and a range of institutions . . . became more widespread. (Dunajeva and Vajda 2021)

For example, the *Journal of Critical Romani Studies*, closely associated with the critical turn, “seeks to create a platform to critically engage with academic knowledge production, and generate critical academic and policy knowledge,” claiming that “scholarly expertise is a tool, rather than the end, for critical analysis of social phenomena affecting Roma, contributing to the fight for social justice” (*Critical Romani Studies Journal* 2021). With this book, I hope to contribute to the conversation that began among critically-minded academics by studying the roots and forms of antigypsyism, and striving to unpack Roma identity in different national contexts. More specifically, this book participates in the endeavor to understand and deconstruct narratives about Roma by studying educational institutions as a site where these narratives are employed, challenged, and negotiated.

### Notes on Methodology

In this book, I rely on historical analysis and ethnographic research that was conducted between August 2012 and September 2013 in Hungary and Russia; my analysis is also informed by short fieldwork trips I took between 2014 and 2019. I consider ethnographic research “empirically sound, theoretically vibrant, epistemologically innovative, and normatively grounded study of politics” (Schatz 2009, 4). During ethnographic research, I heavily relied on participant observation, “in which a researcher takes part in daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture” (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 1; quoted in McCall 2006, 4).

During my regular site visits in the two countries, I attended and taught classes in the local school, tutored children in the charity buildings, visited homes, attended funerals, birthdays, holidays, and celebrations, joined families for lunches, had abundant cups of coffee, smoked cigarettes, and simply listened and observed. It took several months to be accepted by local communi-

ties, and even longer to gain trust. Soon I found myself engaging in activities with Roma youth: we ate ice cream together, gossiped about teachers, danced, and played table football. At the end of each day, I reflected on my experience and recorded my thoughts, producing lengthy pages of field notes.

Historical data collection mainly involved archival work and content analysis of textbooks. The most significant archival research I conducted was in the Russian State Library, where I had access to Romani language textbooks from the 1920s and 1930s Soviet Union. While there was no comparable data in Hungary, I was able to look through archival sources from the same time period, newspapers and textbooks, at the National Educational Library and Museum in Budapest. I also heavily relied on secondary sources and research for my historical examination.

Fieldwork largely consisted of semi-structured and open-ended interviews, as well as participant observation. During participant observations I also regularly shared my camera with the children so they could record their own experiences. Then, I had the photos printed and handed them out to the children and their families. Eventually, some families invited me to their homes to take family photos so they could frame and hang them on their walls. On nearly all occasions I was warned by non-Roma about the dangers of leaving my camera with the Roma, yet each time I received my camera back. Indeed, showing trust in the face of suspicion proved critical in laying a new foundation for our interaction.

These photographs were informative for understanding how Roma saw their own surroundings and what they considered important. Susan Sontag suggests that “photographs are evidence not only of what there is but of what an individual sees, not just a record but an evaluation of the world” (Sontag 1990, cited in Niskač 2011, 140). Similarly, Sarah Pink argues that it is important to understand “how local people use photography, art, drawing, video and other (audio-)visual media to represent the private and public narratives and contexts of their lives” (2009, 114). In her ethnographic research with Roma minorities in Hungary, Annabel Tremlett (2017) also used photographs to examine non-stereotypical images and lived realities of Roma. Photo elicitation in Tremlett’s research allowed the researcher to “put more of the power into the hands of the researched” (2017, 725).

I conducted over one hundred semi-structured interviews with Roma parents, community members, NGO leaders, activists, teachers, and various experts in two countries. In addition, I also conducted surveys, attended classes as a participant observer, taught in formal and non-formal educational

settings, and had enriching conversations with NGO workers, politicians, charity leaders, and teachers. In Russia, the survey was conducted by a research assistant, a female Roma respected by the community, over a period of approximately one month in February 2013. The research assistant surveyed a total of 25 households, which consisted of 149 people, 88 adults (15 years of age and older), and 61 children. In Hungary, the survey was similarly conducted by a female Roma research assistant well-known by the community, over a period of approximately three months in March–May 2013. The research assistant surveyed a total of 50 individuals (rather than households) and spent considerable time discussing each question with informants. I was often able to accompany the research assistant. In both surveys, all questions were voluntary, and data was self-reported. To protect anonymity, participants were referred to by numbers only.

I began collecting survey data to generate some statistics about the particular groups I studied. Soon I realized the limitations of surveying and using common categories (family, household, income, etc.), whose meaning, admittedly, is strongly embedded in the “modern” or Western culture. Although I have adopted an interpretivist stance from the beginning of my fieldwork, it became obvious to me only after fieldwork that the meanings attributed to various categories were not fixed or apparent. In other words, the meaning of categories I used for surveying did not always accurately reflect the meaning of those categories for respondents. Due to differences in ascribed meaning, during surveying and interviews respondents were allowed to interpret questions how they felt comfortable. Giving space to talk and express emotions on their own terms was important to earn trust and allowed a more profound understanding of the respondent's position. I believe that this unintentional method gave me an exceedingly sharper comprehension of the community, while making survey results porous at times. I acknowledge and embrace this consequence.

The difference in interpretation of some of the key survey categories—family, ethnicity and language—merit some discussion. For instance, the question about the number of family members occasionally took up almost the entire survey time. In one example, a Roma woman surveyed passionately explained her family situation:

When my mother had her last child, she was approximately 15 years older than my youngest sibling, and so I raised her as my daughter, with my own children—can she count? I told this “daughter” when she turned

16 that she was in fact my little sister, but she continued calling me her mother. (Roma woman, interviewed by author, April 13, 2013)

In other families, children raised by grandparents or other relatives, eventually calling their “adopted” parents as mother and father shared their own confusion about what *I* meant as family. Consequently, I questioned my own usage of this word and the meaning behind words generally, given a new cultural milieu. I treated these concerns about the validity of my survey, however, as a fruitful finding on its own. There are cultural and contextual considerations when ascribing meaning to certain concepts, categories, and ideas.

Similarly, I had long discussions regarding ethnicity. Especially in “mixed” families and settlements, many were cautious placing themselves in any one category. In fact, their resentment to even answer the question came from society’s generalizations, as many complained. Often their protest to address their ethnicity began by claiming that “everyone looks at me and only sees a Gypsy, but . . .”—and they would continue with an intricate story of their family tree, with well-off or even noble ancestors, naming Lovara, Romungro, Hungarian and many other family members. “Now you choose which one you put for your survey,” was once the answer. Other times the question about their ethnicity, provoked even stronger feelings and respondents had long tirades about how they are called a certain label, but feel another, or how discrimination affects them because they are “Gypsies.” One woman tried to hide her ethnic background and was neither accepted as Magyar, while among Roma she earned the “blond Gypsy” nickname. She told me her story at length when I inquired about her ethnicity. These stories, once again, pointed out that ethnicity—even if classified in categories, using gradation and allowing for multiple answers—force informants to reduce the complex reality they live in.

Finally, the category of language also posed challenges. For instance, many in the Hungarian settlement reported to speak Romani, some even clarified which dialect. I later accompanied a linguist to this settlement who engaged with my informants in the dialect they reported to speak. It turned out that none of the young people spoke it, and the elderly said they had not used it in so long that they forgot most of it. I suspect that either knowing a few words compelled them to report as if they speak the language, or by claiming to speak Romani they reaffirmed their sense of pride in being Roma. Relatedly, during conversations with other scholars and workers of the local charity, all claimed there are no Boyash people in the settlement, yet quite a few reported speaking that language.

## Structure and Subject of the Book

Perhaps unconventionally, I begin discussing the structure of the book with the front cover, which illustrates what motivated me to write this book. It is a drawing by Dorina Major, kindly shared by Nóra L. Ritók, the director of Real Pearl Foundation (Igazgyöngy Alapítvány). The Foundation has been working with poor youth for over two decades, operating an art school for disadvantaged students, mainly Roma, pursuing a pedagogical philosophy of “child-centered visual education with compensation for underprivileged circumstances” (Real Pearl Foundation 2021). The author of the drawing was in the fourth grade of elementary school at the time this drawing was shared with me, living in one of the poorest towns of Hungary. Coming from a deprived background and raised by a single mother, Dorina performed well in her school and shined in her art education extracurricular classes, with her unique vision, creative ideas, and hard work. Dorina is one example of a talented Roma girl who thrived when given an opportunity to show her skills. This book was inspired by children just like Dorina.

This book is concerned with understanding how group identities acquire their content—how positive or negative stereotypes are formed, disseminated, and perceived. I explore Roma identity formation and contestation comparatively in Hungary and Russia. I show that there are two dominant images of the group—“bad Gypsies” and “good Roma.” The former ethnic category has evolved over centuries, since Roma were increasingly defined as the quintessential Other, a threat to the nation, criminals, uneducated, undisciplined, and backwards. The latter image has been advanced over the last few decades to counter negative stereotypes latent in the Gypsy label. Various non-state actors are promoting a new image—that of proud, empowered, and educated good Roma. I pay attention to how these categories evoke certain feelings, are employed, and rejected or accepted by Roma and non-Roma alike in order to understand the role ethnic labels play in marginalization or empowerment.

I study education practices because the mobilization of identity narratives is distinctly recognizable at these sites—it is in formal and non-formal educational institutions where the bad Gypsy image is most visibly sustained and reproduced, while education is also supposed to be a tool of empowerment and positive identity building. Another driving question of this book is why there is such a difference between the Roma communities I observed in the two countries of research: Russian Roma were more proud of their identity and

better rooted in their countries than Hungarian Roma, despite being less connected to the international Roma movement and with less support from various pro-Roma NGOs.

Following the advice to “start any work concerning Roma with defining terminology” (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 507), I wish to clarify my use of terminology at the outset. Throughout the book, when describing general issues, I use the term Roma. When referring to Gypsies (*cigány* in Hungarian, *tsygan* in Russian), I do so not in a derogatory way; I acknowledge the negative connotations of the word, its meaning rooted in a mistaken label considering Roma as Egyptians, and the current agenda of pro-Roma movement to replace the term Gypsy with that of Roma. Since in this project I am particularly concerned with meanings of ethnic categories, especially in relation to identities, I consequently strive to employ terminology to reflect its original use by my informants, or to expose a certain meaning, connotation, or implication. In other words, my intention is to depict the emic interpretations when I use either Roma or Gypsy as ethnic labels.

In addition, I am also mindful that the word Roma is seldom used in general Russian discourse, and hence my attempts to use it during fieldwork caused confusion (leading non-Roma informants to believe I inquire about Romanians or Romanian Roma). During fieldwork it also became clear to me that Roma/Gypsy identity is increasingly politicized, and siding with one label or another often carried important messages. For example, among some Roma in Hungary, the preferred term was Gypsy. When I used Roma, some assumed I was implying that it is shameful to use the term Gypsy; once a local Roma man in Hungary exclaimed during my field visits: “I am proud to be a Gypsy, I am not ashamed of who I am—we are Gypsies here, not Roma.”

I also recognize the importance of the term Roma, which contributed to the effort of self-definition and construction of a unified, transborder Roma community. The shared Roma identity also allowed for the consolidation of a collective struggle against discrimination and helped political mobilization as well. The term Roma is undoubtedly the dominant category in political and policy language, especially at international levels. Academically, however, for a study that is concerned with the emergence and meaning of ethnic labels, both Roma and Gypsy are important categories to examine and understand. Since the term Gypsy often evokes negative depiction, I describe it as the “bad Gypsy” image; on the contrary, since the term Roma is assumed to imply a positive portrayal, I call it the “good Roma” image. As Mihai Surdu aptly pointed

out, “Gypsies and Roma . . . [are] totalizing classificatory labels [and] politically coined” (2016, 13), and my goal is to understand how these labels came about and are mobilized in educational settings.

The book consists of three broad parts: a theoretical/methodological discussion (Chapters 1 and 2), a historical examination (Chapters 3, 4 and 5), and contemporary assessment (Chapters 7, 8 and 9); the latter part begins with a description of fieldwork, positionality and ethical considerations (Chapter 6). In Chapter 1, I am primarily concerned with providing an honest description of the goals of research and limitations of the findings, in addition to discussing what motivated the writing of this book. Chapter 2 is primarily concerned with clarifying the theoretical framework and concepts that are core to the study. In this chapter, I interrogate issues of nationhood, state power, belonging, and identity politics attempting to elucidate Roma identity formation. I posit that the historical and contemporary definition of nationhood, which is a direct outcome of state building and enduring nation building efforts, is necessary to understand how these exclusionary practices towards Roma evolved and recently met with resistance from non-state actors.

Chapter 3 begins with a historical analysis of Roma in the Habsburg (later Austro-Hungarian) Empire and the Russian Empire. This time plants the seeds of antigypsyism, which accompanied state consolidation and nation building efforts in both cases. Roma were the exemplar of “non-civilized” and “savage” people, who were difficult to manage and tax, who needed to be “humanized” and “modernized.” In the meantime, education was increasingly seen as a tool of forging unity among diverse groups in both empires. In the Russian Empire, this unity was arguably defined along cultural rather than ethnic terms, while in Austria-Hungary, the German-Magyar domination generated an oppressive context for other nationalities and minorities.

After the demise of multinational empires, nationalism and national self-determination redrew the borders of Europe and restructured social organization, including ethnic relations, which is a topic of Chapter 4. This chapter is primarily concerned with introducing the unique nativization policies of the Soviet Union, which laid the ground for institutionalization of Roma culture, the emergence of Roma intellectuals and a sense of belonging. In the meantime, Hungary, having suffered devastating losses after World War One, embarked on a nationalist path of nation building, which fed into the subsequent radicalization of interwar political culture. This chapter briefly notes the importance of the Roma Holocaust as one of the most defining collective events in Roma history.

Chapter 5 provides a non-exhaustive discussion of state socialism in both countries. This era has been extensively covered by other researchers, and here I focus on political education in state socialist schools. I unpack how a changing definition of Roma, as a group that fell victim to capitalist oppression and marginalized by the capitalist society, led to an assimilationist approach to the “Gypsy problem.” With the state goals of modernizing society, proletarianization, and industrialization, Roma were to be assimilated into the proletariat. Forging socialist workers from Roma was the new civilizing mission of the state. Assimilationist policies further marginalized and segregated Roma, who were concentrated in unskilled labor force and lived in poor quality houses, although their access to education significantly improved. Yet, education, just like other aspects of their life, was segregated. The end of this era also allowed for some criticism of the unjust treatment that Roma faced and the prejudiced societies they live in. Simultaneously, an international pro-Roma movement was developing, which generated a new discourse about Roma transborder identity and belonging. The effects of this movement were later more evident in Hungary and negligible in Russia.

My historical analysis was partly informed by Zoltan Barany’s book, *The East European Gypsies: Regime Change, Marginality, and Ethnopolitics* (2002). Barany systematically analyzed rich historical data to study how states under different regimes—imperial, authoritarian, state-socialist, democratic—targeted minorities differently. I have major disagreements with the author’s arguments, especially in his blame on Roma for centuries of marginalization but benefitted from his historical analysis.

I begin the third part, concerned with fieldwork and contemporary analysis of Roma identity formation, with a description of the field site and the conditions of data collection, discussed in Chapter 6. My goal is to reflect on ethical considerations that I faced during ethnographic research, reveal my positionality, and depict the relationship I was able to develop with the communities that informed my findings. Then, Chapter 7 and 8 focus on contemporary analysis of identity formation in the context of educational institutions in nationalizing Hungarian and Russian states. First, I present the political context of current exclusionary nation building in both countries. There are explicit efforts to mobilize educational institutions in order to raise a patriotic future generation imbued with national values, while marginalizing or overlooking some minorities. Often the bad Gypsy image is disseminated and reproduced as part of formal and non-formal educational practices, for example through in-class disciplinary practices, changes to the curriculum, or segregationist practices.

In light of this, the pro-Roma movement is actively laying the foundation for broader discourse change, and indeed a new Roma identity to replace that of the Gypsy, through various formal and non-formal educational projects aimed at empowering Roma and strengthening the Roma culture. I also look at how, and with what success, non-state educational initiatives, led by international institutions, NGOs, and activists, have attempted to inflict values of multiculturalism and advance Roma transnational identity, promoting a positive image of the group. These two chapters present fieldwork findings from various contexts in trying to understand the intricate dynamics within classrooms and other spaces.

Chapter 9 continues the discussion of how identities are negotiated, how Roma perceive of their own and group identities, their sense of belonging and strength of community ties. There are decisive differences between the observed Russian and Hungarian Roma communities, although in both countries they defined themselves in similar terms. The community in Russia retained a strong sense of community, pride in their culture, and felt rooted in Russia. In Hungary, however, the community experienced many conflicts, generational divides, hopeless visions of the future, and a static view of their culture. Yet, in both cases successful initiatives were launched by charismatic Roma people, who acted as a liaison, instigated a positive change, and promoted a dialogue between Roma and non-Roma. This is the topic of Chapter 10 in the Concluding Remarks, where I recount the stories of two charismatic Roma people from the Russian and Hungarian Roma settlements and discuss best practices. Based on this discussion, I conclude that problem-oriented activities that do not prescribe ethnic identities and led by local Roma were able to promote equality and strengthen communal bonds. I also highlight the importance of investing in education of the majority society about tolerance and multiculturalism in general, and Roma culture in particular.



## Chapter 2

# Theories and Concepts—State, Nation, and Identity

*Identity requires difference in order to be, and it converts difference into otherness in order to secure its own self-certainty.*

(Connolly 1991, 64; quoted in Neumann 1999, 207)

There has been robust academic interest for decades in concepts like the nation, nationhood, nationalism, state, society, and national identity, with competing theories and explanations of these phenomena. I primarily focus on literature related to European state and nation building, and take sides with constructivist, rather than primordial approach. For the purposes of this study, I am particularly interested in academic literature that illuminates 1) the effect of state and nation building processes on minority groups; 2) how groups are categorized and managed by states; 3) the role of schools in constructing a nation and the “Other.”<sup>1</sup> In studying social classification of Roma—a process that is inherently historical and political—and the ensuing identity narratives, it is imperative to treat the topic at hand in a historical perspective, recognizing its roots and social consequences.

### Homogenization Efforts During State and Nation Building

I build on the assumption that state and nation building are inherently dynamic and ongoing processes, and that “national identity is an ongoing process of change and adaptation” (Grotenhuis 2016, 212). To distinguish between state and nation building, I use the definitions proposed by the political scientist Johan P. Olsen (2004). He maintains that “state-building refers to

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1 I use the concepts “Other” based on Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978), where he contends that the Occident (West) has created a false image of the Orient (East or the Other), and the two images are binary opposites and should be defined in relation to one another.

the process of building or developing a national political center with considerable resources . . . to penetrate and control a territory and its population,” while “nation-building refers to a process of cultural standardization and homogenization within national borders, and differentiation from the rest of the world” (Olsen 2004, 146). It is also crucial to acknowledge that the formation of nationhood should not be disconnected from state development as the two tend to develop in tandem. Hobsbawm claims that “it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to [a certain kind of modern territorial state, the ‘nation-state’]” (1992, 9–10). Ernest Gellner, too, suggests that what separated the agrarian from industrial society was the fact that states were inescapable in the latter period, to which nationality was central (1983). In other words, with the consolidation of the state, a new social order was established, to which nationalism was key.

Building on existing historical research and analysis, I distinguish five distinct phases of state building in Hungary and Russia, each of which had its own goals, visions of nationhood, and ideas of appropriate subjects/citizens. My argument is summarized in Table 1 below; to develop this framework, I built on works by Ernest Gellner, Zoltan Barany, Charles Tilly, Rogers Brubaker and Anthony Smith. As the table shows, differing policies towards Roma characterized each historical phase. More specifically, the pre-modern phase of state building, which lasted from the seventeenth century to the mid-nineteenth century, was followed by the early-modern period. The pre-modern state is characterized by indirect rule and was primarily concerned with profit-making in the form of tax extraction. With time, state consolidation led to the expansion of formal state institutions, which were tasked, in part, with transforming subjects of the state to a unified nation. This goal redirected the focus from population management and resource extraction to civilizing, modernizing, and homogenizing the population. In the meantime, states were able to increasingly consolidate control over their population. I argue that antigypsyism developed and took root as an outcome of nation building projects in these early phases—pre-modern and early-modern—since Roma were excluded and perennially viewed as non-profitable, undesirable, and backwards. Or put differently, all those who were deemed to be deviants at this time were subject to assimilationist policies.<sup>2</sup>

World War One and the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 was a decisive historical moment that led to profound political changes. I consider this (inter-war) period separately, which includes early socialism in the Soviet Union, and

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2 For example, minority groups in the North of Russia (Slezkine 1994).

**Table 1:** Phases of State Building

<i>Phase of State Building</i>	<i>Pre-modern</i> 17th-18th c.— mid-19th c.	<i>(Early-) Modern</i> Mid-19th c.— WWI	<i>Interwar period</i> Early Socialism 1920s–30s, USSR	<i>State Socialism</i> 1940s–1990	<i>Neo-Modern</i> 1990–Present	
<i>State and its goals</i>	Loose state, indirect rule; extraction of taxes and profit-making	Consolidation of state, direct rule; building a corresponding nation	State should wither away; building communism internationally	Align cultural and national boundaries with (nation) state boundaries	Stalinism, strong authoritarianism; total control of subjects	Re-nationalizing state <sup>3</sup>
<i>What is a nation</i>	Agrarian society, “low culture” <sup>4</sup>	Homogeneous citizens, “high culture” <sup>5</sup>	Socialist workers—globally	Culturally homogeneous members	State-abiding Socialist workers, within one country	Homogeneous
<i>Appropriate citizen</i>	Tax-paying, useful, profitable subjects	Civilized and modern, homogeneous	Class-conscious Communists	Loyalty to the state and imbued with national values	Working class, class conscious proletariats	Patriotic
<i>Policies towards Roma</i>	Sedentarization, managing population and extracting profit	Civilizing mission and/or assimilation	Nativization—Roma identity as part of Soviet nation	Exclusion	Modernization and assimilation into the working class (proletarianization)	State: assimilation Non-State: Roma identity
<i>Dominant tool(s) of nation building</i>	Limited tools (no central authority), no definite nation	School, church, and army	School	School	School, labor	Formal and non-formal education

parallel to that, the political project of re-organizing Europe into nation-states in the aftermath of World War One peace treaties. With rising nationalism and political radicalization, Roma and other minorities were increasingly excluded and marginalized in Hungary at this time. The newly formed Communist Party in the early Soviet Union, in the meantime, experimented with a nationality policy that assumed the elevation of “backwards” nationalities through proper education (and Sovietization) to the ranks of Soviet citizens.

The events of World War Two were devastating for all Roma in Europe and the Soviet Union. After World War Two, under state socialist authoritar-

3 Brubaker defines nationalizing states as “states that are conceived by their dominant elites as nation-states, as states of and for particular nations, yet as ‘incomplete’ or ‘unrealized’ nation-states, as insufficiently ‘national’ in a variety of senses” (Brubaker 1996, 411).

4 I.e., folk transmitted culture (see Gellner 1983).

5 I.e., literacy carried culture (see Gellner 1983).

ian states, Roma were subjected to assimilationist policies and proletarianization efforts. Later, regime change once again brought a new political ideology that (re-)defined state and nation building efforts. I refer to the latter phase as the neo-modern or contemporary era, when non-state actors were increasingly important in providing education and promoting an alternative discourse on Roma identity. Indeed, most attempts at state and nation building throughout history tended to develop policies that treated Roma in a paternalistic manner and regarded them as groups to be “civilized” or “modernized,” hence Roma were continuously categorized as the quintessential “Other,” until relatively recently, when a new discourse emerged endorsing a positive identity.

The next important concepts to define are nationalism, cultural homogenization, and social classification. Nationalism is tightly related to state formation and nation building efforts. Charles Tilly, one of the most known theorists of European state-making, claimed that during the era of national consolidation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,

almost all European governments eventually took steps which homogenized their populations: the adoption of state religions, expulsion of minorities . . . , institution of a national language, eventually the organization of mass public instruction . . . the failure to homogenize increased the likelihood that a state existing at a given point in time would fragment into its cultural subdivisions at some time in the future. (1975, 43–44)

Cultural homogenization was a matter of survival for states, or else they would have fallen apart due to cultural divisions, Tilly maintained.

Daniele Conversi, a scholar of nationalism, also described cultural homogenization as a core aspect of nation building and a “state-led policy aimed at cultural standardization . . . [and] top down process where the state seeks to nationalize the ‘masses’” (2010, 719). Ernest Gellner in his seminal book *Nations and Nationalism* (1983) saw the process of homogenization in terms of congruency between “the political and the national unit,” which he called nationalism, that in turn becomes “a principle of political legitimacy” (Gellner 1983, 1). Gellner also maintained that standardized state education was key in spreading a unified national idea, while promoting social homogeneity and improving literacy (Gellner 1983, 138). Eric Hobsbawm similarly noted that “states would use the increasingly powerful machinery for communicating with their inhabitants, above all the primary schools, to spread the image and heritage of the ‘nation’ and to inculcate attachment to it” (1990, 91). Schools

were then one of the primary institutions that homogenized the population (Gellner 1983; Foucault 1997; Mitchell 1988), and therefore facilitated nation building (e.g., Boli et al. 1985; Boli 1989; Meyer et al. 1979). Pierre Bourdieu has also suggested that schools were one of the principal sites where unified national identities were constructed:

the state contributed to the unification of the cultural market by unifying all codes . . . and by effecting a homogenization of all forms of communication. . . . Through classification systems inscribed in law through bureaucratic procedures, educational structures, and social rituals the state molds mental structures and . . . contributes to the construction of . . . national identity. (Bourdieu 1999, 61)

Standardized culture that fostered a common sense of belonging was carried not only through school education, but also other forms of literary culture; as Benedict Anderson wrote, print-capitalism and in particular, newspapers, reassured that “the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life . . . nationness [became] the most universally legitimate value in the [modern] political life” (1983, 3, 36). In other words, shared national ideas and history, commemoration of national heroes and events, all of these contributed to the creation of a common national identity, indispensable for an “imagined community” to evolve.

As states modernized, the increasingly homogenous populations within state borders also had to be efficiently governed, managed, and controlled. James Scott maintains in *Seeing Like a State* that “[m]odernization required, above all, physical concentration into standardized units that the state might service and administer” (1998, 231). National standardization was essential and “hard-wired into the architecture of the modern state[s]” (Scott 2009, 4). Such standardization efforts were driven by the “logic of homogenization and the virtual elimination of local knowledge” (1998, 302). In other words, a modern state strove to create a standardized, manageable, homogenous “mass society” by “regrouping [the population] in the internally fluid, culturally continuous communities” (Gellner 1983, 22).

Similarly, studying state attitudes towards nomadism, Robbie McVeigh argues that the “obsessive desire to control” motivated state projects of assimilation in the nineteenth century, leading to eradication of misfits, “unwanted elements,” and disorder (1997, 20). Yet, homogenization efforts must not be seen as totalizing. Some scholars have assessed the bottom-up response to imposed

conformity: whether these are “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990) or resistance of state authority (Scott 2009), performance of identities (Pusca 2013), or other forms of “negotiation of Roma identities” (Silverman 1988). Or, at times, historically some states may have been unable to carry out homogenization policies due to insufficient resources or other reasons (e.g., Mironov 2019).

## Managing the Population and Classifying Identities

An integral part of standardization was creating a manageable population that state bureaucratic institutions could oversee and control. Populations are managed through social classifications, which are “categories officially adopted or approved by the state and incorporated into law and administration,” and these categories are attached to certain attributes and labels (Starr 1992, 263, 282). In a similar vein, Michel Foucault argued that to manage the population, people’s bodies, minds, and souls were “normalized” and classified based on pre-determined categories in disciplinary institutions (Foucault 1997). Importantly, social categories or labels acquire meaning, evoke emotions, and are vital to the construction of social identity (Starr 1992). Moreover, ethnic categorization implies high level of generalization and tends to lead to stereotyping.

In the case of Roma, codification and stigmatization of “Gypsy travelers,” among other “outsiders,” unmistakably emerged with state consolidation and “nationalistic fever” in the nineteenth century (Lucassen 1997, 38). These are not only practices of the past but are ongoing today. Labeling Gypsies and other undesirables allowed for state policies to target and stigmatize specific groups. Besides, scientific and political categorization was, and continues to be, essentializing and contributes to the negative image of Roma (Surdu 2016). Through classifying attempts, Roma are relegated to determinism—static culture, fixed social categories and identities, and set narratives. Put differently, classifications tend to be reductionist and reify reality. For instance, during the 2011 census, the Hungarian Central Statistical Office only allowed a common “Gypsy/Roma” category and listed merely “Gypsy language,” thus making Boyash and Romani languages, with its multiple dialects, inseparable and undistinguishable (Arató 2013, 45).

“The politics of official classification,” writes Paul Starr, “can be broken down into series of choices, each a potential source of conflict” (1992, 278). One of these choices is naming a social category. Remarkably, “when referring to the same group, two names may suggest entirely different attributes,”

because “names call to mind other objects and events[,] and color the perception of any category” (ibid., 282). These essentialized labels may trigger advantages or damages, a point well illustrated by Mahmood Mamdani in his book, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2002), where he analyzes the process of essentialized ethnic labeling through what he calls “culture talk.” Mamdani assesses the relationship between cultural and political identity through an in-depth analysis of cultural framing of group identities. “Culture talk” resulted in two political identities—good Muslims and bad Muslims—where the latter became synonymous with backwardness and fanaticism. Mamdani’s “culture talk,” or “predilection to define cultures according to their presumed ‘essential’ characteristic,” is akin to stereotyping, and it tends to encourage collective discipline and punishment (2002, 766–67). It also implies a static culture of the “impenetrable Other,” which is constant and exists outside of history, because “if labeled ‘bad,’ this badness becomes essentialized as part of the inherent make up of . . . race, ethnicity and backwardness” (Khan 2006, 149; Mamdani 2002; 2005).

The question then emerges: how are social categories maintained and internalized by the population? Studies have shown that certain state institutions—such as the police and schools—were critical to the process of labeling and stigmatization of the population, especially Roma. With their perennial goals to normalize and categorize, these disciplinary institutions were charged with stigmatizing and punishing those who deviated from the “norm.” Leo Lucassen, a prominent social historian, in studying the “police practices involved in the surveillance of ‘dangerous’ or ‘suspicious’ persons,” convincingly argued that “in many aspects the Nazi period just continued the traditional labelling of gypsies by the German police” (1997, 30, 46). Building on Michel Foucault’s theory of power, Jennifer Gore (1995) identified several techniques of exercising power in educational institutions, including surveillance, normalization, exclusion, and classification. Gore shows that “individuals and groups are differentiated and classified . . . in the process of knowledge production,” which is connected to the “production of social and educational inequalities” (Gore 1995, 175).

Accordingly, schools are usually described as the “the most important socializing institution” (Nogee 1972, 315) that is tied to the state with its “monopolistic, centrally controlled communication network” (Azrael 1972, 318). With a centralized and state-approved core curriculum, universal schooling has been historically the mechanism “generating citizens” and managing identities through political and cultural socialization (Boli 1989), as well as

“the road leading towards the eradication of non-conformity” (Crowe 1994, 76; also see Kendall 1997). Schools are thus “functional sites” where through “distribution of individuals in space” and teachers’ “ideological power,” identities are disciplined and ordered, and where disciplinary power, which “is exercised through invisibility . . . , impos[ing] on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility,” indeed produces a certain “ceremony of objectification” (Foucault 1997).

In the case of Roma, numerous studies demonstrated that schools were viewed by some Roma communities as “unsuitable institution[s]” where the youth are particularly at risk “to be imbued by a value system that is not theirs and that they have no wish to acquire” (Liégeois 2007, 186; also see Liégeois 1987, Demeter et al. 2000). Due to deep-seated societal discrimination and coercive environments in schools, some Roma families consider schools as an alien institution and are distrustful of them (e.g. Liégeois 2007, Demeter et al. 2000, Messing 2012, Neményi 2007). Consequently, schools have also become sites where attitudes and beliefs were “re-enacted and came into conflict” for minority groups, such as Roma (Liégeois 1987, 140).

The effects of school discipline on minority children have been explored outside of Romani Studies as well. An outstanding example is Ann Ferguson’s study of African American boys in the United States education system, in which the author examined how black stereotypes influence teachers’ treatment of pupils, and how young boys in turn construct a sense of self under these circumstances. Ferguson impressively demonstrated that schools are where discipline becomes a “powerful occasion for identification” (Ferguson 2001, 2). Ferguson argued that schools “create, shape, and regulate social identities,” and in the process of school labeling, exercise of rules and school punishment make “bad boys,” or black masculinity (ibid.). Analogously, Roma students in schools are disciplined—normalized, excluded and punished—according to the dominant negative stereotypes:

Attempts to racialize Roma pupils were apparent in various schools [in Hungary] . . . and Roma were treated differently due to stereotypical representation: their poor hygienic standards, little interest or ability to learn in school, early marriages and laziness. Often teachers and non-Roma parents complained about non-Roma students being “Gypsified” by picking up behavioral patterns, dressing, and speaking style from Roma classmates. (Dunajeva 2017, 60–61)

Overall, there is a need to problematize and understand how states label populations and recognize the social and political consequences of these categorization practices. In addition, it is imperative to supplement our understanding with bottom-up responses from those being categorized. It is naïve to simply assume that “people subsumed under [one] label form a homogeneous ethnic group” and subscribe to that very label, since labeling does not necessarily conform to the self-definition of the people categorized (Lucassen 1997). This book addresses both concerns.

In addition, although the historical role of education in nation building, cultural homogenization, construction of national identity and population labeling is widely accepted (e.g., Green 1997; Egan 1989), it is worth inquiring about the role of non-state actors providing alternative and non-formal education, and, in some cases, countering the narrative about ethnic labels, categories, and identities.<sup>6</sup> In the case of Roma, the two educational settings—formal and non-formal—often transmit different values and narratives. I found that state schools reportedly marginalize Roma minority, but non-state actors seek to empower them; state policies follow integrationist discourse and assimilationist actions, while many pro-Roma NGOs seek to promote transborder Roma nationhood and empowerment of the minority. I recognize the importance of non-state actors in advancing nation building, especially for transborder groups like Roma (Dunajeva 2021b), and the critical importance of education to nation building efforts (e.g., Staley 1966; Ramirez and Boli 1987).

Schooling, then, poses an important site of tension: do schools empower minorities or marginalize them, while standardizing the population into manageable units? Schools are usually assigned the task of teaching and raising good citizens, as well as empowering and integrating them through education, but they can also adversely serve as an instrument of homogenization and a tool of marginalization. The role of education then merits more discussion. In particular, I analyze the role of formal and non-formal education in constructing or challenging the image of the “Other.” Moreover, I discuss the consequences of the competing messages on Roma identity formation in formal and non-formal educational settings, striving to understand how it affects the relationship between Roma and non-Roma, as well as Roma and their respective states.

While there has been considerable academic attention to the importance of school education in “imagining the nation,” few have studied various

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6 Admittedly, in both Hungary and Russia renewed efforts of centralization and nationalization of education have been underway.

responses to the homogenizing, top-down disciplinary measures in schools.<sup>7</sup> I wish to contribute to this gap in knowledge by assessing how Roma children in schools and settlements act in the context of essentialized identities—the bad Gypsies, as historically constructed by the state, and the good Roma, as recently advanced by non-state actors. Notably, I do not suggest that these sets of actors are either homogeneous or singularly responsible for transmitting these images; I instead study how these images were generated, and how they are employed, mobilized, and used to produce a certain response through education.

### Comparative and Historical Study: Roma in Hungary and Russia Throughout Time

While this book strives to portray a historical and grounded study of the role educational institutions and school discipline play in Roma identity formation, case studies are instructive for scrutinizing various phenomena central to social sciences and current political debates, signifying the dynamic and shifting nature of even the most entrenched concepts, such as power, nation, state, and identity. A Hungary-Russia comparison provides a helpful context in which to study the interplay between these concepts and display state-society dynamics. The two countries share many similar characteristics, and yet there are also major differences, providing fertile ground for testing the impact of various institutions or actors, and assessing their role on Roma identity formation.

Of the most palpable differences I observed during fieldwork was that Russian Roma appeared more rooted and content, despite my expectations. My research was partially driven by the desire to understand what makes Russian Roma, or the ones I have studied, to feel more at home in Russia and to feel prouder of their identity and culture than their Hungarian Roma counterparts. I set the goal to uncover what role education—in the past and now—may play in constructing a sense of belonging and identity in the two countries. Table 2 below shows a concise summary of major Roma groups and demographics in the two countries.

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7 See an excellent example by Petra Margita Gelbart in her PhD dissertation “Learning Music, Race and Nation in the Czech Republic” (2010), where she examines how Roma students socialize through music instruction in Czech public schools.

**Table 2:** Subgroups and Number of Roma in Russia and Hungary

	<i>Roma in Russia</i>	<i>Roma in Hungary</i>
<i>Largest subgroups</i>	Ruska Roma, Kalderash	Romungro, Vlach, Boyash
<i>Number of Roma</i>	204 958 (2010 census)	315 583 (2011 census)
<i>Percentage of total population</i>	0.15%	3.16%

Source: Kapitány (2015) and Demeter and Chernykh (2018, 119).

In terms of historical parallels, both Russia and Austria-Hungary were large empires before World War One. After the collapse of empires, the Soviet Union uniquely implemented a nativization period during early years of communism (during the 1920s and '30s), which was characterized by a state-managed Roma identity project. Promotion of minority cultures served the purpose of educating subjects on dogmatic principles of Marxism-Leninism and ultimately building a post-ethnic Communist society. At this time, Roma culture was institutionalized as part of the Soviet social fabric and Roma were entitled to education in Romani language. This short-lived policy, I argue, had long-lasting effects on Roma identity, and there was no comparable policy in Hungary at the time.

Hungary joined the Communist Bloc after World War Two, and state policies towards Roma in the two countries were relatively similar at this time. Then, both went through regime change and attempted to build a new, democratic society, to only drift back to semi-authoritarianism in the recent years. In some sources Viktor Orbán, Hungary's prime minister, is referred to as the "Vladimir Putin of his country" (*The Telegraph* 2013; *NY Times* 2011; Origo 2013). The current political resemblance is surprising considering that Hungary was one of the most promising countries after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and was among the pioneers in joining international institutions, transitioning to a free-market economy, and adopting democracy. Despite comparable undemocratic tendencies, Russia's intolerance of non-state actors is increasingly draconian, while Hungary's membership in the EU since 2004 until relatively recently ensured a more peaceful presence of NGOs (Human Rights Watch 2018). However, in the last few years there is a "shrinking civic space for civil society" in Hungary (TASZ 2017).

Until faced with an increasingly repressive political and legal environment in Hungary, Budapest-based actors, such as the Open Society Foundations, Roma Education Fund, and the European Roma Rights Centre, to name a few, have been the most influential in advancing the pro-Roma movement

(e.g., Kóczé and Rövid 2012). In the last few years, many have left: the Open Society Foundations closed international operations in Budapest in 2018 and moved to Berlin, the European Roma Rights Centre relocated from Budapest to Brussels the same year, and the Roma Education Fund is relocating its headquarters from Budapest to Belgrade in 2020. The Hungarian Roma I encountered during fieldwork were significantly more aware of the transborder Roma movement than Russian Roma; an analysis of the effects of the associated pro-Roma discourse on rootedness and identity of Roma is informative and timely.

Efforts to displace the bad Gypsy image with that of good Roma had more complex consequences than their proponents had foreseen. My analysis shows that promoting and maintaining these conflicting messages may have unintentionally led to, on the one hand, distrust and alienation between educated and non-educated members of the Roma community. Some scholars referred to this phenomenon as a “crisis of legitimacy [of Roma identity],” which resulted as a consequence of exclusion of the educated upper- and middle-class Roma, who “no longer live in traditional conditions” (Gheorghe 1997, 157; Ladányi et al. 2006; Koulis 2005).

On the other hand, the transborder Roma movement and Roma identity pose a conundrum in terms of belonging: should Roma feel more affiliation with their countries or with other Roma Europe-wide, or perhaps with both? I observed a struggle, where Roma often find themselves estranged in their countries, while also find it hard to find their place in a yet incomplete Roma transnational movement. In addition, series of interviews with non-Roma revealed that the promotion of good Roma image, along with the “Western” criticism regarding discriminatory practices against Roma, was perceived by some non-Roma as imperious, arrogant and hypocritical, which then fueled anti-Western attitudes, but also prejudice against Roma.<sup>8</sup>

Table 3 below is a summary of the main actors in Hungary and Russia and their characterization, as well as the way education is employed to construct a certain image of Roma, and the normative discourse it generates regarding the group. For instance, while Russia, with a small Roma minority, has a strong authoritarian state and weak presence of non-state actors, in Hungary Roma are the most visible minority and there are more non-governmental organizations. In both countries, non-state actors strive for Roma empowerment, supporting Roma role models and positive identity building, while often focusing

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8 The concept of the “West” was used broadly in both countries, and usually implied either the European Union, Europe, the United States or non-state actors/civil society.

on the importance of the youth. In Hungary, I observed the goal of political mobilization and transborder nation building as more prominent compared to Russia. In both countries I observed state schools pursuing an increasingly nationalist curriculum, while disciplinary measures were heavily influenced by negative stereotypes about Roma. I observed less awareness of the good Roma discourse in Russia, and the crisis of belonging affected Russian Roma to a lesser degree.

**Table 3:** Actors in Russia and Hungary in Comparison

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Non-State Actors</i>		<i>State Actors</i>		<i>Roma/Gypsies<sup>9</sup></i>	
	<i>Russia:</i> <u>weak</u> sector	<i>Hungary:</i> <u>strong</u> sector, in- creasingly weakened by state	<i>Russia:</i> <u>strong</u> and authoritar- ian	<i>Hungary:</i> <u>powerful,</u> increasing- ly undemo- cratic	<i>Russia:</i> <u>small</u> minority	<i>Hungary:</i> the <u>most</u> <u>visible</u> minority
<i>View of Roma</i>	Empowerment and positive identity, at times creation of ‘transnational Roma nation’		Disadvantaged, marginalized group in need of integration/assimilation and assistance		Ethnic or locality-based affiliations	
<i>School</i>	Education of Roma elite/educated class, and extracurricular activities		Nationalist curriculum, militarization of schools, focus on patriotism		Desire to be educated, fear of discrimination	
<i>Content or effect of education</i>	Roma national symbols, standardized Romani language, at times political mobilization and representation		Reproduction of stereotypes		Negotiation of identity: resistance, internalization, performance, assimilation	
<i>Goal</i>	Positive identity, political empowerment or transnational nation-building		Integration/assimilation		To be treated with respect	
<i>Identity Narrative</i>	“Good Roma”		“Bad Gypsies”		Crisis of Belonging	

9 I acknowledge that discussing Roma/Gypsies as one homogeneous group does not do justice to the diversity of the group, yet, for the sake of analysis, in this table I refer to Roma/Gypsies broadly. I also wish to stress again that my arguments are based on observations and collected data from Roma communities studied in the two countries, so findings may not be generalizable, and only suggestive.



Part II

# **Bad Gypsies and Good Roma in Historical Perspective**



## Chapter 3

# Early Nation and State Building in Empires

*The indisputable truth [is] that a whole could never be perfect if the parts remained in disorder and disarray.*

Catherine the Great (1761–1796)  
(Quoted in Slezkine 1994, 67)

This chapter assesses pre-modern and early-modern state and nation building efforts, which formed the foundation of the enduring bad Gypsy image. I highlight that initially control and extraction of resources were the primary goals of states. Hence, series of efforts targeted itinerant Roma and rewarded settled or “useful” Roma. With time, due to factors such as the rise of nationalism, industrialization, and the consolidation of the state, Roma in both Russia and Hungary were increasingly targeted by the state through “civilizing” policies. These policies can also be seen as governing methods and means of rational administration that were supposed to help multiethnic empires manage their diverse population. However, in the Habsburg Monarchy, assimilation dominated, and this was characterized by the oppression of everything that defined Roma at the time—their language, culture, traditions, professions, and way of life. In the Russian Empire, the civilizing mission seemingly took the form of “civic integration,” but also harbored assimilationist undertones. In other words, if in the Russian Empire “Gypsies were poised to flourish as productive, mature, assimilated members of Russian society,” then civic integration clearly led to the “extinction of Gypsies as a distinctive people” (O’Keeffe 2014, 113).

### Early State and Nation Building: Control over the “Other”

In the time of early empires, primarily in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a pre-modern state was not yet fully consolidated and the focus was on profit-making; in order to increase revenue, the state had to manage the popula-

tion by imposing taxes and enforcing tax collection mechanisms. Importantly, in pre-modern societies the state had no interest in promoting cultural homogeneity as the cultural differentiation ensured a society, where “below the horizontally stratified minority at the top, there [was] another world, that of laterally separated, inward-turned [communities], tied to the locality by economic need” (Gellner 1983, 10). Consider the following excerpt from an influential study about “Gypsies” written in 1783 by the historian and geographer Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann:

Every man has taxes to pay, and powers to exert, the Gipsies none of the least; if he does not know how to make use of them, let the state teach him, and keep him in leading strings till the end is attained. If the root of this depravity lies so deep, in the first generation, that it cannot be removed immediately, a continuation of the same care will, in the second or third descent, be sure of meeting its reward. Now let us reflect on a Gipseey, when he has discontinued his Gipseey life, consider him with his fecundity and numerous family, who being reformed, are made useful citizens, and we shall perceive how great want of economy it was to throw him away as dross. (Quoted in O’Keeffe 2013, 3)

Arguably, the state was interested in “extracting taxes, maintaining the peace, and not much else” (Gellner 1983, 10). I disagree with Gellner’s “not much else” clause, and suggest that most importantly, states needed to be able to administer their population, which necessitated a thorough scientific understanding and classification of various groups living on the territory of their states, which took the form of census, ethnographic examination and formal registration, in order to make them into profitable subjects. State control over subjects was also important for modernizing and civilizing missions, which were to further improve profitability of the subjects. As a result, groups not under state control were particularly vulnerable to being framed as “deviant” and “backwards,” providing a sharp contrast to state-led modernization efforts, exemplified through the lifestyle of the “modern” society.

It is only after “normalizing” and “civilizing” the “savage Gypsies” that more explicit efforts of homogenization arose. It took a relatively consolidated state to establish a sufficient bureaucratic mechanism able to permeate the entire society and make sufficient bonds to constitute a nation, either by assimilating, integrating or excluding groups of people. Both Hungary and Russia were part of multi-ethnic empires that formed before the emergence of

national consciousness. With nation building efforts and the rise of nationalism, the “affinity of modernity with the nation-state” made the abolition of “unwanted elements” even more urgent (McVeigh 1997, 20). The goal, therefore, became to create a “standardized . . . metric world of facts” with a “mass society” by “regrouping [the population] in the internally fluid, culturally continuous communities” (Gellner 1983, 22).

Increasingly, direct rule substituted intermediaries and indirect rule (Tilly 1992). At this time, “In one of their more self-conscious attempts to engineer state power, rulers frequently sought to homogenize their population in the course of installing direct rule” (ibid., 106–107). This ensured loyalty, more effective communication, and easier administration. Systematic and centrally enforced homogenization was an essential component, which enabled states to create not only a manageable and legible population, but also a coherent nation that was loyal to the state. Admittedly, however, “homogeneity is the Scylla [monster in Greek mythology] of exclusionary politics of a dominant identity” (Grotenhuis 2016, 111). In other words, an indispensable byproduct of homogenization was marginalization of groups deemed as outsiders.

For Hungary and Russia, the rise of nationalism, and with that, intensified efforts of nation building, came at the end of the second half of the nineteenth century, sparked by the 1848 Revolution and the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise for Hungary, and for Russia with a series of uprisings and war losses in the nineteenth century, especially the Polish rebellion of 1863. These events marked the beginning of a more pronounced Magyarization and Russification of minorities. Russification and Magyarization policies had cultural as well as administrative components. Cultural homogenization was a “state-led policy aimed at cultural standardization . . . [and] top down process where the state seeks to nationalize the ‘masses’” (Conversi 2010, 719), whereas the administrative component refers to the imposition of the dominant language in administrative and bureaucratic state structures (Weeks 2004, 474–75). The two components did not have to appear together. Homogenization—Magyarization and Russification—manifested differently, assumed distinctive policies, approaches, and goals over time. Even the meaning of what Magyarization and Russification meant differed over time. I use temporal demarcation for analytical purposes, while I recognize the processual nature of the changes—discrete events might have accelerated, rather than caused homogenization.

In Hungary, by the late nineteenth century, practically all minorities were under pressures to assimilate:

As the nationalist creed spread to the masses, nobody could escape the constant pressures for Magyarisation . . . Ever since, non-Hungarian speakers have been looked upon with suspicion, marginalised or eventually assimilated. This led to a situation of “entry” versus “exit,” where “entry” meant assimilation, without which the only other available alternative was “exit,” that is, emigration and asylum. The majority of Hungary’s inhabitants were therefore Magyarised. (Conversi 2007, 374)

In contrast, the Russian Empire was arguably more inclusive and relatively tolerant, which was appealing to non-Russians as a path to progress. Cultural homogenization was only a “latecomer to the arsenal of tsarist state-building” (Suny 2001, 53).

### *Roma in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Hungary*

The edited volume of Barna Mezey (1986) is a valuable source of historical knowledge about Hungarian Roma. The volume is a detailed chronicle of the “Gypsy question” in Hungary from the fifteenth century until 1985 through meticulously selected letters, documents, and archival sources. The author concludes that one of the primary lines of tension in the feudal era (until the end of the nineteenth century) was the difference in political attitudes between the tax-extracting absolute state and the autonomous Roma communities (Mezey 1986, 12). Policies concerning Roma at the time reveal a desire to reach the group for the purpose of state control, regulation, and tax extraction.

For administrative purposes, the Habsburg state established the office of Gypsy Affairs, which functioned from 1783 until 1786 to oversee and regulate Roma in the monarchy (Mezey 1986, 16). Another institution of control was that of *vajda*. In H.M.G. Grellmann’s writings from 1786, originally titled *Historischer Versuch über die Zigeuner*, about the mechanisms of control and governing of Roma in Europe, he detailed the institution of *vajda* in Hungary and Transylvania.<sup>1</sup> Grellmann, perhaps credulously, posed the question of how a legitimate state could allow such self-rule within its territory. In fact, the purpose of *vajda* was indeed to assure state control over Roma, as Mezey suggests in his study:

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1 In this context, *vajda* refers to the leader of given Roma group(s). An apt definition of this title is the following: “Both *vaida* (*vajda*) and *voevod* were titles used historically in Hungary, Romania, Wallachia and Moldavia that designated leadership, combining varying degrees of non-Romani authority with internal election” (Sierra 2019, 288).

through their vajda they [Roma] were more easily mobilized and used for various purposes . . . these superintendents, who ruled over groups of Gypsies in various counties . . . were placed to their position by the [imperial] court . . . Each Gypsy had to pay them one forint each year. By the deadline, a tax collector visited each county seat, when Gypsies had to appear to fulfill their duty. In order to assure that all taxes are collected, town and village authorities were ordered to support the tax collectors . . . to support them through military means if needed. (Mezey 1986, 58)

The decrees of the Transylvanian Principality from as early as 1560 clearly stipulated the regulation of “Gypsy taxation”: “every Gypsy with a tend must pay twice a year 50–50 *dínár*, on the day of Saint George and Saint Michael” (Mezey 1986, 71). And the vajda was instrumental in extracting and collecting these taxes.

Legal documents at the time make a striking contrast between two “types” of Roma: the valuable Roma who were to be protected, and the vagabonds who should be expelled or normalized. In the Habsburg Empire, Roma were continuously targeted by efforts to sedentarize, control, and modernize, and often framed in early legal documents as itinerant, vagrant, and looting peoples (Mezey 1986, 9). Similar to the Russian sources from this time, Roma are described as cowardly, not trustworthy, and reckless. Gedeon Ács, a clergyman who published his observations in 1856 about Roma from before the 1948 Revolution, wrote that the professions of Roma were “not too many”: they were horse dealers, “half-thieves and half-traders,” who excessively praises their horses that can be “in-foal or not in-foal, whatever they wish,” while a “scientist Gypsy” is nowhere to be found (Mezey 1986, 65).

At the same time, early sources also mention Roma who excelled in metalworking skills, for example, and were invaluable for weapon making and repair (Mezey 1986, 9–10). In some cases, Roma received letters of entitlement granted by the state to assure the protection of the profitable Roma. For example, Vladislaus II, King of Hungary from 1490 to 1516, wrote in a letter about their mandate to

Separate Tamás Bolgár Gypsy vajda and his twenty-five traveling tents of Gypsies from the company of other Gypsies and their vajdas, and order them . . . to make bullets and military weapons . . . providing them with safe and free journey on the territory . . . and ability to freely stay and sell their goods. (Mezey 1986, 76)

Ferdinand I, King of Hungary between 1526 and 1564, acquitted “ten tents of Gypsies” from the town of Dés from paying taxes, who were unjustly moved to Újvár “to the detriment of the mines.” In his letter from 1552, he ordered Roma to be moved back to Dés for continuous service, with the assurance that their “freedoms and traditions are maintained” and they are spared of “paying any regular or unusual taxes” (Mezey 1986, 77). Overall, Roma, if they fulfilled some essential functions as metalworkers, barbers, executioners, or street sweepers, tended to become a more integral part of the society, but did not necessarily integrate or assimilate (*ibid.*, 10–11).

A more centralized politics towards Roma in Hungary was first formulated under Maria Theresa (1740–1780), primarily due to the continuous need for taxation, as “one of the main goals of the absolute monarchy was to increase the number of taxpayers,” as well as to improve public safety and modernize the population (Mezey 1986, 14). At this time, some Roma communities were expelled from the Habsburg Empire due to their unacceptable transient lifestyle (Koulish 2005, 313) or as a result of Roma becoming “obsolete,” that is, their work was no longer considered necessary (Mezey 1986, 11). Furthermore, Maria Theresa issued a proclamation in 1773 in an effort to sedentarize and modernize Roma—their huts were demolished, and there was an order to imprison those Gypsies who abandoned their new homes (Wagner 1987, 34). Many Roma children were kidnapped to be “re-culturated”—they were placed in foster homes to be turned into “good Hungarians and Christians,” and were to be called “new Hungarians” or “new peasants.”

The Empress’s son, Joseph II (1780–1790), who continued Maria Theresa’s policies of enlightened absolutism, ordered Roma groups to settle in villages that were closely watched and controlled by government officials (Koulish 2005, 313). In his own rulings, Joseph II referred to “virtuous Royal Decrees” regarding “better regulation and returning [Gypsies] to the proper course of action,” such as his decree from 1783 which forbade Roma marrying other Roma, prohibited horse keeping and begging, ordered Roma to settle and work in the fields or acquire a profession, and allowed for punishment in case of resistance (Mezey 1986, 85–94). Furthermore, it was Joseph II who recognized the significance of education and targeting the youth in order to permanently settle nomadic groups and make Roma communities manageable. The emperor also issued a decree to force each Roma child to enroll in state-owned educational institutions (Wagner 1987, 39). The “Gypsy politics” of both Maria Theresa and Joseph II was described by observers at the time as a “humanitarian solution” and as “enlightened” policies (Mezey 1986, 14).

In short, until the eighteenth century, Roma in the Habsburg Empire co-existed as part of the broader society, and often distinguished themselves with their sought-after skills. Then, beginning in the eighteenth century, the “Gypsy question” was treated in a more centralized manner and with growing urgency (Mezey 1986). The approach to minorities, including Roma, once again changed in the aftermath of the 1848 Revolution. The Revolution was sparked by the cultural and political oppression that Magyars experienced by their Austrian counterparts; at the time, Hungary was characterized by a nationalist revival and the ideology of “one nation in one state” was gaining popularity.

The subsequent compromise (1867) that restored peace with the Habsburgs and created two internally sovereign kingdoms in essence left minorities defenseless against “Hungarian hegemonist ambitions” (Crowe 1994, 82). Magyarization efforts in Hungary started after the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise (for example, see Bancroft 2005 for placing the time of Magyarization at this event).<sup>2</sup> What perhaps best illustrates the change in ethnic composition of Budapest: “Budapest went from about 80 percent German-speaking in 1848 to about 80 percent Magyar-speaking in 1880” (Freifeld 2001).

Intensified industrialization and capitalist transformation also contributed to the rise of nationalism and marginalization of Roma at the time (Horváth 1963). As a consequence of industrialization and capitalist transformation, Roma labor was no longer in demand and their services did not constitute an integral part of village life any more (Mezey 1986, 18). In addition, a significant number of Roma immigrated to Hungary between 1840 and 1893, virtually doubling the number of Roma, causing anxiety among the non-Roma population and fueling antigypsyism in the country (Kállai n.d.).

The Nationality Law of 1868 declared Hungarian as the state language, and education policies were used as vehicles of Magyarization, making Hungarian a compulsory subject in schools and mandating all teachers to speak the language.<sup>3</sup> Initially, however, appeals for Magyarization were balanced by demands for tolerance and equality, hence immediately after the compromise there were relatively moderate nationality policies, for example, permitting the use of minority languages. However, “by 1879 when the act was revised, official enthusiasm for national minority language education, or the use of minor-

2 The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 marked the beginning of dual monarchy and partially restored the sovereignty of the Kingdom of Hungary.

3 Although these rules were sabotaged in some schools, nevertheless the imbalance between the developing Hungarian and non-Hungarian cultures was heavily shifted towards the former (e.g., Maracz 2012).

ity language in other official capacities, had waned and there was a reversion to a more extreme policy and practice of Magyarization” (New 2014, 174).

Assimilationist policies often took the form of “grammatical Magyarization” through education, which was “the most important means of culture and social development” (Crowe 1994, 82, 84–85). Initially, however these policies “had promoted the Magyarization of schools and of local administration [with] only infrequent attempts to interfere in the activities of the nationalities’ own organizations. The established practice was to legislate Magyarization and to avoid repressive measures as far as possible” (Szász 2002, 696).

Increasingly, Hungary was re-conceptualized as “a unitary Hungarian national state, where the ideas of state and nation were to be equal” (Crowe 1994, 82). In the pursuit of national autonomy, minority groups were first ignored and later outright repressed by the Hungarian state. The policy of Magyarization was explicitly formulated “in an attempt to transform the Kingdom of Hungary into the Magyar nation-state,” according to Kálmán Tisza, who was the Prime Minister of Hungary between 1875 and 1890 (Kamusella 2009, 553). When Baron Dezső Bánffy became the Prime Minister of Hungary from 1895 to 1899, he

considered that this [earlier, more moderate] approach was “unsystematic and inconsistent” and looked for a more lasting solution. He wanted to deal with the problem in a more institutionalized and bureaucratic fashion. The government, in his view, had to monitor closely the national minorities’ cultural and political activities, and to consistently apply nationalistic principles in legislation and administrative practice, as well as in its policies regarding economic, educational, and Church affairs. (Szász 2002, 696–97)

Roma were also repressed by these policies, and seen as not integrated, deviant and a threat to the fabric of national society. Andres Blomqvist’s well-researched study of Szatmár (Satu-Mare) County in nineteenth-century Transylvania illustrates well how despite the suspicion of the authorities, Roma, in fact, were economically well-integrated:

half the Roma in Szatmár County worked in industry (42 per cent) or were musicians (7 per cent). In the city of Szatmár-Németi most Roma industrial workers were employed in brick factories . . . and carried out heavy physical work. In other parts of the county and in Hungary in general, Roma were mainly employed as agricultural workers. (2014, 84)

Nevertheless, the nationalist discourse that permeated Hungarian politics called on “landowners not to hire day laborers from among the Romanian and ‘Gypsy’ populations,” as expressed Count István Bethlen (who also served as the Prime Minister from 1921 to 1931) in his 1907 speech (Blomqvist 2014, 84).

Some refer to the implementation of austere Magyarization policy as “Hungary’s regional colonization” (Blomqvist 2014, 33), referring to the subjugation of non-Magyars and establishing an ethnic hierarchy among the population. This paternalistic, colonial mentality is unyieldingly clear in the ethnographic and scientific studies of the time. For instance, Herrmann Antal, one of the most known Hungarian ethnographers in the early twentieth century, wrote that

the Gypsy race [czigány faj] is essentially childish, unable to decide about their own fate. Appropriate people, the society, the state must educate, guide them . . . if needed with force . . . a little cruelty must be done in the name of humanitarianism . . . the state must take guardianship of those children of the nation, whose biological guardians have failed in terms of today’s civilization. (quoted in Dupcsik 2018, 66)

Other sources, such as the visual representation of Roma at the time, similarly represented Roma as uncivilized, beast-like peoples (Szuhay 2002).

The end of the nineteenth century brought with it several changes that culminated in an increasingly consistent and pervasive bad Gypsy image. In the past, Roma constituted part of the everyday life of agrarian and early industrial societies, yet slowly, as industrialization and modernization intensified, their place in society became unstable. With their economic role depreciated, Magyarization efforts further downgraded Roma language, culture, and traditions. With assimilationist policies, the “Gypsy stigma” persisted, and consequently, the bad Gypsy image was further preserved and reinforced.

As the ardent report by the Ministry of Education and Culture claims, “the early nineteenth century witnessed the overwhelming victory of the Hungarian language at all level of education, following the decision in 1840 by the National Diet declaring Hungarian the official language of the State,” assuring “overwhelming power and control of the state over the content and organisation of the whole education system” (2008, 7). After six years of compulsory education were introduced in 1868, a year after the 1867 Compromise, the goal was to reach out to all peoples; a testament to that is the drop of illiteracy from 68.7 to 31.3% between 1870 and 1910 (ibid.).

*Roma in Eighteenth and Nineteenth-Century Russia*

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century Russian Empire, the state's dual goal of maximizing profit and modernization was equally dominant. In the eighteenth century, nomadic groups in the Russian North were subjugated to paying a tribute (initially a fur tribute) and were considered "foreigners" until they took "a solemn oath of allegiance" to "soldiers, mercenaries and Cossacks led by Moscow-appointed administrators" (Slezkine 1994, 18).<sup>4</sup> Scientific inquiry aimed at discovering "if foreigners in question possessed anything of value" so as to make annexing the new land profitable for the state (*ibid.*, 38). These examples demonstrate that the goal was to make distant groups into tribute-paying, registered subjects under the control of the state.

Assimilation or homogenization was not the primary objective. State-policies "were based on the understanding that the Russians would uphold the local customs . . . [a]s long as the *iasac* [fur tribute] kept coming in" (Slezkine 1994, 30). Furthermore, "the natives who agreed to pay *iasac* received royal protection and the title of 'peaceful,' but they did not become Russian" (*ibid.*, 43). Modernization was imperative for making a profitable and obedient society, as well as reaching out and exercising control over the furthest groups that inhabited the vast Russian Empire. Similarly, in the case of Roma in the Russian Empire, the central goal was bringing them under state control, hoping to "turn Gypsies into human beings . . . and then keep them within the state as useful subjects," so they can lead "productive and settled lives" (Crowe 1994, 76, 156). Their deviancy was expressively described by a minister in Lithuania in 1787: "Gypsies in a well-ordered state are like vermin on an animal's body" (quoted in Crowe 1994, 157).

Under Peter the Great, who ruled the Russian Empire from 1721 until 1725 and significantly expanded the land under his control, the Russian Senate oversaw the administration and collection of taxes and issued decrees regarding Roma settlement. In 1733, Roma in Russia were ordered by Anna Ivanovna, the Empress of Russia from 1730 to 1740, "to pay taxes to help form a military regiment"; in 1766, under the rule of Catherine the Great, the Senate imposed a 70-kopek tax on Gypsies (Crowe 1994, 154). At this time, in the Ukrainian territories Roma were regarded as "unpleasant" and were ordered to pay "a fixed tax into the Military Treaty of Little Russia"; in the Polish territories,

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4 Also known as "Peoples of the North," which refers to the indigenous groups in the Russian North, Siberia, and the Far East.

a prefect arrested a Roma man, against whom no offense had been proven, simply because “from [his] way of life there is no profit” (*ibid.*, 154–160). For better control, Roma were settled in government villages, starting in 1803 (Crowe 1994, 158). Nicholas I, who ruled the Russian Empire from 1825 until 1855, settled 752 nomadic Roma families in two villages in Bessarabia (today Moldova), with houses and fertile land.<sup>5</sup>

Russification policies under the rule of Catherine the Great (1762–1796) referred to “promoting uniform Russian laws,” while respecting “local traditions, privileges, and laws” and fostering “ethnic and religious tolerance” (Hoogenboom 2012, 83). In this sense, Russification denoted political and legal integration rather than cultural and linguistic assimilation. According to the historian Theodore Weeks, this type of administrative Russification “became nearly universal after the 1860s . . . [while] cultural russification . . . limped behind” (2004, 474). The driving force behind administrative Russification was to assure loyalty to the Tsar and preserve the borderlands, especially with expected secessionist movements and the rise of anti-Russian nationalism.

Affiliation with the nation in a vast and diverse empire like Russia could hardly take on a strictly ethnic character. With its enormous peasant population, even if they were of the “Great Russian nationality,” nevertheless they “had little national consciousness in the sense of a feeling of solidarity and shared experience with other Russians throughout the empire,” and tended to identify with their village or region, rather than the nation (Weeks 2004, 474). After the Polish uprising of 1863, “there was a hardening of the official line taken toward non-Russians” (Weeks 2001, 105). Some scholars argue that the uprising marked the beginning of more intensified Russification policies: “strictly the policy of ‘Russification’ can be spoken of as the government’s official line only after the Polish rebellion of 1863” (Polvinen 1995, 18; see also Weeks 1996).

Similarly, Brigid O’Keeffe, a historian of imperial Russia and the Soviet Union, maintains that governing and managing the population in the late imperial period in Russia was through “forging of civic unity in the face of ethnic diversity” (O’Keeffe 2014, 127). Rationalization and control of Russia’s population—enormously sizeable and diverse—was to be done through “civic integration” (*ibid.*, 111). To that end, the imperial state attempted to modernize and civilize groups such as Roma to turn them into proper citizens. As historian M. M. Plokhinskii wrote in 1890:

5 Kalinin and Kalinina suggest that by the 1880s these villages ceased to exist, and Roma families burned down their houses (2001, 243).

The Russian government in the eighteenth century treated the Gypsies of Little Russia (*tsygane Malorossii*) in an extremely caring manner: in all cases when it was possible, it attempted to guard the Gypsy population from any insult . . . [the imperial Russian state had attempted] to make ordinary citizens of Gypsies without employing violence, but instead acting with meekness, words, and respect. (Plokhinskii 1890, 109–110, 113; quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 120)

O’Keeffe, in her thorough analysis of six ethnographic studies about Roma published in the Russian Empire between 1878 and 1901, showed that the imperial Russian state deemed Gypsies “capable of civilization,” and that the state must take on the responsibility of guiding and uplifting them (2014). This approach starkly differed from that in Europe at the time; European and Russian treatment of Roma at the end of the nineteenth century was a point of comparison, and seen as an “irrefutable argument for the practical and moral superiority of imperial Russian rule” for offering a “just, tolerant, and rational” solution to the “Gypsy question” (O’Keeffe 2014, 112).

Martin Aust (2016), a historian of early-modern Russia, came to a similar conclusion: the bureaucrats of the Russian Empire from 1855–1914 were keenly aware of governing models of European countries, which may have served, in part, as guidance for the Russian reforms. Yet, the Russian Empire also strove to distinguish itself and establish supremacy in some areas:

Compared with the other European colonial powers, the approach of the Russian Empire appeared an exception. In this discourse, the peaceful expansion, inclusion of non-Russians and sympathetic attitude towards foreign cultures in the Russian Empire and Asia were contrasted with the violent expansion and exclusion which were a feature of other European colonial powers. (Aust 2016, para. 38)

Treatment of Roma and their incorporation as citizens was then a paramount test of Russian superiority and better policies. Put differently, the paternalistic, yet seen as enlightened, rational and tolerant treatment of Roma by the Russian imperial state was portrayed as evidence for the supremacy of Russian imperial might, especially in comparison with their European counterparts.

Similarly, some ethnographic studies of the time accused the Habsburgs—and by extension European enlightened states—of irrational use of force and rushed decrees, without making an attempt to fully understand Gypsy cul-

ture and traditions. In contrast, the patient and benevolent approach of the Russian Empire, as ethnographic accounts from the time suggested, had provided rational guidance, instead of force and coercion (O’Keeffe 2014). O’Keeffe illustrates this mindset with the study of K. P. Patkanov entitled *Gypsies*, a book published in 1887 by the Imperial Academy of Sciences, and in the book, Patkanov criticizes the Habsburg Empire’s “merciless” policies towards Gypsies. Furthermore, in his meticulous description of Empress Maria Theresa’s and Emperor Joseph II’s reforms, aimed at absolute assimilation of Gypsies through forced measures of denying their group identity, language, right to culture and traditions, Patkanov concludes that these “measures designed ‘for the complete destruction of Gypsies’” were “soullessly cruel” and “simply senseless” (Patkanov 1887, 5–6; quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 118).

Overall, Russian ethnographers “not only advocated state efforts to settle and educate Gypsies, but also unambiguously embraced the goal of transforming Gypsies into integrated citizens of the autocratic empire” (O’Keeffe 2014, 113). Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, renowned experts of Roma history, come to a similar conclusion, that is, “the policy of the Russian Empire towards Roma was subordinated to the striving to make them fully fledged subjects of the Empire, enjoying full civil rights and parallel to that carrying out their civil obligations” (Marushiakova and Popov 2013, 8).

This integration into society as citizens undoubtedly assumed an effort to modernize and civilize Roma. The question whether Roma (and other groups, for that matter) were capable of civilized existence was definitely one of the most principal questions that occupied bureaucrats and intellectuals. Although some ethnographic studies at the time speak of Gypsies as “poised to flourish as productive, mature, assimilated members of Russian society,” nevertheless it was also clear “not all groups within the empire were considered adequately capable of cultural progress and the attendant civic integration” (O’Keeffe 2014, 111, 113).

In a review of Roma in nineteenth-century Russian Empire written in 1877, Anatoliy Bogdanov, an anthropologist and zoologist,<sup>6</sup> concluded that the backwards lifestyle of Roma—which he saw manifest in nudity or inappropriate clothing, holding on to old habits, resistance to modern practices, such as going to school, living in permanent houses, or holding a profession—

6 Bogdanov was instrumental in organizing the “All-Russian Ethnographic Exhibition” in 1867, which was “Russia’s first major ethnographic exhibition . . . [that] consisted of dioramas with at least 300 mannequins portraying over 60 ethnic groups, and a wide range of additional displays representing the material culture and physical features of the peoples of the Russian Empire” (Knight 2001, iii).

explained their “low development” (Bogdanov 1877, 1). Although “naturally good singers and beautiful people, with fiery black eyes,” Bogdanov wrote, they hold on to their traditions despite decades of contact with other nations.

In his study, Bogdanov extensively quotes archpriest Rudnyev, who was deeply skeptical of Gypsies’ ability to progress towards civilization. Archpriest Rudnyev was “closely familiar with the lifestyle of Moscow Gypsies” and claimed that although these “aliens initially received some privileges”—being “equaled with Russians [*uravneny s russkimi*],” following the Orthodox belief and practicing religion “no worse than Russians”—and “one hardly heard about burglary among them”; yet, Roma seemed to have been unable to use these privileges (Bogdanov 1877, 1–2). According to Rudnyev, they were dishonest and never changed their backwards traits: “Despite the unprofitable nature of their profession, Gypsies, due to their intellectual undevelopment, simply fail to lead another path,” and “cheating . . . is not even a sin for them” (*ibid.*, 2). Rudnyev describes Gypsies as “loud and cowardly,” who neither educate their children, nor allow them to schools: “As hard as I tried, only one Gypsy widow agreed to send her child to the ‘shelter’ [*prijut*, where children were educated to grammar, religion, and handcrafts],” remembers Rudnyev (Bogdanov 1877, 2).

Despite quoting Rudnyev’s pessimistic account, Bogdanov claimed that modernization would indeed elevate them: Gypsies are “not without brain”—there is a Gypsy doctor (“who nevertheless still has a Gypsy accent”) in Romania, wrote Bogdanov, and Gypsies living in villages and cities are “less dark” than those living in the forest, and are already somewhat mixed with the Caucasian race (*ibid.*, 5). Bogdanov trusted that backwardness could be eradicated with appropriate state approach and civilizing policies.

This ethnographic description illustrates well the common juxtaposition of backwardness and civilization, where Gypsies represented the former. As another account quoted by O’Keeffe in the popular weekly *Privoda i liudi* in 1878, written by amateur ethnographer A. Shile, revealed, “In character, appearance, and lifestyle—in everything, the Gypsy is the opposite of a Russian person” (quoted in O’Keeffe 2014, 113). Indeed, the nineteenth-century imperial Russian state “maintained vital distinctions between Russians and non-Russian”; “Russians were contrasted with the other peoples within the empire,” as a common practice to highlight “difference from and fear of the ‘other’” (Suny 2001, 44, 52). This juxtaposition helped construct the image of the Other in contrast with the “civilized” Russians, while at the same time justify the actions of the civilizer. It was the creation of the Other that allowed the state to assume responsibility for dealing with the “Other.”

Edward Said's *Orientalism* is particularly pertinent to understanding how this juxtaposition in fact upheld an oppressive social hierarchy:

. . . for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short. Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. (1978, 3)

Educating the backwards Others was evidently one of the most effective ways of dealing with the Orient. The importance of education is evident from the change in elementary school enrollment, which swelled “fivefold from 1856 to 1885 and another fourfold by 1914” (Suny 2001, 53). The state supported and prioritized Russian education, transmitting not only Russian language, but also culture and values (Thaden 1964). The state insisted on tight control over popular education “in defense of the regime’s traditional prerogatives” (Thurston 1984, 54) and in order to exert social control and create cohesion among its subjects to assure loyalty to the state. Despite these state policies, systematic cultural homogenization through schooling was untenable in the nineteenth century, as Russia lacked the proper resources to reach its vast territories (Weeks 2004).

### Enduring “Backwardness”

This chapter demonstrated that in the context of consolidating European nation-states and the rising power of nationalism, both empires struggled to maintain their sovereignty over a diverse population. Homogenizing, civilizing, and modernizing efforts were directed at groups deemed as deviant, backwards, or foreign, to make them into useful subjects and bring them under state control. As both Russians and Magyars were believed to be “Great Nations” and the only historic nation of their land, a union with these nations was seen as inevitable for progress. In both countries the general goal was to unite the entire society and to replace the “diversified, locally-tied low cultures by standardized, formalized and codified, literacy-carried high culture” (Gellner 1983, 76).

Several lessons can be drawn from this historical discussion of the Roma population in early Hungary and Russia. First, transition to the modern world initially implied scientific progress and “humanizing of the backwards”; prog-

ress and modernization required a basic administrative framework with clear categories measuring the “degree of backwardness” of various groups (Slezkine 1994, 88). The concept of backwardness in the official discourse enabled a more scientific description of the subjects, in an effort to render “filthy aliens” or “the provincial and undeveloped” groups “totally and permanently transparent” (Slezkine 1994, 55, 115). As Slezkine aptly put it, “just as all the sciences can be ranked according to their usefulness . . . so could customs and religions” (*ibid.*, 57).

Second, education emerged as the essential tool for civilizing and for forging unity among ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse groups in both empires. In the Russian Empire, this unity was arguably defined along cultural rather than ethnic terms. In the Austro-Hungarian Empire after 1867, “the German-Magyar hegemony against other nationalities” was the organizing principle of the society (Monticone 1968, 111). Developing social order was imperative for both empires; increasingly, “at the base of the modern social order [stood] not the executioner but the professor” (Gellner 1983, 34).

Nomadic groups were viewed as “non-civilized” and “savage,” but “ignorance and foolishness . . . could be overcome through education” to move “from infancy to maturity” (Slezkine 1994, 57). Gypsies were considered backwards, and their backwardness was seen as rooted in their antiquated traditions and primitive lifestyle, which made them less governable and accountable to the state. Hence, they had to be educated and civilized. In both cases, however, the Gypsy as an ethnic label was increasingly associated with negative characteristics and attributes, such as being foreign, backward, uncivilized, unproductive, uneducated, and the like. This negative content and accompanying marginalization emerged alongside consolidation of state and nation building.

The most important conclusion of this chapter is the emergence of antigypsyism. Antigypsy policies, attitudes, discourse, and state orders were steadily built into the fabric of society and incorporated into the institutional landscape, to remain intact for many more centuries. To borrow Said’s theory of Orientalism to highlight the importance of juxtaposing the uncivilized with civilized: just like the Orient is constructed as the opposite of the Occident, backwardness was constructed as the trait of the “Other” opposed to that of the “civilized.” Hence, one concept could not exist without the other.

Put differently, antigypsyism is the discourse of subjugation, producing distinction between Roma and the majority, rendering the former inferior, and with that, the subordinate subjects, the bad Gypsies, were created. The close relationship between state and nation building on the one hand, and

antigypsyisms on the other hand, was similarly highlighted in the research of Dimitrina Petrova, a scholar and human rights advocate.<sup>7</sup> Petrova emphasized that “anti-Gypsy laws and other persecution of the Roma” in the early history of Europe “are best understood in the context of the fight against vagrancy and other forms of idleness . . . condemning all forms of life that seemed nonproductive . . . [while] ethnicity played a lesser role” (*ibid.*, 125). With time, Petrova added, “repression strengthened and anti-Gypsy laws began to be implemented more strictly and uniformly across the territory of sovereigns, in line with the process of nation building in modern Europe” (2003, 125).

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7 To be accurate, Petrova placed the emergence of the anti-Roma stereotype as early as the fifteenth century. More precisely, her study identified “the formative historical event that forged the core of the anti-Gypsy stereotype the . . . encounter of the nomadic Roma with Western European civilization,” in the fifteenth century in Europe (2003, 127–28).



## Chapter 4

# The End of Empires

*We want, if possible, a closer cooperation and fraternal unity to emerge among the oppressed classes of all the nations living in Russia . . . There is only one thing we do not want: the element of compulsion.*

Vladimir Lenin  
(Lenin 1914; quoted in Bilinsky 1981)

Whereas there was considerable overlap in the attitudes, perceptions, and approaches with respect to the Roma minority in the Habsburg and Russian empires, the period following World War One saw notable divergences as major political transformations reconfigured the states governing the territories of Hungary and Russia.<sup>1</sup> The subtle distinction between the models of “civic integration” in Russia (but with assimilationist overtones) and aggressive assimilation in Hungary in the pre-modern and early-modern phases of state- and nation-building gave way to pronounced differences after World War One, in the wake of the Treaty of Trianon and the Russian Revolution. Ideological, demographic, historical, and cultural factors as well as the differing political regimes contributed to a striking contrast in the state’s relationship to Roma in the Soviet Union (USSR) and Hungary between the 1920s and the 1940s.

The logic of national self-determination drove the approaches in both Hungary and Russia during this period, but the concept was interpreted and carried out differently in Europe (including Hungary) and the USSR. Notably, popular stereotypes of Roma apparent during the period of imperial rule—as backward, dirty, disorderly, and prone to theft—and the negative evaluation of nomadism, traditional Gypsy occupations, and other common char-

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter greatly benefitted from a co-authored, unpublished conference paper, presented at the 5th NISE Conference 2019, The Politics of Difference in 1919 Europe: Minorities and Border Populations in Warsaw, Poland, entitled “The Question of National Self-Determination after World War I: Nation and State Building Efforts in the Soviet Union,” presented with Dmitriy Dunaev (Budapest University of Technology and Economics).

acteristics of Roma prior to World War Two remained intact in both Russia and Hungary. However, as I explain below, the Soviet Union pursued a series of unique, coordinated state initiatives as components of their so-called nativization campaign, aimed at integrating Gypsies into the new socialist political system. In the political, economic, and social upheaval in Hungary between the World Wars, xenophobia and nationalism took root. Although ostensibly, a nationalities policy assured equality for all Hungarian citizens (Crowe 1994, 86), exclusion and discrimination against Roma took an increasingly aggressive and violent form.

In this chapter, I synthesize secondary sources and draw on sources from the period including newspaper articles, political texts, as well as textbooks used in primary schools in Hungary and the Soviet Union, to illuminate the logic behind each state's Roma policies and illustrate popular attitudes toward Roma. I focus particularly on the area of education and how these were manifested and contested in the domain of the schooling of Roma children.

## The End of Empires: World War One and the 1917 Revolution

The Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires were not sustainable, and many blame nationalism and emerging ethnic tensions for their demise. These tensions were present in the realm of education as well; it was a common practice for central authorities to shut down or suppress “unpatriotic” schools that educated in national languages other than the state-supported language. In Hungary, for example, from the late nineteenth century, “the ministerial bureaucracy required that increasing numbers of subjects in non-Magyar schools be taught in Magyar and granted or withheld state subsidies in order to make Magyar the language of instruction in the vast majority of Hungary's primary and secondary schools” (Cohen 2007, 262). In the Russian Empire, similarly starting with the mid-nineteenth century, the previously autonomous schools had to incorporate Russian language, history, geography, and other subjects in their curriculum, with the aim of creating Russian-medium schools (Pavlenko 2011). At times these efforts were met with resistance, contributing to the consolidation of national identities within empires and bolstering ethnic tensions. These tensions, however, in most cases did not advocate for independence from the empire; instead, the aim was greater empowerment within a reformed multinational state (Cohen 2007, 242). World War One, however, brought profound political changes.

When a young Bosnian Serb, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914, Hungary entered the war almost immediately. Allegedly, Hungary was motivated to join the war for fear of losing its influence in the empire due to the growing Slavic population, and to avoid jeopardizing the “special imperial mission for the Magyardom and its civilizing qualities” that were affirmed with the 1867 Compromise (Piahanau 2014). The Russian Empire entered World War One to protect their Slavic brothers, the Serbs. Other countries quickly joined the war as well, mainly due to claims to territorial integrity or retention of great power status. It was a war so bloody that it (ironically) came to be known at the time as the War to End All Wars.

Neither an assessment of the causes that led to the war, nor its progression or conclusion are within the scope of this book. However, contribution of Roma to the war effort in both Hungary and Russia, in the form of combat and non-combat service, is noteworthy as it is a little known or recognized fact. Recruitment efforts in Hungary in 1914 assumed military service from Roma men as well. The *Budapesti Hírlap*, a Hungarian daily newspaper wrote in 1914:

The Gypsy fought like a lion. He endured any fatigue, had no needs, withstood cold or heat, and when it came to fighting, there was no one braver in the whole regiment than him. He wanted to show that the Gypsy, ousted from everywhere, looked down by everyone, also has a homeland. (Magyar Múzeumok [Hungarian Museums] 2018)<sup>2</sup>

Some Roma served as musicians in the army, while others as cavalrymen or infantry (BOON 2018). Still little is known about this topic, although some research is conducted, most notably by the Hungarian historian Róbert Gergely Scholcz.

Similarly, already in pre-revolutionary Russia, settled Roma expressed their patriotism to their country by serving in the army. Based on the historical study conducted by Nikolay Bessonov, Russian artist and researcher of Russian Roma, there is evidence that Roma contributed to the 1812 war and the First World War (without pointing at the evidence itself, regrettably; Bessonov 2010). There is also evidence that Roma, who immigrated to the Russian Empire throughout the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth cen-

2 This research was done for a traveling exhibition called “Hegedűvel és puskával—a Nagy Háborúban” (With a violin and a gun in the Great War), which uncovers the enormous contribution of Roma during World War One in Hungary based on the research of historian Róbert Gergely Scholcz.

tury, such as some Kalderash Roma, often engaged in metalwork and tinning of dishes for military units, staying near military camps and providing useful labor (Chernykh 2018). Overall, the involvement of Roma in World War One merits more research and discussion in both countries.

Soon the involvement in the war effort led to food shortages and crumbling of the countries' economies and infrastructure, which was especially the case in the Russian Empire. The war also exposed the poor leadership of Tsar Nicholas II, and delegitimized the tsar of Russia in the eyes of many. As a result, in 1917 two revolutions shook Russia: one known as the February Revolution, when starving demonstrators demanded to end the war and replace the Tsar, and the second known as the October Revolution, led by Bolsheviks. As a consequence of the latter revolution, the provisional government that was formed after the February Revolution was overthrown and the Bolsheviks took power, quitting the war effort and establishing a communist state. The Soviet Union was finally established after the destructive and lengthy civil war, which lasted until 1923.

The end of World War One and the 1917 October Revolution proved to be a decisive breaking point for the political order at the time, and they unleashed an unprecedented challenge: the fall of empires and a growing sense of nationalism. Since former empires encompassed a wide range of ethnic groups, the newly formed European states faced the task of re-defining the sense of belonging, nationhood and statehood; it was the logic of national self-determination that redrew the borders of Europe and redefined social order. The Soviet Union remained a multiethnic state, which also employed the narrative of national self-determination, yet it was interpreted and carried out differently than in Europe.

In fact, the question of national self-determination was discussed as early as 1896 during the International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress in London (also known as London Congress of the Second International); this discussion was later brought up in 1903, and again on the eve of World War One by the leftist parties of the "great Eastern states," the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and Russia (Bari 2016, 85). The European counterpart, Otto Bauer "utilized self-determination in order to argue for the federalization of the Habsburg Empire means of extraterritorial national autonomy," while the Russian counterpart, V. I. Lenin "understood the term as a right of 'national territories' to secede from the empire . . . essentially accept[ing] that the multi-ethnic structures of the East would break up with the utilization of the notion" (ibid. 85–86).

Fundamentally, the Austro-Marxist position on national self-determination envisioned "cultural autonomy for nationalities within the federation of

autonomous regions with a firmly centralized government” (Tarr 1999, 106). Lenin’s definition was meant to gain the support of national movements for the Revolution, “improve relations among the diverse proletariat elements of national groups,” and allow the party to “represent all the working class elements of a multinational state” (ibid.). It is clear, therefore, that national self-determination was supposed to serve the state-building endeavor in the European case, while in the Russian case the concept was mobilized in the interests of furthering the idea of socialism. Lenin stated:

It is not the business of the proletariat to preach federalism and national autonomy; it is not the business of the proletariat to advance such demands, which inevitably amount to a demand for the establishment of an autonomous class state. It is the business of the proletariat to rally the greatest possible masses of workers of each and every nationality more closely, to rally them for struggle in the broadest possible arena for a democratic republic and for socialism. (Lenin 2002, 13).

In the aftermath of the October Revolution, Lenin’s ideas were put to practice, and Soviet Russia was on the path of re-imagining its society driven by the ideology of Marxism-Leninism. The ultimate goal was the establishment of communist society, built on a socioeconomic order structured upon the common ownership of the means of production and the absence of social classes. In theory, Marxist ideology assumed the creation of classless political communities based on work ethic and Marxist belief, rather than nationalism or race. In this society, everyone had the obligations to assume a soviet working-class identity and with their labor contribute to the communist effort; all people needed to be proletarianized.

In Europe, meanwhile, the Austro-Marxist position on national self-determination proved to be utopian. Instead, Woodrow Wilson’s interpretation of self-determination, described in his 14-point program, dominated the peace talks concluding World War One and resulted in the establishment of a number of smaller states, more or less with homogenous populations. In fact, Wilson’s understanding of national self-determination was justified when nation-states emerged on the ruins of multi-ethnic empires. Wilson claimed that:

No nation should seek to extend its polity over any other nation or people, but . . . every people should be left free to determine its own polity, its own way of development, unhindered, unthreatened, unafraid, the little

along the great and powerful . . . This war had its roots in the disregard of rights of small nations and of nationalities which lacked the union and the force to make good their claim to determine their own allegiances and their own forms of political life. (Quoted in Leonhard 2017, 330)

Nation-states in Europe were structured around the premise that the state enjoyed a virtual monopoly on culture, so “culture-mediated nationalism” became “pervasive in the society” (Gellner 1983, 138–140). Since a nation-state represented a particular nation and assumed a high degree of cultural cohesion, such states fostered national unity that became the central idea behind the political legitimacy of the state.

In other words, while the Austro-Hungarian Empire was replaced by nation-states and Hungary emerged as a relatively homogenous country, the Soviet Union remained a multi-ethnic country.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in Hungary, an explicit Magyarization policy—an oppressive and discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities (White 1992)—characterized the official approach to minorities starting at the end of the nineteenth century, that endured after the Trianon peace treaty, which concluded World War One for Hungary, while arguably the Soviet Union was not envisioned as an instrument for a given ethnic group (although there are debates about this in academic and political circles).

Overall, after the colossal political changes that World War One and the October Revolution brought, both countries engaged in a renewed effort of state and nation building. To return to my argument presented in Table 3, in the interwar period while the Hungarian state was increasingly aligned with the Hungarian nation, excluding and marginalizing other ethnic groups, the early Soviet Union had an international vision of communist society, that Roma were to be part of.

### Soviet Nativization Policies in the 1920s and '30s

A few years after the 1917 October Revolution, at the Eighth Congress of the Russian Communist Party (RCP(b) March 18–23, 1919, Moscow) the question whether the clause on the right of nations to self-determination should

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3 Although the Russian Empire did suffer some territorial losses, integrity here refers to the fact there was no separation of the Russian Empire into independent states as in Europe.

be preserved or abolished was widely discussed.<sup>4</sup> Lenin remained faithful to his standpoint and addressed this question categorically—all nations must have the right of self-determination. He believed that the clause on the right of nations to self-determination retains its significance for the entire transitional period of the proletarian dictatorship. Lenin stated: “All nations have the right to self-determination . . . Throwing away the self-determination of nations and substituting it with the self-determination of working people would be completely wrong because such a statement does not take into account the difficulties, with which differentiation takes place within nations” (Lenin 1968, 212).<sup>5</sup>

The foundations of the Soviet nationality policies were declared at the Tenth Congress of the RCP(b) (April 17–25, 1923, Moscow); upon the establishment of the Soviet Union, the problem of the national policy of the new state has been included in the agenda of the Congress. The new nationality policy was defined as nativization (*korenizatsija*, literally “taking root”), and beginning with 1923, the most important task of the party in terms of the national policy was the “nativization of the apparatus.”<sup>6</sup> Nationalist tendencies were present in Russia in the early twentieth century, and “the virtues of the periphery and non-Russian nationalism were being loudly proclaimed by increasingly self-assertive ethnic elites,” yet, instead of repressing this national revival or breaking up the country into nation-states, the “revolutionary regime called on the former exiles to perform the task [of representing their nations]” towards a common goal of building a communist society (Slezkine 1994, 129).

The course towards accelerated nativization has been confirmed by the resolution of the Fourth Meeting of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) with the responsible officials of the national republics and regions in Moscow (June 9–20, 1923). The resolution also stressed the need for the “ideological unity” of the party. The aim of the nativization policy had been raising “young communist organizations of the national republics and regions from the proletarian and semi-proletarian elements of the local population” (Stalin 1947, 293), forming truly internationalist communist leadership. Examining data and

4 Part of this chapter was published in Dunajeva (2021c).

5 The way the Soviet Union engaged in state and nation building is debated among academics. Some call it “a new model of colonization” (Hirsch 2000), others argue it was empire building (Dallin 1959) or unique type of federation (Tewatia 1975). What is clear is that the Soviet Union from its very creation inherited a complex question concerning a multitude of nationalities living with their borders; questions that extended beyond the political unit of the nation state. I only focus on how minorities, and Roma in particular, were treated during this process.

6 Nativization was not a unanimously agreed upon direction. In fact, it “was contested by party members suspicious of concessions to nationality and the inclusion in the party and state of peoples less committed to the rigidifying vision of the dominant faction in the Communist Party” (Suny 1992, 27–28).

figures for membership in the communist parties at the time, Ronald Suny, an expert on non-Russian nationalities of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, concludes that “steadily Russian officials were replaced by national leaders” (Suny 1992, 26).

According to Lenin, cultivation of national identity was necessary because exploitation of minorities under the Russian Empire could only be “undone” by the establishment of national governments, which through cultivation of their own lifestyles would “direct at the dark masses a ray of enlightenment” (Slezkine 1994, 136). Consequently, one of the goals of nativization was to promote native cadres into leadership positions. To achieve communism, everyone needed “special guidance” from a “special communist party,” which had to reach all groups in their native language (Slezkine 1994, 142). Nativization policies reinforced and, in many instances, transformed national identities in the Soviet Union, which led to amplified national awareness and politicization with time (Suny 1992).

While national cultures were promoted, the goal also remained to modernize nations, as only modern, class-conscious groups can develop further into communist and Soviet men and women. Promotion of national cultures manifested in various ways:

The policy of “nativization” . . . contributed to the consolidation of nationality in three important ways: in support of the native language, in the creation of a national intelligentsia and political elite, and the formal institutionalization of ethnicity in the state apparatus. On the language front the Soviet governments, already in the years of Civil War, adopted laws establishing the equality of languages in courts and administration, free choice of language in schooling, and protection of minority languages. The central state promoted alphabets for peoples who had no writing, opened schools for those who had none under tsarism . . . Soviet activists set out to create educational systems and literary languages for their peoples by selecting the dialect to be promoted and by systematizing, refining, “purifying” the lexicon. (Suny 1992, 25–26)

In the case of Roma, the Soviet government recognized Roma as a national minority in 1925, and besides granting them the right to be educated in Romani language, the Pan-Romani Union and Romani Congress were organized, and Romani collective farms were established in 1926–27 (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, 244). Since the language as a medium of education was of lesser

importance than its content, as “Marxist schools would have the same curriculum irrespective of their linguistic medium” (Slezkine 1994, 142), accordingly, Soviet Roma were to be educated in Roma schools in order to instill Marxist-Leninist values through their own cultural channels and language, and, eventually, become incorporated into the fabric of Soviet society. Importantly, these policies were seen in line with the “official Soviet doctrine repeated Lenin’s prediction of *sblizhenie* (rapprochement) and *sliianie* (merger) of Soviet peoples and of the creation of a single Soviet culture” (Suny 1992, 30).

Top-down management of group identities during this period also involved a form of homogenization and standardization into distinct groups, which resulted in reification and essentialization: one Romani dialect—that of the Ruska Roma or Russian Gypsies, which was “spoken by Moscow’s activist Romani elite—was pronounced as standard language and consequently taught in Roma schools” (O’Keeffe 2013, 80; see also Kalinin 2000). Standardization based on such criteria was far reaching, and even “Gypsy-like nomads” like the Liuli in Central Asia had to learn this selected dialect (Kalinin 2000).

Indeed, nativization was not without its paradoxes, and several researchers pointed out inherent contradictions (e.g., Hajda 1993), inconsistencies (e.g., Gorenburg 2006) or even counter-productivity (e.g., Liber 1991) integral to nativization policies. For instance, while the formation of autonomous regions based on ethnic groups was the official state policy, independence movements were crushed (Slezkine 1994, 142). Similarly, while ethnic consciousness was cultivated, celebrated, and institutionalized, the ultimate goal was that “the interests of the small ethnic group as well as the larger national group would be subsumed under the category of proletariat class interests” (Gleason 1990, 143). Furthermore, non-Russian nationality continued to be equated with backwardness and Soviet policies aimed at “eliminating the backwardness . . . that the nationalities inherited from the past” (Slezkine 1994, 144).

It is worth looking at the realm of culture and education to better understand how nativization policies were implemented and affected Roma identity formation. To illustrate that, below I mention the Romen Theater and give a detailed analysis of education directed at Roma from the time. To that end, I present research on the topic and the results of my own archival work, especially Romani language textbooks from the 1920s and ’30s.

In 1931, the unique Romen Theater was built, which until today is considered the cultural center of the Russian Roma, employing Roma actors and holding performances in Romani language (see Figure 1 below). The Romen Theater was a testament to the “national in form, socialist in content” approach

to national policy, and it also epitomized the contradictions of promoting nationality culture but with a civilizing mission:

Established with the express purpose of eradicating the “bourgeois decadence” . . . and replacing it with didactic folk art, the theatre throughout the 1930s served as the site of multiple reimaginings of Gypsiness as ethnographically authentic and ideologically appropriate Soviet entertainment. Long after its creation in 1930, Romen persisted as a mobilizer of Soviet ideology and a professional home for Romani actors increasingly marginalized within Moscow’s wider theatrical milieu. Not least of all, Romen persisted as the dependable, state-sponsored site of performances of Gypsies as fiery, excitable, tantalizing lovers of liberty—poetic, peculiar, yet capable of Soviet civilization. (O’Keeffe 2013, 238)

In other words, a cultural site that was meant to “preserve” and “perform” Roma culture, the theater was also created to help assimilation, sedentarization, education, and “transform[ation of] Gypsies from wild parasites into productive workers” (Lemon 2000, 130-31). To that end, the directors in the theater changed plays “to fit within both Euro-Russian theatrical expectations and the bounds of socialist realism” (Lemon 1998, 150).

A similar paradox clearly manifested in the realm of education as well. Schools were continuously used to manage identity and to change Roma into



**Figure 1** Performance in the Romen Theater in the winter of 2013, photo taken by the author.

hard-working, rational, and literate socialist members of Soviet society. Roma were to be liberated by the values of communism, join the socialist working class, and enjoy the equality and freedoms of that system—that was the content of education. For instance, Crowe described that Romani literacy books “include[ed] articles explaining the new land tenure system, the five-year plan . . . how to become atheists, live in houses and go to school (Crowe 1994, 177). Overall, educating the “backwards Gypsies” served the goal of enlightenment and acculturating youth to Soviet culture (O’Keeffe 2013).

An outstanding examination of the early Soviet Romani educational initiatives is Brigid O’Keeffe’s book, *New Soviet Gypsies* (2013). O’Keeffe argues that education of Roma at the time attempted not only “to teach Roma literacy and hygiene, but also . . . to transform backward Gypsies into conscious Soviet citizens” (2013, 67). In closely studying Gypsy schools in Moscow, the author describes the cooperation of the Gypsy Union with the Moscow Department of Education in delineating the particularities of Romani-language elementary education and assisting in popularizing the schools among Roma parents. Then, in 1926, “the Soviet Union’s first Gypsy schools formally opened in Moscow” where “students were instructed in reading, writing, arithmetic, drawing, crafts, music, hygiene, physical education, history, and civics” (O’Keeffe 2013, 69).

Although O’Keeffe points out the initial lack of success—low enrollment, resistance from some communities, Russian teachers’ inability to communicate with Roma children, tremendous linguistic and cultural diversity within the Roma communities—nevertheless, these early defeats led to a meaningful realization: “In the absence of a native language common to all of Moscow’s Romani schoolchildren . . . one must be created for them” because “without an alphabet, textbooks, or their own cadres of native language schoolteachers, Romani schoolchildren were thus deprived of their right to an education in their presumed native language” (O’Keeffe 2013, 75–77). A year after the first Roma school opened, a decree “On the Creation of the Gypsy Language Alphabet” was adopted with the goal of creating a Cyrillic script-based alphabet and uniform language for the Roma of the USSR, which immediately led to “composing the first Romani-language textbooks to be published in the USSR” in 1928 and beyond (O’Keeffe 2013, 82).

Below I consider examples from textbooks circulated at this time, translated from Romani language to English.<sup>7</sup> I show excerpts from primers and

7 Translation was done with the help of Kirill Kozhanov, PhD, a Romologist and linguist at the Institute of Slavic Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences. I am grateful for his assistance.

analyze how education of basic grammar sought to alter Roma students' identities from "unsettled fortune-tellers" to enlightened, hardworking socialist Roma. Through textbooks building on stereotypes about Roma, the Soviet state strove to recreate Roma as part of the socialist working class. I suggest that in these textbooks, there was an obvious attempt to juxtapose stereotypical Roma culture with the desired qualities of a Soviet citizen, as well as teach socialist values. Textbooks taught discipline, work ethic, Marxist-Leninist ideology, and socialist values, while contrasting those with undesirable social elements, backwards traditions, and poor work ethic.

Figure 2 is the inside cover of a textbook for first-grade Roma students. It depicts a Roma home at the top and a classroom at the bottom of the page. The former is a chaotic, filthy, disorderly environment, representing backwardness. The latter, however, is an orderly and disciplined atmosphere, with obedient chil-



**Figure 2** Inside cover of N. A. Pankov and N. A. Dudarova, "Dzhidi buty" (Джиды буты). Moscow: Centrizdat, 1930. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)



**Figures 3 and 4** Excerpt from N. A. Dudarova, “Amari buty” (Амари буты). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1932, 10–11, 54–55. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

dren, clear social hierarchy and clearly defined social roles for the teacher and students. Evidently, it was the school that possessed the ability to transform Roma living in antiquated conditions to civilized, enlightened, and modern. Schools were also to transform the dirty and disorderly way of life to tidy, disciplined, and orderly habits through lessons like “teeth brushing, hair combing, and face scrubbing [taught] in the classroom” (O’Keeffe 2013, 72). The schools then became not only institutions that teach these values, but the very analogy to the Soviet society: a well-disciplined, homogenous society of hard-working citizens.

Similar juxtaposition existed between “backwardness” and the Soviet way of life, where the latter was characterized by a sanitary, urbane, and diligent lifestyle (see Figures 3 and 4). Soviet schools evidently played a vital role in overcoming “Gypsy backwardness,” in teaching not only literacy, but also habits that come with a more educated routine, such as keeping order and hygiene. Enlightenment also took a form of exposing old traditions—such as the oppression of women or itinerant life—and overcoming those through the enlightened Soviet school system. Undoing injustices of tsarist Russia, where these backwards traditions were rooted, was thus imperative, as the following excerpts from textbooks demonstrate:

... under the Tsar, Roma were not considered people, they did not work, were not taught ... now they live like any other worker. ... Under the Tsar women's lives were bad. The women were oppressed. Now the woman can depart from her old life.

Lifestyle changes fast. Roma understand well that a house is better than the field.

Those who work, eat. We won't sit hungry, we are working Roma. (Dudarova 1933, 28–29)

O'Keeffe pointed out that there was disagreement regarding how much “the voices of the prerevolutionary Gypsy past [should be allowed] to speak to the New Soviet Gypsies of the future,” and whether textbooks should include “folkloric tales of drunkenness, thievery, and oppression served as valuable illustrations of ‘Gypsy backwardness’” (2013, 88).

Textbooks contained not only practical advice on hygiene, but were also filled with political messages, educating Roma in Romani language about Lenin, Stalin, the values of socialism, and the Bolshevik Party. Political education, in line with broader Soviet education policy at the time, was inevitable for instilling class consciousness, improving socialist awareness, and teaching communist morality. As Lenin claimed, “the whole task of the upbringing, education and teaching of contemporary youth should be the creating of a communist morality” (quoted in Zajda 1988, 391). The goal was no different in schools, and in the case of Roma who embodied “moral poverty of backwardness,” moral education was even more imperative to rid them of “ideological impurities that unwashed hair and shoeless feet implied” (O'Keeffe 2013, 72–73). Romani textbooks celebrated the socialist way of life, the Communist Party, and the leaders of the USSR. For instance, Figure 3 translates from Romani as follows:

**Lenin**

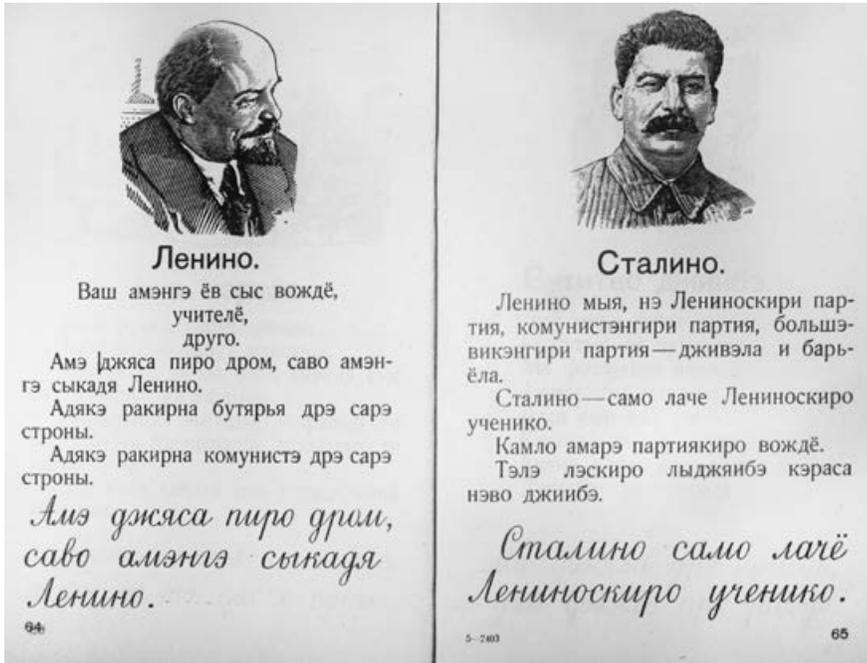
For us, he was a leader, teacher, friend.

We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.

So say workers in all countries.

So say Communists in all countries.

We are on the path that Lenin paved for us.



**Figure 5** Excerpt from N. A. Dudarova, “ABC Book: Your Primary School,” (Букварь: ваш начальнo школа). Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe uchebno-pedagogicheskoe izdatelstvo, 1934, 64–65. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

### Stalin

Lenin died, but the Leninist party, the  
 Communist party, the Bolshevik Party—it lives and grows.  
 Stalin—the best student of Lenin.  
 Beloved leader of our party.  
 Under his leadership, we are building a new life.  
 Stalin—the best student of Lenin. (Dudarova 1934, 64–65)

For sovietization, then, besides overcoming backwardness, it was also important to recognize “enemies of the people,” also referred to as the “enemies of the proletariat,” and participation in collectivization. These enemies were political opponents of the Soviet regime, so educating the young Romani pupils to identify such traitors was essential. In a similar vein, kulaks—affluent peasants who were viewed as enemies of communism—were seen as remnants of the inequalities of tsarist Russia and class enemies who posed an obstacle to collectivization efforts.



**Figure 6** Excerpt from N. A. Dudarova, “Amari buty” (Амари буты). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1932, 32–33. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Teaching Roma children about the importance of goals of collectivization was yet another goal. Collectivization was not only a crucial goal of the state’s industrialization effort (Slezkine 1994, 188), but it was also particularly important in the case of Roma because nomadism was seen as incompatible with collectivization. In addition, collectivization was considered a way to manage the backwards peoples: it cultivated qualities such as strength and determination, and taught economic rationality and modern technology (Slezkine 1994, 205). These messages are addressed in the excerpts from a Romani textbook below (see Figure 4) that translates as follows:

### **Kulaks**

Gypsies have kulaks  
 Kulaks should not be admitted to collective farms  
 They are enemies of collective farming  
 Together with the priests,  
 We must drive them off,  
 They are the enemy of collective farming  
 And they are called kulaks

### **On the collective farm**

Kulaks said that we will not have bread in the collective farms,  
that we will not have vegetables

Kulaks are our enemies.

Kulaks told the poor peasants not to join collective farms.

Collective farms follow a plan.

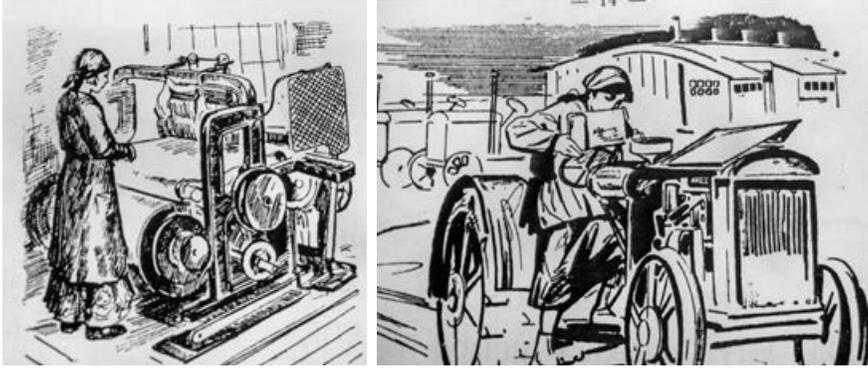
Each worker completes their tasks. ...

Kulaks lied to us. (Dudarova 1932, 32–33)

Working class identity assumed a certain attitude to labor as well. Roma were to be introduced to working habits that were socially useful to advance economy and boost communism. Socialist labor also bonded workers through solidarity to a common cause of building a communist society. In Lenin's words, "To the old world, the world of national oppression, national bickering, or national isolation, the workers oppose a new world of the unity of the workers of all nations, in which there is no place for a single privilege nor for the slightest oppression of one human being by another" (quoted in Muradov 1974, 292). Indeed, Lenin believed that the lack of national tension and national distrust would draw people together (Slezkine 1994, 143).

Textbooks instructed Roma about their participation in the labor market with clear message about women's contribution as well. Through labor, "Romani workers were called upon to attach heartfelt meaning to their contributions to socialist construction as well as subscribe to the Soviet values of discipline, transparency, and consciousness" (O'Keeffe 2013, 104). Particularly important was to modernize Roma women, stereotyped as fortune-tellers and beggars. In textbooks, women in the traditional Roma household were portrayed as subordinate to men and victims of patriarchal social order, yet their submissive status changed by engaging in proper work in a socialist society (Figures 7 and 8). Joining the working class implied more autonomy for women, and Roma women were shown fulfilling occupations previously thought of as only for men, like tractor drivers and factory workers.

Through education and work, Roma were to be liberated of their "backwards habits" and ultimately join the socialist masses. Socialism, therefore, was portrayed as emancipation and empowerment, especially for Roma women. This transformative effect is evident in the following abstracts from a Romani textbook:



**Figures 7 and 8** Excerpt from N. A. Dudarova “ABC Book with Illustrations: Reader for Adults” (Аваса пылваренса: Букваре ваш барэ манушэнгэ). Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1933, 14, 25. Book accessed from the Russian State Library (Khimki, Russia)

Masha works in a factory. Her husband works in a factory. Their children go to Roma kindergarten.

Masha doesn't have a father. The school gives food to Masha. Masha is given shoes and clothes. Masha goes to school.

My mother was a fortune-teller. My father was a trader. Now my mother is no longer a fortune-teller. My father does not trade. I go to school. My mother works in a factory. My father works in a factory. Find your happiness in work. (Dudarova 1932, 24–25)

In summary, the “civilizing work” in schools aimed “to ensure correct progress through education,” training of native communist intelligentsia, and instructing previously backwards groups about appropriate work ethic, lifestyle, and ideology (Slezkine 1994, 157). For Roma, just like many other “backwards” groups, the ultimate objective was then to integrate into the socialist society. Effectively, Roma identity was expected to become “nested in” the larger Soviet working-class identity, and the ultimate goal was for nationality-based identities to become obsolete with time.

The early Soviet nationalities policy, with their governing ideology that minorities must reach equal status with the Russian majority, lasted until the 1930s, and was in retreat by the end of that decade (Gorenburg 2006). As a result, by the end of the 1930s Roma educational institutions in the USSR were discontinued as “harmful” and an “ideological turn” changed the direction of nationality policy in the country (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 19). The national minority status of Roma in the USSR (along with national schools,

newspapers, and the like) was withdrawn as soon as in 1936. By 1938, a secret resolution discontinued (minority) national education and national classes for the Roma (Demeter et al. 2000, 207). Cultural institutions such as the Romen Theater were “simply a rather small hangover of the Bolshevik legacy,” writes Michael Stewart, a social anthropologist and expert on Roma (2001, 74). Nevertheless, Lenin’s regime was arguably known by the Russian Roma community as “the beginning of civil rights for Roma in USSR” (Crowe 1994, 174), and nativization policies had long-lasting consequences.

Nativization policies, however, may have played a role in the sense of belonging of Russian Roma—a topic further analyzed in later chapters. For example, Alaina Lemon, a socio-cultural and linguistic anthropologist who works in Russia and the former Soviet Union, demonstrated a strong sense of belonging and rootedness among Russian Roma in her research (1998; 2000). I similarly found a sense of rootedness among Roma in Russia during my fieldwork, with nearly all Roma respondents considering Russia as their homeland and classifying themselves as *Rossiyanе*.<sup>8</sup> In contrast, considerably fewer Hungarian Roma respondents considered themselves Hungarian. I describe this finding in more detail in the following chapters.

## Hungary After the Treaty of Trianon

After World War One, Hungary was a nation-state with a relatively homogenous population, yet nationality politics remained paramount, with a significant number of ethnic Hungarians outside of newly established Hungarian borders and minority groups within its borders. Even though “virtually all the successor states [in Eastern Europe] claimed nation-statehood, they were in reality mini-empires,” as Raymond Pearson, an expert on national minorities in Eastern Europe aptly notes, that had to deal with their “antagonized minorities and their territorially dissatisfied neighbors” (Pearson 1992, 500–1). In addition, an economic depression swept through Hungary as the aftermath of World War One further aggravated nationalist sentiments.

After the treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost 67% of its territory and 58% of its population, considerably changing the ethnic composition of the country: before World War One, approximately half of the population

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8 Laitin described identity categories and the distinction as *rossiyanе*—members of the Russian state and *russkiye*—an ethnic category of Russians (1998, 265–66).

belonged to one of the minority groups, which by 1920 changed to only 10% (Olasz 2014, 251). “By depriving the Hungarian nation of most of its minorities . . . the framers of the peace treaty unwittingly encouraged the dream for a homogenous Magyar ethnic state,” the historian Thomas Spira wrote (1970, 165). As a result of this trauma, radical political views gained ground.

In 1919, the communists assumed power for a brief four-month period, which was not sufficient to formulate and carry out any systematic nationality policy. The politics of the Hungarian Soviet Republic under the leadership of Béla Kun never gained sufficient popularity in the country, which only strengthened the support of counter-revolutionaries, also known as “Whites.” The Whites were led by István Bethlen and Miklós Horthy, the latter having already earned his fame as the former commander-in-chief of the Austro-Hungarian Navy became the Regent of Hungary in 1920.<sup>9</sup>

“Next to ever present revisionism,” writes the historian Steven Vardy, “the first of the two interwar decades in Hungary was characterized primarily by a policy of political, economic, social and ideological-cultural consolidation,” and Bethlen was responsible for this consolidation (1983, 28–29). After the Trianon Treaty, national minorities were regarded as the cause of the unfavorable treaty and the country’s dismemberment, and were increasingly excluded. As a consequence, Roma found themselves in a relatively homogenous nation-state pursuing a national mission of Magyarization that was also quite xenophobic (Kamusella 2009, 662; Spira 1970). Donald Kenrick, a linguist and researcher who studied Roma, writes that “apart from the musicians, Gypsies have been viewed with mistrust [and from] the mid-1930s, calls were made in the Hungarian Parliament for the internment of Gypsies in labor camps” (2007, 117).<sup>10</sup> The work of the previously mentioned Barna Mezey (1986), with its collection of original letters and other written sources from the time, remains one of the most instructive resources of historical knowledge about Hungarian Roma from this time period, which I use extensively for my analysis as well.

In the interwar period, solving the epochal “Gypsy question” remained a continual task of the state, with a growing urgency and an increasingly aggressive approach. There was hardly a coherent Roma policy that the government

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9 For an intriguing discussion of Horthy’s rule as a “moderating influence” that in fact “saved Hungary too far to the radical right before World War Two”, see Steven Vardy’s “The Impact of Trianon upon Hungary and the Hungarian Mind: The Nature of Interwar Hungarian Irredentism” (1983).

10 With the exception of the musician Roma, who were arguably still highly regarded in the interwar period, as their description published in the 1937 *Budapesti Hírlap* (Hungarian daily newspaper) demonstrates as well: “Gypsy musicians are . . . the most noble representatives of Hungarian Gypsies” (Binder 2018, 24).

was able to formulate. The inability to address the “Gypsy problem” sufficiently was criticized in 1931 in one of the weekly papers (*Magyar Közigazgatás* 1931/40, 4; quoted in Mezey 1986, 181):

It is public knowledge that Gypsies are the biggest threat to public safety. Their low intelligence, nomadic life, evasion of regular work predestines them to criminality. I am convinced that if we succeeded in making them settled and assume regular work, criminality country-wide would improve. Finding a solution to this issue is rather hard and we must admit, we do not have a program. Occasionally there are partial decrees, which must be guided by good intentions, yet they fail to treat the roots of the problem and often instead of improvements, they do more harm . . . The Gypsy question is difficult, but it is futile to attempt a solution through chasing, aggravation of their subsistence, making them wild . . .

Some scholars disagree. David Crowe, a renowned specialist in the history of the Roma people in Eastern Europe and Russia, suggests that there was indeed a nationalities policy, at least during the government of Count István Bethlen from 1921 to 1931, which allegedly assured equality of all Hungarian citizens, yet it was “compromised by a subtle, ongoing campaign of Magyarization” (Crowe 1994, 86).<sup>11</sup> Whether there was a comprehensible Roma policy immediately after World War One might be debatable, but what was certain is that Roma were targeted by various policies as non-desirable members of society.

Official communication and reports from the time consider imposing restrictions, constraining rights, and holding police raids as solutions to the “Gypsy problem” (Mezey 1986, 180). Sedentarization efforts continued, and wandering Roma were described as a health, security, and social threat. According to a 1928 decree signed by the Secretary of State on “More efficient regulating of itinerant Gypsies and renewed effort of data-collection,” a keener cooperation with the police and defense forces was described as imperative to manage Roma within Hungary and prevent more from entering the country (Mezey 1986, 200).

Similarly, a 1932 report from the high sheriff of Vasvár county to the county commissioner also protested against “a large number of Gypsy caravans” going through towns, suggesting various prohibitions, such as complete ban on horse

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11 See more on Hungary’s national minority policies between 1920 and 1945, including provisions on national minority schools in Paikert, “Hungary’s National Minority Policies, 1920–1945” (1953).

keeping, to impede on itinerant lifestyle (Mezey 1986, 206). An increase in the police force is suggested as the only way to make Gypsies comply with the prohibition and observing rules on registering their activities in animal husbandry with the authorities. With that, a state-sponsored collective criminalization of Roma accelerated. This political atmosphere of exclusion and discrimination was prone to violence and radicalization.

Tensions between Roma and Magyars were palpable. A description of Roma in Ondód from 1933 complains about their “poverty and shocking reproduction,” which will “plunge the entire town into poverty” if the “Gypsy question” is not addressed sufficiently (Mezey 1986, 162). This writing highlights the idleness of the local Roma, depicted as socially, economically, and even morally destructive for the community: “Even the chimney-sweeper’s fee is paid by the smallholders. A small part of Ondód Gypsies are musicians, but the majority of them are beggars . . . in addition their societal and moral tremendous destruction merits its own discussion” (*ibid.*).

What deteriorated the situation of Roma was the rapidly changing society and economy: work opportunities were continuously shrinking as old professions became gradually obsolete, and competition for jobs further increased with Roma moving to Hungary from neighbouring countries (Kállai n.d.). “We are nail-smiths,” complained a Roma in 1932, “but nowadays our work is no longer needed. By working all day we make no more than one pengő. There is no construction, no one buys the good quality hand-wrought nails. If no one buys [nails], we are unemployed” (quoted in Dupcsik 2018, 89). The conditions were no different for many other professions like tinkers, basket weavers, and many more. Not only their labor was superseded, but in rural areas the local population tended to have less means to pay for the traditional, hand-made work that Roma provided. Urbanization further marginalized Roma, often pushing their settlements away from the edges of cities and towns.

Under the pretext of protecting the society, children were especially targeted. For example, “child protection” decrees called for placing “abandoned” children of “itinerant Gypsies” or those who “do not have family members taking care of them” to state care (Mezey 1986, 211). In reality, however, it often led to forceful acts of robbing Roma families of their minors, provoking resistance and contempt of state authorities (*ibid.*). Requiring school attendance—albeit erratically throughout the country—for Roma children also continued, although obliging adherence to these regulations was rather challenging for state authorities (Bábosik 2009, 178). The fine for non-attendance was often overlooked due to poverty, which impelled a teacher in Csíktapolca to suggest

more drastic measures of incarceration or forced labor of the head of the family (Pomogyi 1995, 183).

My archival inquiry through newspapers from the 1930s showed that the rationale behind the urgency to educate Roma children was framed in terms of societal protection against deviance, diseases, and criminality. It was less about “enlightening” or “civilizing,” as it was about public security and safety, to which Roma were defined as a threat. A newspaper article from 1933 with the title “Gypsy School of Diósgyőr” proudly announced that the first Gypsy school was opened in town, highlighting that “one of the main subjects taught is hygiene” (*Új Barázda*, January 22, 1933). The newspaper continues: “Those who come to school with dirty hands, they have to get washed on the spot; those who defy the soap will be threatened with a brick. This is no longer necessary, however.” The Gypsy school of Diósgyőr was also mentioned as an exemplary school to be replicated throughout the country, where “teachers wash and cut hair” of the “coal black Gypsies,” as *Reggeli Hírlap* newspaper writes in its June 8, 1935 edition. Other papers, such as the May 1, 1938 edition of the *Miskolci Reggeli Hírlap*, mocked young Roma girls who escaped attempts to cut their hair and “refused to part with their one and only pride.”

In Székesfehérvár, according to the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* from November 9, 1930, since the local Gypsies were settled and “tamed,” the area became safer; the local administration opened a separate Gypsy school for the “new generation of Gypsies.”<sup>12</sup> Undoubtedly there was a strong motivation to make Gypsies into useful and safe members of society, and some teachers like József W. Vadas, who established and taught at the above-mentioned Székesfehérvár Gypsy school until 1932, were hopeful that it was possible to teach Gypsies, although they were “hard to tame” (Surányi 2005, 124)

In other places the growing number of Roma, especially school-age children, necessitated a solution to the “schooling of Gypsies,” formulated as part of the “Gypsy questions.” A report from the general town meeting of Pankasz, immediately before the outset of World War Two, attests to just that: “Establishment of a separate Gypsy school is critically important . . . because their number grows year after year” (Pomogyi 1995, 186). Kemény István, one of the most known Romologists in Hungary, pointed out that until World War Two, “children were just as numerous in the non-Roma families as they were in Roma families” (Kemény 2005, 34).

12 The newspaper was made available at the National Educational Library and Museum in Budapest, Hungary. I hereby express my gratitude to Károly Szabó at the Library for his invaluable help.

School attendance among Roma generally grew in the interwar period, especially among those who could access the school and lived near villages; yet, many quit school after a few years of study (Kemény 2001). Absenteeism of Roma children was common in the entire country, which was likely the consequence of discrimination in schools and state institutions, as well as bureaucratic failure. Some documents also suggest that school-age Roma children were not registered properly and subsequently left out from the catalog of students (Pomogyi 1995, 184).<sup>13</sup>

Segregated education was becoming widespread. Often Roma schools or classes were realized only if sufficient funding and resources—depleted or scarce at the time—were provided. The Tárkányi Gypsy School, which opened in 1935 with a dedicated teacher, Dénes Jász, was housed in the village school, where a dedicated classroom was assigned for Roma. Although there were plans for a “single classroom separate school,” due to the disruptions of the war these plans never materialized (Tárkányi Elementary School 2021). A few years after its establishment, local newspaper (*Esztergom és vidéke* 1938) proudly announced that the Tárkányi Gypsy School “had a great effect on the moral, intellectual and sanitary development of Gypsies” (Hungarian Cultural Heritage Portal 2021). A pedagogical paper from 1937 expressed its admiration for the work of Jász by going beyond the expected curricula and paying special attention to “moral and hygienic” education of Gypsy youth (*Néptanítók Lapja és Népművelési Tájékoztató* 1937, 564). In the town of Pankasz, instead of a separate school, a classroom was rented in 1942 to realize the education of Roma (Mezey 1986, 214).

This negative stigma attached to Gypsies and, consequently, Gypsy schools, is abundantly clear through newspaper articles, such as the one describing the fervent protest of Roma from the town of Ács against the creation of a Gypsy school in 1938. The newspaper *Kis Ujság* from December 4, 1938 described the objections of Ács Gypsies:

[Ács Gypsies] protest . . . against the opening of the Gypsy school. They are not Gypsies, they claim, and they said with pride they are Hungarians. They won't attend the Gypsy school. They begged not to take them out to this shame. Rather, they will make sure their children attend the local school.

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13 These issues were not new; as early as in 1909 there were instances when Roma demanded their own schools. Such was the case in Ószentanna and Pankota in 1909, where Roma parents complained of their children being teased, which instilled in them “the thought that they are an ulcer on the society” (Pomogyi 1995, 184).

In terms of textbooks, although there were no policies regarding Romani language textbooks like in the Soviet Union at the time, Roma did appear in Hungarian-language textbooks, usually as part of educational tales in readers. For example, a second-grade reader from 1925 contained a tale about “Pejkó,” a horse that was stolen by a Gypsy (Mócsy, Petrovác and Walter 1925). The rightful owner of the horse, having found the Gypsy thief at the market, ingeniously proved that the horse was stolen. In the end, the Gypsy protagonist faced the law. Another second-grade reader, *Pista és Juliska*, written by László Kozma and published in 1925, contains a short story about a Gypsy who stole a goose. After a warning to stop, the Gypsy sarcastically replies that he will not stop because he is chased.

In sum, it was evident that Roma were popularly seen in Hungary after World War One as a societal problem that required an ample solution from the state. It was also increasingly apparent that Roma were not seen as capable of adaptation, but rather as a social nuisance or source of danger, to be contained or confined. The approach to minority groups inevitably became increasingly xenophobic. Intolerance of certain minority groups, coupled with economic hardships and depression of the 1930s, and the political leadership of Prime Minister Gyula Gömbös who “set immediately to work on the creation of a ‘fascist state system’” led to the growing popularity of the Hungarian National Socialist movement (Crowe 1994, 87).<sup>14</sup> Caught in the middle of it all were Hungarian Roma and Jews.

The striking contrast between the Soviet Union and Hungary after World War One is that in the former, a multi-ethnic society was initially organized around the socialist ideology, whereas in mono-ethnic Hungary, the trauma of losing the war, economic depression, and political volatility led to the re-imagination of a nation-state strongly defined by ethnicity, pursuing exclusionary policies towards Roma.

In the realm of education, the early Soviet Union pursued a mission to enlighten and civilize Roma through schools. To that end, a standardized Romani language was codified and used for school education. Roma traditions and way of life, which were seen as source of backwardness, were condemned in the name of socialist progress and Sovietization of Roma. In Hungary, Roma were also targeted for their perceived idle and unproductive lifestyles, and the policies were predominantly defined in terms of eliminating the threat they

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<sup>14</sup> When the war broke out, the Hungarian political elite also hoped to reverse its territorial losses by allying with fascist Italy and Nazi Germany (Csepeli and Örkény 1996).

allegedly posed to public security and safety. Roma in Hungary were increasingly criminalized, marginalized, and excluded; during the interwar period, with the radicalization of the political scene, the “Gypsy problem” was also discussed in chauvinist and racist tones.

### A Note on the Holocaust

The Holocaust during World War Two is perhaps one of the most tragic, destructive periods of Roma history.<sup>15</sup> Scientific racism dominated the discourse in those decades, with claims of the inferiority of the “Gypsy race.” There were numerous anti-Roma measures already in the 1920s and ’30s, but those intensified as Hungary became increasingly militarized (Bársony and Daróczi 2008, 32).<sup>16</sup> Demands to establish concentration camps for “criminal Gypsies” were widespread in the country, often citing the German example (*Holokauszt Magyarországon* [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.). For instance, in 1939 Győző Drózdy, a party of National Union Members of Parliament, called for a special Roma census in the name of racial preservation, and Ferenc Orsós, who later became the President of the Hungarian Medical Chamber, insisted on the adaptation of German race laws in Hungary during his address to the Upper House of the Parliament in 1941 (Bársony and Daróczi 2008, 32; *Holokauszt Magyarországon* [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.).

An intensified wave of anti-Roma atrocities began in 1944 when the Hungarian Arrow Cross Party assumed power. Many Roma became victims of mass shootings, which happened in Szolgaegyház, Nagyszalonta, Doboz, Várpalota, Lajoskomárom, and Lengyel, among other places. By 1944 there were at least 30 ghettos or work camps in the country, where tens of thousands of Roma were forced to labour in inhumane conditions (Szalayné Sándor 2017, 4). Thousands of Roma were hauled in the infamous “Csillagerőd” near Komárom, on the bank of the Danube. From “Csillagerőd” some were transported to concentration camps in Dachau, Bergen-Belsen, and Ravensbrück.

The exact number of victims of the Pharrajimos (a term that means “destruction” and refers to the Roma Holocaust) in Hungary is still debated; numbers are difficult to estimate as many deaths were not accounted for and countless bodies lay in unidentified mass graves (Tóth 2019). Moreover, some sources suggest that

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15 Part of this section was published as Dunajeva, “Roma Holocaust in Hungary: Importance and implications of Roma resistance” (2020).

16 See a detailed description of anti-Roma measures and pogroms during the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s in Purcsi (2004).

not all Roma were categorized as such, but some were transported as asocials or political prisoners (Fábiánné Andrónyi n.d.). Some, like historian László Karsai, assess the number of Roma victims in Hungary to around 5000, with thousands more as persecuted, while others estimate up to 50,000, like Menyhért Lakatos, a well-known Roma literary figure and writer, or somewhere in between (Tóth 2019; *Holokauszt Magyarországon* [Holocaust in Hungary] n.d.). Some suggest that extermination directly affected at least one-third of the Hungarian Roma (Márton-Tóth 2015; Fábiánné Andrónyi n.d.).

In the Soviet Union, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler's Germany, which was in turn violated in the summer of 1941 when Germany invaded the USSR. Roma served in the Red Army and participated in aid programs (Bugay 2015). In the fall of that year, mass killings of Roma—nomadic and settled—began in the occupied territories and intensified in 1942 (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 489). It is important to note that accounts from the time attest to Roma who were well integrated in the Soviet society before World War Two broke out. A description of Roma in Smolensk characterized them as part of the “normal Soviet population, who worked on the kolkhozy and some in the factories, many of whom were educated” (quoted in Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 493). When Smolensk was occupied by the Nazis in 1941, the locals were shocked when “98 people were taken away” after a gas van arrived to the local Gypsy kolkhoz (ibid.). Similarly, in towns of Smolensk oblast, two hundred of “working, law-abiding Gypsies” were murdered in two Gypsy Kolkhozy and thrown into holes (ibid.).

Heavy massacres took place in Western Ukraine, Smolensk, Leningrad and Pskov regions (Demeter and Chernykh 2018). Roma of Pskov region recalled:

We all lived together, all of my family members . . . then we received a message to prepare food for three days . . . even though my father was not literate, he was farseeing. Many Gypsies gathered and all asked “where are they taking us?” and the Germans responded: “you will be sent to Bessarabia, you are Gypsies after all.” And many Gypsies believed. But my father said: “What Bessarabia? . . . everyone will be shot like dogs! I have a horse—take your children and let's hide in the woods” . . . My dad took my mother and us, children . . . and only one family survived—ours. (quoted in Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 492)

In the woods near Leningrad (today's Saint Petersburg), Nazis demolished several Roma settlements with nearly 800 people (ibid.). During the Nazi mas-

sacre of Roma in Babi Yar, which is “considered a single largest Holocaust massacre in Europe,” between 1941–1943 hundreds of Ukrainian Roma were murdered (Kotljarchuk 2015) and five Roma settlements liquidated (Demeter and Chernykh 2018).

Soviet Roma participated in the war effort as soldiers at the front, and Roma are proud that there are eleven heroes of the Soviet Union (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 495). Wartime heroism of Soviet Roma was through their participation as infantrymen, tankers, drivers, pilots, gunners, medical workers, and partisans (Amelin 2013, 4). They also performed as artists and musicians for the Soviet Army. Among Soviet Roma heroes was the “legendary reconnoiter” Ruza Tumashevich or Polya Morazevskaya, a young Roma partisan who gathered valuable information for her unit (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 493–95).

Once again, it is difficult to estimate the exact number of victims. Often, Roma were not deported to concentration camps, but rather were killed on the spot by Nazi *einsatzgruppen* and local collaborators. Some estimates suggest that “German military and SS-police units . . . shot at least 30,000 Roma in the Baltic States and elsewhere in the occupied Soviet Union” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum n.d.). Meanwhile, Demeter and Chernykh argue that it is “practically impossible” to determine the number of Roma deaths during World War Two (2018, 493).

After the profound destruction of World War Two and its disparaging racist ideology that resulted in the persecution and genocide of Roma, the trauma was hardly overcome. Recently, there have been more efforts to uncover the mechanisms of coping, resisting, and surviving the Roma Holocaust, as well as recognizing the trauma felt by the community and victims to this day (see for example Mirga-Kruszelnicka and Dunajeva 2021). However, for decades the Roma Holocaust was hardly discussed. Both countries focused on rebuilding their countries after the destructions of the war, and renewed efforts of nation building were guided by the ideology of state socialism after the end of World War Two. With abundant literature on Roma during post-war socialism, the next chapter provides a brief summary of this era, with a special focus on education policies.

## Chapter 5

# State Socialism (1945–1989)

*“A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.”*

Stalin (1913)

While the Soviet Union had been building socialism for approximately three decades by the time World War Two ended, Hungary’s political project of state socialism commenced in 1947. United by the same ideology of state socialism, the two countries’ attempt at assimilating Roma “misfits” at this time merged in many ways. Although Roma remained a small, politically unimportant minority in Russia and were affected by overall nationality policies, in contrast, as the most numerous minority in Hungary, there were political discussions and orders specifically targeting Roma in the country. In the Soviet Union in 1970 there were approximately 98,000 Roma in the country, amounting to a meager 0.08% of the total population (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 115). In Hungary in 1971, Roma community constituted 320,000 people, which was 3% of the total population (Kemény and Janky 2006).

In this chapter I review the assimilationist approach that Roma faced in Hungary and Russia after World War Two and reflect on the legacies of these policies. The purpose of the brief assessment of this era is to complete the historical analysis and highlight the legacies of socialist-era policies on Roma identity formation, discussing the two countries side-by-side. As the topic of Roma under socialism occupied many researchers before, there are numerous excellent studies on this topic; perhaps the most comprehensive source for Hungary is the impressive collection of original sources on Roma politics covering the years between 1956 and 1989, edited by Tamás Hajnáczy (2015), which is a worthy continuation of Barna Mezey’s earlier cited volume (1986). Balázs Majtényi and György Majtényi’s “A Contemporary History of Exclusion: The Roma Issue in Hungary from 1945 to 2015” is also noteworthy. While the extent of academic inquiry about Russian Roma has been more modest, with no compa-

rably comprehensive study of Russian Roma after World War Two, excellent scholarly work of Elena Marushiakova and Vesselin Popov, Nadezhda Demeter, Alexander Chernykh and Nikolay Bugay is of special importance. These sources are also informative about Roma self-organization and mobilization efforts under socialism—a topic that is outside of the scope of this chapter.

## Assimilationist Campaigns

After Lenin's death, Stalin approached minorities with a radically different idea. Stalin turned away from cultivating national cultures, and instead followed an approach of fierce assimilation. As Maria Konstantinova, a researcher of Ukrainian and Russian Roma, describes this sharp turn,

Under Vladimir Lenin's indigenization policy, the Roma had begun to find their cultural place within . . . Russian society. However, these social developments were brought to a stop under Joseph Stalin, as they did not correspond with the new minorities' policies . . . [which "encouraged" Roma] to culturally assimilate with the rest of the Soviet population. In doing so, they stripped the Roma of their cultural traditions and lifestyle. (2012, 2, 9)

The similarity between Socialist policies towards minorities across countries stems from those being decisively shaped by the socialist doctrine, and more specifically by Stalin's interpretation of Marxism in his "National Colonial Question" (Stewart 2001, 71).

In his multi-volume *Sochineniia*, Stalin wrote that socialists are indeed sensitive to the small peoples of USSR; however, he was wary of what he saw as the "fragmentation" of USSR into small states, as he assumed that large states were the only ones capable achieving socialism (Stalin 1946). Stalin also firmly believed that all groups and nations within the Soviet Union needed to be modernized. To transform the entire society, besides collectivization and industrialization, a cultural revolution was needed, which would replace the "antiquated customs" with "scientific ideology" (Slezkine 1994, 219). This logic dictated that backwardness was a "swamp" and "one drop of backwardness was enough to poison the barrelful of modernity" (*ibid.*, 220–223).

Marushiakova and Popov point out that the changes in the Soviet Union at that time should be seen as an overall paradigm change in nationality policy,

rather than any measure specifically targeting Roma (2020, 2011). Put differently, the Roma minority was so small in the Soviet Union that they never generated as much attention as in most of Eastern Europe. Minority assimilation was primarily driven by linguistic assimilation (Russification), repression of nationalism, and reidentification; the latter was most effective through urbanization which loosened ties with traditional communities (Gorenburg 2006). As a result of linguistic assimilation, “enrollments in schools with native language education declined, many ethnic regions dropped native language education entirely in favor of Russian language education with the native language taught as a subject” (Gorenburg 2006, 283).

In fact, the assimilationist approach was broadly employed in the Socialist Bloc beyond Hungary and Russia as well, “each state measure in Eastern Europe directed towards Roma could be regarded a step aiming at assimilation,” and in Hungary there were even talks about “natural assimilation of Gypsies” (Marushiakova and Popov 2011, 8). As Zoltan Barany put it, “by the mid-1950s ‘what to do with the troublesome Gypsies?’ became an important question across Eastern Europe [and t]he main goal (assimilation) was the same [across countries]” (2000, 424). “Elevating the Gypsies” became a primary goal, while “claiming that Gypsies did not constitute a national minority,” and thus assimilation was seen as natural progression of “solving the Gypsy issue” (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016, 34).

In the Soviet Union, Stalin’s repressive measures and mass deportations affected numerous minorities, and while Roma were not specifically targeted, they were still negatively affected (ERRC 2005, 48–49). Although Stalin’s draconian measures of “wholesale liquidation of non-Russian political leaders, the decimation of non-Russian educational and cultural elites, and even mass extermination . . . of nationalities” were not typical for all of the post-World War Two Soviet history, assimilationism continued even after Stalin’s death (Fedyshyn 1967, 35). Khrushchev, perhaps most known for his de-Stalinization, pursued the objective of assimilation of non-Russian peoples “with an even greater determination and consistency but with different methods [than Stalin]” (ibid.). As a result, some concessions were made to non-Russian people to reassure their belonging to the Soviet society, yet consolidation of all nationalities as Russian-speaking, Russian-cultured, Soviet people in the name of building communism dominated.

Hungary’s post-World War Two single-party system was similarly built on the principles of Marxism-Leninism following the Soviet model and declared their goal of building an egalitarian society consisting of the working class. To

that end, Hungary soon faced the “problem” of Roma who were not well integrated into society, let alone constituting the working class. Policies that targeted Roma, however, were arguably tainted by the “anti-egalitarian nationalism that had gained strength between the two world wars [and] persisted into the new political framework” (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016, 31). The “Gypsy question” was unceasingly framed in deeply discriminatory ways in much of Europe, and in Hungary in the 1950s local councils considered forced labor for “work-avoiding Gypsies” (Hajnóczky 2015, 19).

There is also evidence that the Hungarian political elite were aware of, and keen to study the Soviet nationality approach. For instance, in the 1946 *Social Science Review*, the social science periodical of the party, an article by András Kálmán “referred to the Soviet Union’s minority policy and argued that the question of ‘unassimilated’ Gypsies was a national issue” (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016, 33). Kálmán advocated for assimilation through incorporating Roma labor into the heavy industry sector and openly criticized the old approach of making “new peasants” from Gypsies, whom he believed should be made into “real workers” (Dupcsik 2009, 152). Then, in 1957 a study was conducted by György Pogány and Géza Bán from the Ministry of Labor to assess the situation of Roma. The study was primarily motivated by the need to find a solution to the distractions in the labor economy that Roma had posed, and various solutions were compared with those of the Soviet Union and a handful of other “friendly countries” (Hajnóczky 2015, 22).

Roma represented a challenge on many levels: first, their lifestyle made centralized decision-making more difficult; second, they did not fit “Stalin’s mechanistic model of what constituted a nation and posed a continuous challenge to Communist thinking” (Stewart 2001, 71). Accordingly, various efforts to bring Roma under state control continued. In Hungary, identification cards were introduced in 1954 and within a year all citizens had been issued one except “itinerant Gypsies,” who were later issued so-called “black identification cards” (Hajnóczky 2015, 20). In Russia, *propiska*, or the internal registration and passport system, was initiated already before the Second World War, in 1932, after which “Soviet authorities started cleansing the big cities from ‘unwanted and dangerous elements,’” and Roma, due to their visible differences, were among the victims (ERRC 2005, 49).

Proletarianization and collectivization of Roma (or other minority groups, for that matter) was also a key approach to cultivate a working-class consciousness among Roma and modernize them. Their special status as a group “lying outside of socialist society,” as they were commonly referred to in the

Hungarian discourse at the time, is telling of the state's view of Roma communities (Majtényi and Majtényi 2016, 38). Roma were referred to as “untrustworthy citizens,” “social cases,” or people who needed “special attention” (Stewart 2001, 74; Siklova and Miklusakova 1998, 58). Assimilationist campaigns, however, were ruthlessly destructive of local cultures and traditions, often leading to a paternalistic dependence on the state.

If linguistic assimilation is any measure of losing cultural identity, then in the USSR assimilationist policies led to some decline in native speakers of Romani language, which continued in the years to come: only 59.3% chose Roma as their mother tongue during the 1959 census in the USSR, compared with 64.2% in 1926 (Crowe 1994, 189). This drop was undoubtedly related to “the lack of Romani language publications . . . and ongoing pressure to settle and assimilate” (*ibid.*). In comparison, a comprehensive study of Hungarian Roma conducted in 1971 under the leadership of István Kemény, revealed that only 21% of Roma spoke Romani and 8% spoke Romanian (Boyash) as their mother tongue (Kállai n.d., 38).<sup>1</sup>

What occupied bureaucrats at the time were also obstacles to Roma assimilation. One general cause was the capitalist oppression of the past: the narrative of assimilationist campaigns often described the intention to correct for legacies of capitalist past that left Roma marginalized, poor, and consequently unproductive (Stewart 1997, 5–6). For example, the 1961 Resolution of the Hungarian Communist Party explicitly states that in “capitalist societies Gypsies were excluded, which resulted in mutual lack of trust and prejudice among Gypsies and non-Gypsies. With the liberation of our homeland, Gypsies became full members of our society” (quoted in Mezey 1986, 240).

In the USSR, nomadism was seen as one of the more significant obstacles of assimilating Roma. During the 1952 census, authorities learnt that there were “still” 33,000 nomadic Roma in the USSR (Stewart 2001, 81). These numbers were partially due to some Roma reverting to nomadic lifestyle as an economic strategy, a result of the post-war economic devastation (Marushiakova and Popov 2003, 303). Nomadism was seen as incompatible with collectivization—a crucial goal of the state's industrialization effort (Slezkine 1994, 188).

Shortly after the census, on October 5, 1956, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR issued a decree on “The inclusion of the itinerant Gypsies in labor activities” (Stewart 2001, 81).<sup>2</sup> This decree, Nadezhda Demeter noted,

1 The study, unfortunately, does not reflect on the use of Roma language in the interwar period.

2 Marushiakova and Popov analyze letters from Roma activists and intellectuals in the Soviet Union and show that Nikolay Pankpov, a Russian Romani intellectual, in his letter to Khrushchev in March of 1956

“defined a crime on the basis of nationality” (quoted in Crowe 1994, 188). Many other Eastern European countries soon followed suit, such as Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Romania. This decree also ordered all Roma into wage labor, and some 10,000 were moved to Siberia where labor was needed (Stewart 2001, 81). “The result of the 1956 law was great hunger,” recalled a victim of resettlement process, “soldiers with guns rounded up all those in camps” (quoted in Lemon 2000, 233). The earlier introduced *propiska* system also helped enforce the 1956 decree by allowing broader control of city residents (ERRC 2005, 51).

This period also coincided with some of the biggest socialist industrial projects, for which a large workforce was needed. “Everything remotely resembling economic development was of special importance to the state” in the heat of industrialization (Slezkine 1994, 273). In the Russian North, for instance, if certain groups were not efficient in industrial labor or large-scale food production, their land was often considered vacant and thus their very existence denied (*ibid.*, 274).

Roma were also targeted for the industrial labor force (The Save the Children Fund 2001, 113). After all, labor was the most important measure of value and a requirement to becoming a valuable member of the socialist society. The aim of the 1956 decree, thus, was also “to recruit all Roma into full-time employment in standard occupations” (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, 244). There is disagreement regarding the efficiency of implementation of this decree, ranging from lax application of these rules to coercive settlement of Roma; more realistically, the historian and anthropologist Volha Bartash’s observation is perhaps most accurate, namely that “the transition to sedentism had regional particularities which to a great degree depended on the interaction of all actors—Roma, authorities, police and non-Roma population—on the ground” (Bartash 2015, 32).

In comparison with the Soviet Union, eradication of nomadism was likely not the motivating factor in Hungary since it was repeatedly addressed since at least the 1890s (Fehér 1993, 4).<sup>3</sup> Comparable to the Soviet Union, the spo-

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also urges the Soviet state “to resume work among the Gypsies on the transition to a settled way of life, employment and culture” (2020, 272). The authors suggest that this letter and the work of Roma activists could have played a role in “convincing” the Soviet state of the need to address nomadic lifestyle of Roma. N. F. Bugay in his study of the Soviet Roma in 1930–1960 reaches the same conclusion, highlighting the role of Roma intellectuals in formulating policies that targeted other Roma in the country (2015, 62).

3 Already the stated purpose of the Roma census of 1893 was “to resolve the issue of vagrancy and to sedentarize itinerant Roma.” Then, a decree from 1928 of the Minister of Interior stipulated: “whether [Gypsies] practice migration in order to avoid work, or do so under the pretext of looking for work, the forces of public order are obliged to arrest and detain them where they are found and then to deposit them at the nearest police headquarters” (Kemény 2005, 28, 47).

radic participation of Hungarian Roma in full-time employment and their continuous engagement in traditional occupations were all seen as opposing socialist progress. In addition, the realization that 40% of Gypsies were illiterate and a negligible percent completed the basic school leaving exam (*The Save the Children Fund* 2001, 121; *Fehér* 1993, 7) likely stimulated a firm state policy, leading to the 1961 resolution of the Central Committee.<sup>4</sup> Besides denying Roma nationality, the resolution outlined an approach to solving the “Gypsy problem” by focusing on the triad of labor, housing, and schooling (*Dupcsik* 2009, 141).

Importantly, the 1961 Resolution explicitly stated that Roma must not be viewed as a nationality:

The basis of our policy toward the Roma population is to be the principle that, despite certain ethnic characteristics, it is not an ethnic group. In the solution of their problems we must take into account their particular social situation and ensure their full citizens’ rights and responsibilities, as well as provide the necessary political, economic and cultural conditions for exercising these. . . . Many perceive it as an ethnic question and propose the development of the “Roma language,” the establishment of Roma speaking schools, colleges, farming co-operatives, etc. Such views are not only incorrect but dangerous as well, as they tend to conserve the segregation of the Roma and decelerate their integration into society. (Quoted in Kállai n.d., 38)

The stance described is the complete opposite of the Soviet nativization policies in the 1920s and ’30s, which established Roma speaking schools for the purposes of social advancement, but akin to the later nationality policy in the USSR. The resolution acknowledged the need to bridge the gap between Roma and non-Roma, but solutions were seen in complete assimilation and abandonment of a lifestyle that “causes” these conditions.

Later, during the Kádár-era (1965–88), the 1979 report by the Scientific, Educational, and Cultural Unit of the Hungarian Communist Party confirmed the same standpoint, that Roma should not be seen as a nationality, but a group in the process of integrating into the society (*Hajnáczy* 2015). The attitude was similar in many other Eastern European countries. Czechoslovakia,

4 Other explanations were proposed as well. For example, *Dupcsik* suggests the reason why there was no official Roma policy for over two decades may simply be due to the insufficient time of the party to fully engage with this “marginal” question (2009, 139).

for example, denied the very existence of a Roma minority, proving on “scientific grounds” why they were unable to become a nationality (Barany 2000, 422). Accordingly, the term Roma was banned, and instead, officials used “population of Gypsy origin” (Siklova and Miklusakova 1998, 59), and assimilation was seen as the only policy to pursue.

Paradoxically, Roma became a group whose identity was denied, but who were nevertheless easily distinguishable and identifiable. For instance, in Hungary data collected by state officials allowed the authorities to publish racialized criminal statistics, and there were specialized police units responsible for the elimination of “Gypsy crime.” In Czechoslovakia, while “Romani nationality was not officially recognized . . . the state officials [nevertheless] maintained detailed files on ‘the population of Gypsy origin,’ labeled according to skin color” (Siklova and Miklusakova 1998, 58).

In the Soviet Union, Hungary, and several other socialist countries, there were efforts to “uplift” Roma communities and remedy their impoverished living conditions which extended to the realms of education, housing, and employment. For instance, the Hungarian housing program in 1964 envisioned the liquidation of 2,500 Roma settlements (Marushiakova and Popov 2011). Bulgaria also designed various policies to “reform” Roma lifestyle and “develop” their culture, which assumed the prohibition of various aspects of Roma traditions and fostered the assimilationist campaign (Barany 2000, 425). In the Soviet Union, sedentarization and settlement of Roma communities continued, but research also reveals that some Roma who were forcibly settled, resisted by adapting their new lifestyles to resemble their traditional way of life: they changed their homes to resemble tents, changed the furniture to fit their traditional living spaces, or showed “deep contempt towards furniture” (Crowe 1994, 188).

Many measures to modernize and assimilate Roma only led to segregation and further marginalization. In Hungary, with the elimination of *cigánytelepek* (Gypsy settlements), the housing provided to Roma was poor, inadequately small, and often in shortage (The Save the Children Fund 2001, 113–117). Roma families often received apartments in cramped and poorly constructed housing projects (labeled as *csökkent értékű*, or reduced value, in Hungarian), expecting Roma to “destroy the available amenities in any case” (Barany 2002, 131). Similarly, in Slovakia, Roma tended to receive inferior quality apartments, and Roma families from rural areas were moved to urban apartments with no preparation for this new lifestyle (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2012). In Slovakia, “makeshift accommodation in Roma settlements” and “overcrowded settlements” became common (*ibid.*, 159). As a result, seg-

regation by the 1960s increased and was more concentrated (Barany 2002, 131–32). These measures arguably reinforced marginality, as well as created a paternalistic system where the poor, disproportionately represented by Roma, heavily relied on the state (Ladányi and Szélényi 2006, 87–88).

In addition to housing, labor inclusion was of critical importance. Accordingly, in the Soviet Union “many [Roma] men received jobs in industry and construction, where they gained professional training[, and t]heir wives were often employed as unskilled workers, cleaners or waitresses and worked until they had children” (Bartash 2015, 37). It was common across the Socialist Bloc for Roma to provide various services “as construction workers, blacksmiths, handymen, mainly for the cooperatives” (ERRC 2005, 52). Yet, traditional Roma professions suffered. For example, in the 1950s and 1960s Hungary, when “most Roma were subjected to a process of proletarianization[, t]his development amounted to a fall in status for Roma musicians,” while the status of merchants—most popularly horse, pig and carpet trading—significantly decreased as well (Kemény 2005, 57). In the Soviet Union, due to economic stagnation some non-Roma entered traditional Roma occupations, and at times even took over some “traditional Roma businesses” (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, 244).

Notably, Roma also succeeded in profiting from informal markets (a practice many Soviet citizens engaged in at the time), especially by moving goods around from places with excess to those with shortages—a common defect of central planning from the 1960s on (Bartash 2015; ERRC 2005, 52). Marushiakova and Popov brilliantly show how popular vocabulary in the Brezhnev period (1966–1982) conveyed this role of Roma in filling the shortage gap: “*zakazat’ u tsygan,*” or “order from Gypsies,” in Russian, was one such expression in use at the time when “the Soviet Union . . . was like one big market for the Gypsies” (Marushiakova and Popov 2003, 304). Roma found their place in the Soviet socialist society as mediators, traders, salespeople and service-providers.

Starting in the 1950s, economic conditions of Roma had improved. Soviet Roma were arguably better off than the average Soviet citizen, with better economic status and higher living standards than the Soviet average at the time (ERRC 2005, 52). Moreover, “under the conditions of economic stagnation during Brezhnev’s government, the Gypsies enjoyed a prestigious social position and, in a way, they were part of the social elite (or at least they were connected to it)” (Marushiakova and Popov 2003, 305). In post-transition Russia, the economic strategies that Roma adopted in previous decades were seen as cunning; Roma were “blamed for profiting illegally at the expense of members

of the majority populations,” stressing the “visible wealth of affluent Romani traders” (Kalinin and Kalinina 2001, 245).

While some Soviet Roma relied on the economic inefficiencies of the state for their livelihood, most Hungarian Roma were increasingly made dependent on the paternalistic Hungarian state, especially for employment. Consequently, loss of employment hit Roma especially hard after transition. When enterprises where Roma were commonly employed closed—such as agricultural cooperatives, factories, public construction, and mines—they found themselves disproportionately represented among the unemployed population, soon leading to growing poverty (Ringold, Orenstein, and Wilkens 2005, 72).

Besides housing and labor policies, education policies were also a critical tool of social control, assimilation, ideological instructions and proletarianization of Roma youth. Socialist states took education policies particularly seriously, as the educational system “helped socialize a predominantly tradition-oriented population into the cultural patterns of an industrial society” (Azrael 1972, 327). In other words, there was “no education for the sake of education,” as Slezkine aptly put it, instead the “emphasis was on practical skills and ideological correctness” (1994, 222). The next section focuses on political education in the Soviet Union and Hungary after 1949, and especially how education policy targeted the Roma population.

### Political Education in State-Socialist Schools

In the Soviet Union, the elimination of illiteracy was a major undertaking already in the 1920s and '30s. In the Soviet Union, the complete control of all aspects of scholarship and teaching by the Communist Party reaches back to the 1930s, and since then, “the party and [Soviet] state claim the exclusive right to educate children according to their purported aim of achieving the distant goal of communism” (Gaworek 1977, 56). Lenin recognized that one of the main obstacles for communist ideas to gain support among the population was illiteracy and hence the *likbez* campaign (“*likvidatsiya bezgramotnosti*,” or eradication of illiteracy) was also used as a political propaganda tool and an instrument to overcome “backwardness” (Kenez 1985). Besides ideological indoctrination, education was clearly associated with productive labor; in Lenin’s words, “universal productive labor has been wedded to universal education” (Zajda 1979, 287). Compulsory and universal ten-year schooling in the Soviet Union was adopted in 1951 and allegedly achieved by 1975 (*ibid.*).

Following suit, the education system was unified and nationalized in Hungary in 1948, after the bill on school nationalization was proposed, consolidating state control of the school system (Szóró 2019). With that, “education became exclusively a state affair,” and churches, having played a dominant role in education, lost their influence, and “education in general . . . was increasingly identified as a social instrument for the ‘construction of socialism’” (Braham 1970, 9, 101). Schools in socialist countries, in short, were a key tool of constructing a planned society, and through ideological-educational undertakings raise a generation of “New Socialist Persons.” To that end, “official ideology penetrated ‘classroom spaces’ and schoolrooms were turned into a feasible arena for creating the ‘new socialist type of human’” (Gyuris 2014, 538–39).

During state socialism, schools continued to play a central role in creating a manageable “cohesive social whole,” which could be more effectively directed by the “all knowing government agencies” (Stewart 2001, 78). Through school instruction, the youth learned the necessary work ethic, class-consciousness, as well as discipline and loyalty to the regime (Gaworek 1977). The ideological importance of education was paramount, as “education involved considerably more than the developing of skills . . . it involved ‘molding the new Soviet man’ . . . [and] pedagogic techniques are designed to foster discipline and respect for authority” (Nogee 1972, 315). Early socialization in schools, political education, and mandatory school activities ensured the construction of devoted proletariats.

Educating illiterate Roma gained an urgency, as proletarianization had to start with the spread of socialist ideas and teaching the proper skills for joining the socialist pool of workers. In Hungary, although the Ministry of Popular Culture (*Népművelési Minisztérium*) had made an attempt to liquidate illiteracy among Roma by offering literacy courses, by 1953 these courses were abandoned due to successive failures or for the lack of incentive (Hajnáczky 2015, 25). Improvement in “cultural upbringing” (*kulturális nevelőmunka*) and the fight against illiteracy and education of school-age Roma children was one of the priorities of the earlier discussed 1961 resolution. Through much effort, by the 1970s, some areas of Hungary were able to achieve universal school attendance, while other regions lagged behind with around 75% attendance; low attendance was partially explained by sources of the time with the deterrent role of parents, who, according to one study, were 62% illiterate (Bábosik 2009, 184–185).

On the one hand, education was a tool of homogenization. The language of instruction was that of the core nation. In the Soviet Union after nativiza-

tion policies were discontinued at the end of 1930s, national languages were seen as “unsuitable for scientific and technological purposes, as well as an obstacle to the scientific progress of the USSR,” and a large-scale, well-organized Russification campaign permeated not only the schools, but also other institutions and social life (Rannut 1991, 31). As a result, minority students often felt unwelcome as the “schools were intended for Russians” (Slezkine 1994, 223). In the Soviet Union in 1958, “a campaign for the intensified study of the Russian language (referred to as ‘the second mother tongue’) was ordered, to advance Nikita Khrushchev’s (1953–1964) “fusion-of-nations” policy (Fedyshyn 1967, 37–38).

In Hungary, the common attitude was that encouragement of Romani language in schools would “prevent the progress of Gypsies, because it would lead to harmful separation of them [from others], and it would encourage the conservation of an anachronistic lifestyle whose time has passed” (Erdős 1960, quoted in Stewart 2001). Even scholars that specialized in Romani language were sometimes forced out of their universities (see Milena Hubschmannova’s case in Czechoslovakia, discussed in Siklova and Miklusakova 1998, 59). Romani language was popularly seen as an insufficient language that also contributed to the inadequate educational achievements of Roma (Dupcsik 2009, 2019)—a belief that remains widespread today as well (Dunajeva and Tidrick 2015).

On the other hand, however, education policies also marginalized. The centralized education that allegedly was accessible to everyone—a narrative often employed for purposes of propaganda, distinguishing the just socialist society from the unjust capitalist one—yet did not provide equal quality of education (Gyuris 2014, 540). For example, throughout Eastern Europe, including Hungary, homogenous “Gypsy classes” or “Gypsy schools” often provided inferior education and lower standards (Forray 2002). There were significantly more Roma in educational institutions or classes for those with learning disabilities (Dupcsik 2009, 212). While school attendance among Roma showed a positive tendency, “some 60% of Roma children [attended] kindergarten, one half of them completed elementary school, and an increasing number learned trades or went to high school,” according to a report from the 1984 session of the Agitation and Propaganda Committee, yet even with improving numbers, low-quality segregated education for Roma became not only wide-spread but also increasingly accepted (referenced in Kállai, n.d. 39).

Labeling and discrimination permeated the school system and affected disciplinary practices. Researchers in 1970s Hungary openly described the phenomenon of “covert, yet effective mechanisms of spontaneous segregation” in

schools, which developed despite the “homogenous and egalitarian Hungarian education system” (Dupcsik 2009, 217). In Czechoslovakia, for instance, each Roma child was documented in schools as a “social case,” and Roma students who refused to attend school were forcibly placed in foster homes and separated from their families (Siklova and Miklusakova 1998, 59). The infamous “C” classes (that stood for *cigány* or Gypsy in Hungarian), along with segregated Gypsy schools, were to be gradually discontinued from the 1980s, yet the practice continues until today. Tensions between state schools and Roma families became increasingly disparaging.

In the Soviet Union, as a consequence of the 1956 decree, sedentarization of Roma accelerated, which enabled Roma youth to attend schools (Abramenko and Kulaeva 2013, 61). Although the idea of Romani-language schools was completely abandoned by this time, arguably social integration, including education, was realized in a relatively short period of time:

The circumstance that Gypsy children were included in the education system without any use of teaching aids in their mother tongue appeared not to be a serious obstacle, and quickly a relatively small circle of Gypsy intelligentsia with good (including university) education came into being. (Marushiakova and Popov 2017, 53)

Nativization-era education did not disappear without a trace, however. Roma educated in Romani language continued to educate their children and relatives the “sophisticated level of Romanes” that they had learned, and the “spark of the Romani Renaissance enthusiasm” was kept alive even decades after Romani-language education was discontinued (Kalinin 2020, 68). Valdemar Kalinin admiringly describes this form of familial education that took place after 1938 in the following way:

As these Gypsies became the older generation, they took the initiative to invite the younger generation to bigger houses, where they spoke about their teachers, told school life stories, fairy-tales; read out poems and stories, which they remembered from attending Gypsy schools. Usually they met during long winter evenings and nights. (Kalinin 2020, 68)

This informal education of Romani language is then an important difference between the experience of the Soviet and Hungarian Roma in preserving their cultural identity.

## Categorization of Roma: Legacies of Socialist Identity Politics and Critical Voices

In summary, this chapter was concerned with a general overview of post-World War Two socialist policies towards Roma. After World War Two, the ambition was to modernize society through industrialization and proletarianization, and Roma were targeted by assimilationist campaigns. I showed that the Stalinist idea of socialism “branded emphasis on ethnic identity as a form of ‘bourgeois ideology,’” discouraging minorities, including Roma, from voicing their ethnic preferences (Crowe 1994, 92). Various policies that aimed at improving the living conditions of Roma, as a result, aspired to assimilate Roma communities into the Magyar or Soviet proletariat. Through that process, segregation and marginalization of Roma increased, and in many cases discriminatory practices were institutionalized. Roma did not “measure up” to “national minority” status according to dominant view at the time.

Assimilation into the larger society, thus was seen as the only solution to the “Gypsy problem.” In both countries the party made decisive steps to eliminate “typical” Gypsy lifestyle and culture—traditions, professions, practices, and language—which they saw as reproducing an undesirable way of life. The report by the Nagykáta Party Committee in Hungary very tellingly articulated the official line regarding Roma, which can be generalized across the region: “For a long time we believed that the Gypsy question will get automatically solved during socialist development . . . [and they would be] absorbed by the society . . . and they would cease being Gypsies, and with that the Gypsy questions will cease as well” (quoted in Majtényi and Majtényi 2003, 243). In other words, in both the USSR and Hungary, Roma communities constituted a “layer who needed to be drawn into the proletariat” (Stewart 2001, 72). Proletarianization of the society meant the creation of a homogenous working class. Any deviation from the envisioned unitary working class was viewed as a social problem and a threat. Since “Gypsy identity was irredentibly linked to negative attitudes, prejudice could only be overcome by eliminating that which ‘provoked’ it” (The Save the Children Fund 2001, 117).

Roma were often treated as a social question or a subculture of poverty (based on István Kemény’s research, discussed in Dupcsik 2009, 186), who had to be elevated in order to be fully integrated into the socialist societies. The civilizational approach under socialism dictated that it was productivity and class struggle that advanced society (Dupcsik 2009, 150). This view is well illustrated in the categorization of Roma into “assimilated, under assimilation, unassim-

ilated” groups in the 1961 Hungarian decree concerning the “Gypsy question” (Kemény 2001), clearly indicating a final mark (and desired goal) of civilizing process as assimilated. Since socialism promised an equal and just society, discrimination was then a remnant of the past and characteristic of capitalist societies. With the words of Kamill Erdős, the most prominent Romologist of 1950s Hungary, “the gist of the Gypsy question is this: There is no Gypsy question, Gypsies want to fuse into Hungarians” (quoted in Dupcsik 2009, 158).

Socialist-era social engineering had lasting legacies. Roma were increasingly concentrated in unskilled labor force and were disproportionately hit by the transition. Broken ethnic ties and little cohesion made a unified and organized response to the crisis difficult. In addition, institutionalized segregation practices continued, which were strongly present in education. Today, it is widely accepted that Roma constitute the biggest losers of the political and economic liberalization in Hungary, and all of Eastern Europe (see, for example, Goldman 1997; Ladányi and Szélényi 2006; Koulis 2005; Szalai 1999; Barany 2002).

In the case of Soviet Roma, the restructuring of the economy in the 1980s and early 1990s also hit them severely; many tried to legalize their trade, but overall, most were not able to continue their socialist-era economic practices and could no longer compete with the increasing abundance of cheap goods (Marushiakova and Popov 2003, 307). Since “Soviet Roma lacked both territory and the administrative structures to make themselves heard” (Lemon 2000, 228), their political representation during the formative years of regime change was inadequate. In both countries, tensions among Roma and non-Roma increased with intensified violence and growing economic hardships.

In both cases, the place Roma carved out for themselves in the socialist system was abruptly lost after regime change. The collapse of socialism with its paternalistic system represented the end of state-provided security and a universal employment scheme. Lacking or inadequate housing and withdrawn state benefits led to homelessness, re-ghettoization, and tumbling living standards (Stewart 2001, 87; see also European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2012; Fehér 1993, 6; Wagner 1987, 37). Cohesion among Roma dropped due to enforced resettlement campaigns under state socialism, and after regime change the situation turned irredeemable; social ties were broken due to resettlement, and institutionalized dependency of Roma on the socialist state generated enormous economic difficulties for the minority.<sup>5</sup>

5 For instance, around urban areas in Russia where many Roma settled, the construction boom of the 1950s led to state-led forced resettlement of the Roma communities. Roma families living in “barracks” were placed in various districts, often far away from each other (Demeter et al. 2000, 213). As a consequence of

In the meantime, scapegoating of Roma was widespread, as “profiteers” of the previous regime, or, on the contrary, as “parasites” of the regime. Racism became an instrument in the struggle for scarce collective goods after the collapse of socialism, and Roma were once again the victims (Feischmidt and Szombati 2017). Unable to find economic opportunities, some Roma in Russia were drawn to criminal activities, especially drug dealing (Marushiakova and Popov 2003, 307), with which they still tend to be associated in popular media today. In Hungary, criminalization of Roma and ethnic tensions increased as Roma lost their employment en masse and entered a spiral of structural unemployment and poverty. Subsequently, “the image of the lazy, criminal, violent, worthless and dangerous Gypsy became entrenched in public discourse” (Feischmidt, Szombati and Szuhay 2013, 183).

Institutionalization of Roma segregation in various realms of social life, including education, was largely continued after regime change as well, regardless of the new political slogans about democracy and human rights. Roma tended to live in segregated ghettos, separate from the mainstream society, and went to segregated schools as well. Some of these schools were allegedly planned as a transitional phase, to educate Roma so they could continue their studies in mainstream schools, yet institutional segregation became deeply ingrained (Kemény 2001). István Kemény in his 2001 review of Roma education admitted that the two forms of school segregation—Gypsy schools and classes, as well as disability schools and classes—provided significantly worse quality of education for Roma children, sealing their possibilities in the labor market. In the Soviet Union, although attendance to schools improved after 1956, research indicates that Roma attended until fourth, fifth, or at most the sixth grade (Tsvetkov 2008), which tends to be a common practice today throughout Russia. Yet, Nadezhda Demeter describes those years during the Soviet Union as positive for Roma, when Roma were “forced to receive education” and as a result Roma children indeed attended school, unlike today when “no one cares” (2005).

Even after centuries of civilizing missions, with different goals and approaches, Roma remained outside of mainstream society. Yet, critical voices increasingly emerged during the latter part of socialism, moving the focus to societal prejudice and away from alleged deficiencies of Roma, emphasizing the

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dispersing Roma families, social cohesion dropped, the youth increasingly forgot Romani language, and meetings were virtually limited to various ceremonies and celebrations (*ibid.*). Cherenkov argues that very recently with the liberalization of the housing market, Roma in Moscow were trying to re-form Roma districts by moving closer to each other (2011).

role of institutionalized and structural discrimination. For example, a 1979 study by the Hungarian social psychologist Endre Hann and colleagues explicitly pointed out the intolerant views of the majority society towards Roma. In studying the public opinion about what it means to be Hungarian or Gypsy, the researchers found that most respondents to their representative survey claimed it would not be possible to “get rid of Gypsies” even through assimilation, and many even complained about non-Roma becoming “Gypsified” (*elcigányosodik*, described in Dupcsik 2009, 234).<sup>6</sup>

Another noteworthy example is the work of the Hungarian sociologist Ottilia Solt, and specifically her 1975 publication, in which she laments about the unjustified segregation of Roma children in schools, which provided inferior conditions and only cemented their societal marginalization (Solt 1998). Furthermore, in 1980s Hungary, the work of Gyöngyi Rácz, who devoted her life to helping poor and Roma students, was a milestone in acknowledging that the failure of school integration was not the responsibility of Roma, but largely rested on the teachers who were responsible for making an environment devoid of prejudices (Bogdán 2015, 85). In other words, the work of these critical researchers and activists have highlighted the futile and even counter-productive nature of encouraging (or forcing) a socially marginalized people to participate in the formation of a socialist society, while not acknowledging problems of societal and institutional racism, only maintained and perpetuated prejudices among the non-Roma population (Konstantinova 2012, 3).

In the Soviet Union in the 1970s and '80s there was a growing academic interest in Roma, and inquiries were predominantly based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted by scholars who spoke Romani language (Demeter and Chernykh 2018, 19–21). Besides academic interest, Roma throughout the Soviet Union appeared to have a steadier place in society than in Eastern Europe, which was partially the result of the nativization policies. As Bartash argues,

They were members of the large Soviet family of peoples who worked hard towards the common goal of building socialism. They made their everyday contribution to the common goal not only with their labour but with their art—the theatre “Romen” as well as actors and performers of Romani origins were known to everyone. (Bartash 2015, 48)

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<sup>6</sup> This ambiguous process of “Gypsification” is a fear that was conveyed to me on numerous occasions during fieldwork as well.

Marushiakova and Popov explain that “today the Gypsies in Russia and the new independent states often joke among themselves that they are ‘the last Soviet people’”—referring to their sense of belonging in the past and nostalgia for those times (2003, 298).

To conclude the historical analysis, it is important to emphasize that a constant component that characterizes all of the analyzed historical periods was a conflicting discourse about Roma, distinguishing “good Gypsies” from “bad Gypsies”—in the Russian Empire it was the urban Roma versus the nomadic Roma, in the early Soviet Union it was local Roma versus foreign Roma (Kalinin 2010, 51), and under state socialism it was working Roma versus unemployed Roma. States attempted to incorporate Roma through various policies: denial of their identity, assimilation, integration, elevation, civilizing, and modernizing missions. Yet, as Valdemar Kalinin notes, there is a “remarkable continuity in Roma identity between the pre-Soviet era of the Russian Empire, the Soviet era and the post-Soviet era (Kalinin 2010, 49). In the next chapter, I analyze contemporary practices of school segregation in both countries. I also demonstrate that both countries should be understood as nationalizing states, characterized by a sense of ownership of the state by the majority and use of state powers to promote this particular culture (Brubaker 1996, 431).

Part III

# **Contemporary Identity Formation**



## Chapter 6

# Fieldwork

### Fieldwork and Positionality

*What we call our data are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to.*

(Geertz 1973, 9)

In both countries, in depth field data was collected primarily in one locality.<sup>1</sup> This allowed for a deeper immersion and more nuanced understanding of identity formation. Namely, through everyday interactions, conversations, and participation in local life, I strove to understand how Roma youth react to the external messages about their group identity and how they negotiate those. Since my research concerns education and consequently the youth, during fieldwork I was mindful of the special developmental phase of the young people,<sup>2</sup> as well as the sensitive nature of discussing topics related to race or racism. For example, a study on the way(s) ethnic minorities integrate into American society demonstrated that youth have an “added dimension to their identity development,” as “these youth are faced with the challenge of not only developing their personal identity, but also integrating their identity as an ethnic group member” within the broader society (Chae 2001, 17).

My qualitative data has limitations and does not provide a representative overview of all Roma. There are several constraints that I wish to disclose.

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1 This section was partially published as Dunajeva, “Power Hierarchies Between the Researcher and Informants: Critical Observations During Fieldwork in a Roma Settlement” (2019) and informed Dunajeva and Vajda, “Positionality and Fieldwork: Participatory Research with Roma” (2021).

2 A discussion on how youth identity development differs from that of adults is beyond the scope of this paper; however, there is excellent research that discusses this topic, such as Spencer, Swanson and Cunningham (1991).

When I took short field visits to other locations to visit schools, observe sites of non-formal education, and meet with the local Roma communities, at times I questioned the validity of my observations. I noticed that occasionally school classes were “set up” a certain way to project a certain image for me—the visitor—and community members were reserved and withdrawn. Another limitation I wish to put forward is my exposure to only particular Roma groups. More specifically, in Russia I was exclusively studying one relatively homogenous Kalderash Roma community and had only scarce opportunities to visit other sites. In Hungary, I spent the majority of my time with a mixed Romungro and Vlach community, with shorter visits to other sites, including Boyash communities.

Recognizing the diversity of Roma, a group that is in fact composed of numerous communities with different languages, traditions, and cultures, it is important to emphasize again that producing generalized claims is not my intention. Accordingly, findings should be treated with modest scope and application, and this study should not be generalized until contrasted and compared with similar studies, and conducted in other parts of the countries or regions. I am hopeful that other scholars will take up the task of grounded inquiry into Roma identity formation, especially in the post-Soviet region.

During fieldwork, I spent more time in Hungary and had a chance to visit other settlements, which broadened my view and understanding of the issue at hand. The Russian case study relies on two and a half months of fieldwork spent at a Roma settlement that was less accessible for a young, unmarried, non-Roma woman. There, my conversations with community members were primarily at my local research assistant’s house, who conducted interviews and surveys on my behalf. The research assistant was a well-known and respected local Roma figure and had access to all households. Later, in the spring of 2019, I returned to Russia to study another Roma settlement,<sup>3</sup> and spent one month conducting interviews and participant observation in three local schools. Both settlements that I visited in 2013 and 2019 were in near proximity to major cities, and Roma lived away from the cities in a segregated community, which locals referred to as “Gypsy tabor.” Below I provide a more detailed description of my main sites in both, Hungary and Russia.

In Hungary, the settlement was often referred to as a slum. It had a population estimated between 450 and 500 people in 2013, at the time of my fieldwork, and the estimated population remained around 500–550 in 2019 and 2020.

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3 For this trip, I received KAP19-14011-1.2-BTK grant from Pázmány Péter Catholic University in 2019.

Due to the various charity programs, media coverage of the settlement was relatively common. According to the data compiled by a local charity, the average age in the community was approximately 21–22 years and life expectancy was relatively low, which should indicate high birth rates and poor health standards. One-sixth of all households had running water in their houses. The population was rather diverse, and conflicts rested on a generational divide, inter-ethnic tensions, and anxiety between newcomers and established residents. Very few, and mainly elderly members, spoke Romani.<sup>4</sup> During fieldwork, survey data was collected through a Roma research assistant who I accompanied several times and was allowed and welcomed in homes.

In Hungary, the school near the settlement was integrated, but within classes education was often segregated. At first, the school was hesitant about my presence, but with time I was included in the daily school activities and even teaching. Then, teachers became more comfortable sharing their experience with me, and with many I was able to build trust and develop friendly relationships. Moreover, I was fortunate to become close to one teacher, who was not only a passionate educator, but also an expert on Roma education, serendipitously, and an excellent writer, who published books and article on issues of Roma education. Our long conversations, his enthusiasm to improve the situation, our joint visits to Roma families, and his critical views strongly influenced my perception of the Hungarian case study. We maintain our friendship even today.

I took various other trips in Hungary and attended multiple schools in the capital, as well as villages throughout the country. I spent a considerable amount of time with Boyash children in a Catholic school in southern Hungary. I also visited several non-formal educational institutions for Roma that offer extra-curricular activities, after-school programs, or specifically aim at educating Roma about culture and language. While this book does not cover a thorough description about each institution I visited, nevertheless all observations informed my understanding, and were imperative for the argument developed in this study.

During fieldwork, I often heard about intra-group conflicts among Roma. In one Hungarian school, the principal complained that there are “conflicts between the Kolompar Gypsies and Boyash . . . children start fights, but parents also get involved . . . there is not much the school can do, we just try to

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4 In the survey many reported they spoke Romani; among the younger generations, I suspect that knowledge of even a few words led respondents to claim knowledge of the language. Almost no one besides the eldest could maintain a conversation in Romani when asked.

calm them down but often don't quite understand the reasons of conflicts" (elementary school principal, interviewed by author, July 20, 2013). It was clear that against the essentialized Gypsy or Roma ethnic group, in reality these communities consisted of diverse groups with languages, traditions, and at times, different interests and grievances as well.

In Russia, there were approximately 2000 Roma living in the settlement I researched, with a predominantly young population. The settlement, on the edge of a town that was close to a main city, was completely segregated with hardly any means of transportation to reach it. The school was situated in the town where Roma children were brought on a separate bus. The school itself was completely segregated: there were two different buildings, the "Russian school" and "Gypsy school." The community was Kalderash and most, if not all, spoke Romani at home. Teachers complained that this posed challenges in the school as many children did not have sufficient command of Russian upon beginning their studies. Nevertheless, I observed closer ties among community members, who were proud to have maintained their customs, including their language.

The Roma settlement in Russia where I conducted a short fieldwork in 2019 had a population of approximately 40 families, as the local Head of the Administration shared in an interview, having detailed the "bureaucratic impossibility of documenting the real number" (head of the local municipal administration, interviewed by author, May 6, 2019). Roma lived in a completely segregated community, and children attended a nearby school in the adjacent town. A few years ago, the city administration built a wall around it, allegedly for "safety reasons" so children do not run out on the road (head of the local municipal administration, interviewed by author, May 6, 2019). For many years there has been a battle to allow Roma to have a school on their settlement, but so far they have neither received a permission to open a school nor to appropriate the building on the settlement where the school could be housed. Overall, the Roma were described to me as "avoiding the government" while the Roma complained about the government ignoring them. Likewise, this fieldtrip informed this book and my arguments, but I do not provide a detailed analysis of it here.

Regardless of the place, type of the settlement, or country studied, all Roma children's curiosity and utter honesty was invaluable to contextualize and grasp their experience in the settlement, school, and their relation to non-Roma. Parents were doubtful about my presence, but when approached with kindness and a positive attitude, they showed unconditional love towards

their family and outsiders, including me. I was invited in to houses and always offered a coffee (and cigarettes). With little means, they were creative in making ends meet. I do not intend to romanticize neither poverty, nor the “Gypsy lifestyle”; the Hungarian settlement was permeated with such a level of misery that disregarding it would be wrong. Yet, this was one necessary condition to pursue fieldwork—seeing beyond unbearable conditions, bitterness, anger, at times even violence and profanity, and instead seeing the person, the family, and community was absolutely key. It was a psychological strategy I developed. Finding happiness and dignity under such conditions undoubtedly required some stamina that I saw in many of my informants.

### Ethnography: Ethics, Reflexivity, and Positionality

Overall, during fieldwork participant observation proved to be the most rewarding and challenging data-collecting method, which deserves some discussion and unpacking. Participant observation necessitated revealing my positionality regarding the subject population of this study, and located me, as a researcher, in the web of power structure and existing hierarchy in research sites.<sup>5</sup> Embeddedness and trust were absolutely central for this study, and my acceptance was critical for honest conversations with both Roma and non-Roma.<sup>6</sup> In the following pages I wish to address some of the ethical issues and disclose my positionality. Indeed, “for a reader to trust the perspective of a researcher as presented in qualitative inquiry, the disclosure of the researcher’s position in relation to the data is vital” (Pitard 2017, para. 1).

Academics have produced a significant body of literature regarding appropriate and ethical ways to conduct ethnographic fieldwork (e.g., Amit 2000; Ritchie et al. 2013), including fieldwork with various vulnerable or marginalized groups (e.g., Hoolachan 2016; Medeiros 2017) or the “Others” (Scheyvens 2014). Furthermore, while positivist fieldwork is often characterized as blind to the agency of the researched (Fuller 2006, 334), interpretivist fieldwork approach has expanded the scope and purpose of fieldwork to include reflexivity—the “inclusion of the observer in the subject matter itself” (McCall 2006, 3; see also Pachirat 2003 and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006)—and give “voice to marginalized, subaltern viewpoints,” which may be an end in

5 On positionality and ethnographic research see Madison 2012.

6 After months spent at the same field site, there were comments about me “becoming a Gypsy.” Whether a trivial comment or not, I believe an in-group status to a certain degree developed.

itself for researchers (Adcock 2006, 61). The latter approach is also known as action research or participatory action research (Schwartz-Shea 2006, 104). Interpretivist research philosophy concerned with “unpacking beliefs or meaning embodied in actions and practices” (Bevir 2006, 284), remains silent on the particular challenges of eliciting meaning when conducting research with marginalized minority groups as well as the ethical considerations of such research. I find it important to elaborate on some of these issues.

First, the attitude of the researcher is a significant aspect that influences research findings. In the case of poor and marginalized groups, a fundamental danger lies in that

rather than valuing our informants and the knowledge they possess, we pity them if they are marginalized . . . We view our informants not as people who lead multidimensional lives—laughing, crying, celebrating, grieving and hoping, just like the rest of us—and who hold information that could increase our understanding of a particular topic, but as people we feel a need to help or that need to be taught something or to be taken down a peg or two. Our attitude towards people who face economic and other hardships should not be so shrouded by pity that we fail to see things of value in those we study. (Scheyvens, Scheyvens, and Murray 2003, 168)

In other words, when conducting research with excluded, poor, oppressed, or in any way marginalized communities, researchers face a challenge in terms of their attitude towards the informants, which may influence their findings. The existence of any group must not be reduced to a single attribute, and researchers should not position themselves as the “rescuers” of the informants. Moreover, if the research concerns children or the youth of the vulnerable group in question, it presents additional challenges: children and youth “is rather a category taken for granted—seen but not heard, acted upon but not with” (Bowden 1998, 282).

When conducting research, I strove to treat children and youth as meaningful actors who can speak for themselves, whose voices deserve to be heard if their interests are to be acknowledged and served. It was typically uncommon to engage with young Roma in an equal manner at the field site. Teachers, charity personnel, visitors, and researchers often regarded the young Roma as less autonomous, less responsible, and less reliable than the adults. Hence, my engagement with the Roma children seemed odd to many.

Second, I also faced an ethical dilemma regarding ways of documenting the experience of my Roma informants. Most forms of conventional data collection during fieldwork—note taking, voice recording, photographs and the like—immediately seemed to be a violation of privacy, although privacy was a loose concept in the settlements: in Hungary, homes built by the charity were on display to visitors, while poorer homes had no doors, only curtains, which provided an ambiguous separation between the public and private sphere.

One day a TV crew came to make interviews and inconsiderately peek into private family homes. Usually, such visits were meant to show the poverty that Roma live in and/or the achievements of the charity. The extent of objectification of the Roma by the TV crew (intentionally or not) was so abysmal that I felt ashamed merely because I was non-Roma just like the TV crew. In addition, because of the charity the local Roma met with a lot of various visitors, from non-Roma high school students who came to “socialize” with the Roma to Hungarian government officials, NGO representatives, and non-Roma university students participating in integration programs or studying “Roma issues” or poverty alleviation.

Furthermore, my background as a non-Roma, Russian and Hungarian, and educated in the United States undoubtedly played a critical role in how respondents related to me, what initial assumptions they held talking to me about topics of race and discrimination, and what immediate boundaries and hierarchies I entered based on my position in a given society. It is then imperative to engage in critical, self-reflexive scrutiny of my own positionality, especially highlighting the uneven power dynamics. More specifically, my presence as a non-Roma researcher seemed to provoke shame among my informants in being Roma. The following excerpt from my fieldnotes, a conversation between two adult Roma men in the community, aptly illustrates the discomfort of my presence. None of the Roma men knew me, and I merely embodied a non-Roma outsider for them:

Two Roma men were sitting in the charity and took out their cell phones immediately when I came in. I felt like I interrupted something and felt awkward that my presence provoked discomfort. The two men started talking, occasionally looking at me, accentuating my presence:

*Man 1:* [says something in Romani]

*Man 2:* [very uncomfortably responds, looking periodically at me and noticing my presence]

Talk like a normal person, come on! Who is a Gypsy here?! Not me!

*Man 1*: Neither am I! I was made by Turks and Russians [laughs]. I am a little bit of a Jew as well, which is why I think whether I should steal or bargain at the market!

[Both laugh.] (Field notes by author, Hungary, August 31, 2012)

This short exchange was rather telling—the presence of a non-Roma (i.e., me) seemed to make the Romani language, as a marker of their Roma identity, appear embarrassing. Indeed, in my previous research about Roma youth welfare and Romani language, Heather Tidrick and I found that the Romani language in Hungary is popularly seen as inferior, as an obstacle for academic achievements and advancement (Dunajeva and Tidrick 2015, 14–15).<sup>7</sup>

On other occasions, my presence was an opportunity to call out racist practices of the non-Roma society, whom I represented in their eyes. The following fieldnotes describe one such instance:

I asked an older Romani woman about her experience before regime change and whether her life improved now. To the question whether the situation will change in the future, she replied: “No, it will only get worse! There won’t be any jobs and if there will be, not for us [Gypsies].” She became increasingly agitated and insisted on sharing an example, about her family member who is a qualified butcher and yet doesn’t have a job: “If you are a Gypsy, the job is filled,” she complained, “even if you want to work.” As the only non-Roma in the room, she addressed her last grievance to me, with her voice raised, furrowing her eyebrows: “I don’t know what the future brings . . . Of course Gypsies are to blame as well, but let’s consider the example of criminality: if I steal a chicken, I get 5 years in prison. If you embezzle 5 million forints, you get what? Maybe you get suspended. But you stole as well! And here is where there is the biggest difference between us [Roma and non-Roma]!” (Field notes by author, Hungary, October 9, 2013)

Keenly aware of the injustices, I interpreted this woman’s behavior as pointing out how structural racism in Hungary perpetuates inequality in the criminal justice system and beyond. Also, this woman seemed to notably shift our attention from Roma, seen as the oppressed, to non-Roma, who are not

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7 Meanwhile, empirical evidence conducted among Roma children in Hungary proves the contrary, that is, that Romani language is not a barrier to academic achievement (Derdák and Varga 1996).

only the oppressors, but also due to their unearned privilege of whiteness, are allowed to carry on with little or no punishment, even for grave offenses. This short interaction also highlighted the importance of ethical considerations in research, including issues of ethnocentrism that have been present in academia for a long time. Indeed, we can no longer suspend “the ethical’ in our dealings with the ‘other’” and must liberate the “‘truth’ from its unexamined Eurocentric and Orientalist presuppositions” (Scheper-Hughes 1995, 409).

After many months of being at the field site, I noticed that the Roma/non-Roma and researcher/informant divisions started to blur. “Are you a Gypsy now, too?” asked one of the children on our walk to the ice cream parlor. “If I may, sure I am!” I said, smiling back. Group membership, after all, “comes in shades of grey” (Schatz 2003, 7). Nevertheless, I do acknowledge my privileges: I still left the field site every evening, the children still clung on to me begging to take them to the city, take them to my home, or at the very least, bring them some gifts the next day (for example, girls often wanted perfume). I was still seen as privileged, with resources and possibilities.



## Chapter 7

# “Bad Gypsies”—Negotiation of Identities in Primary Schools

*Hungarian nation has a weak [meggyengített] culture . . . We don't need parasites and leeches! . . . the person is worth as much as he contributes to the society. Gypsies are useless individuals if they just have to be supported.*

Elementary school teacher  
(interviewed by author, Hungary, August 31, 2012)

So far, historical examination in previous chapters showed that the prevailing conception of statehood and nationhood (what constitutes a nation and how the state relates to its nation) has largely defined boundaries and conditions for belonging. Consequently, policies towards minorities, including the Roma, differed through time. What historical analysis also revealed is the persistence of states in branding those not within their reach as outcasts, uncivilized, unmanageable groups to be “civilized” and “modernized.” Roma were often portrayed as outsiders, although historical evidence indicates that here was also a clear distinction between those Roma who were “good”—settled and integrated—and those Roma who were “bad”—vagrant and idle. Importantly, the preceding chapters showed that antigypsyism was formed in the early stages of state consolidation and nation building and so it permeated state institutions and became an integral part of social consciousness.

Over centuries, formal education had an ideological mission to fulfill, whether it was to teach a sedentary lifestyle or socialist values, and with its compulsory, centralized, and a state-approved core curriculum, internalization of attitudes toward authority and teaching proper discipline became perennial goals of educational institutions. Importantly, while schools educate pupils about national identity—common history, national anthem, praising national paraphernalia, proper grammar, national literature, and the like—assuring shared knowledge that binds the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) into a nation, the concomitant side to creating a nation is excluding those who

do not belong: the “Others.” This chapter is concerned with the current exclusionary state building efforts in Russia and Hungary, examining the process of redefining the meaning of state and nation once again, how those meanings are conveyed through the education system, and how these narratives in turn reinforce the bad Gypsy image.

### Neo-Modern State Building: National Revival and Patriotic Youth

After regime change, the growing sense of nationalism profoundly deteriorated the situation of Roma. Barany suggests that due to the “unhealthy moral transition,” post-socialist countries became even more intolerant of national and ethnic diversity (1995, 192). In the 1990s, debates about national identity and nationhood occupied a central role in political discourse in both countries, as in both Russia and Hungary there were renewed efforts of nation building. Some scholars compare the resurgence of nationalism since 1990 with the nationalist demands of the 1920s in Europe, when linguistic and cultural appeals act as “substitutes for articulated political demands” (Hroch quoted in Bekus 2013, 34). The appeal of nationalism was particularly strong in the ideological vacuum generated after the fall of socialism. In most instances, nationalism brought ethnic tensions and intensified antigypsyism.

Both Hungary and Russia fit well under Brubaker’s framework of “nationalizing states,” which are “states that are conceived by their dominant elites as nation-states, as states of and for particular nations, yet as ‘incomplete’ or ‘unrealized’ nation-states, as insufficiently ‘national’ in a variety of senses” (1996, 411). Regime change left an ideological void that was gradually filled by nationalism. The political elite in both countries largely represented the core nation, and “the new state [came to be] seen as having the right, indeed the responsibility to protect and promote the cultural, economic, demographic and political vitality of the core nation” (Brubaker 1996, 432). In other words, state power was almost exclusively deployed to promote the language and culture of the core nation, which is seen as state-owning and distinct from the rest of the citizens (Brubaker 1996, 431). The nationalist discourse often draws on primordial conceptualization of nation, such as “a true Russian has Russian blood ‘boiling’ in his veins” (Slezkine 1994, 85).

Political scientist Ivan Krastev describes the post-transition conditions as *demographic imagination*, instead of *democratic imagination*, where the majority population, feeling betrayed in the increasingly globalized world,

begin to favor to populist movements and become increasingly hostile towards minorities (2011). Thus, although regime change brought economic liberalization and democratization, the corresponding values of multiculturalism and human rights were not always respected. The situation further deteriorated in recent years.

In such nationalizing states, non-core nations are often not acknowledged as belonging to the nation. After the regime change Roma continued to represent a “threat to national identity” and people “lack[ing] state loyalty” even despite their official minority status (Kendall 1997, 73). As Michael Stewart aptly pointed out, the negative representation of Roma made them out to be “agents of disorder or bearers of an unspecified ‘threat’ to national identity” (Stewart 2012, 5). Consequently, minorities, and Roma in particular, are becoming more alienated politically and culturally. Moreover, race was deployed to make sense of economic and political changes, and Roma were used as scapegoats across many countries (Lemon 2000, 58, 67). Social tensions grew as a “self-selected cadre of communists-turned-capitalists enriched themselves at the expense of the wider population[, and] the poorest sections of society, such as the Roma, were hit worst” (*The Economist* 2011).

After regime change, nationalism was also promoted to the point of an “official national policy of the state,” and it was used as a tool of nation building and cohesion (Molchanov 2000, 263). This kind of nationalism tends to be exclusionary and marginalizes groups who allegedly do not fit into the new vision of an ethnically-defined nation. Nationalizing states are also concerned with national revival, which assumes reformulation of national identity and nationhood, as part of the transition from socialism and re-making the new state as “more national” (Fowler 2004, 77). How national revival is defined and how it manifests in Hungary and Russia is debatable, but the official positions and speeches of Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, and Hungary’s prime minister, Viktor Orbán, are indicative of the meaning and objectives of contemporary nation building efforts. Patriotism has clearly emerged as a central concept in both countries.

While it is difficult to propose an exact definition of Hungarian and Russian contemporary nation and state, it is clear that for Orbán, the Hungarian state bears responsibility towards all Hungarians, even beyond its borders (Orbán 2013a).<sup>1</sup> In Hungary there is a political narrative on the reincarnation of the

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1 In his speech on February 16, 2013, Orbán claimed that one of his goals was to ensure quality education for all young people “from Cluj Napoca (Romania), through Budapest and as far as Subotica (Serbia),” using the Hungarian equivalents for the cities.

country as the motherland for external ethnic Hungarians. Orbán has also highlighted the importance of national integrity in many speeches, and considers “the most significant political, economic theory and economic debates of the next five to ten years” to be defined by the struggle of “European Union *versus* national sovereignty” (Orbán 2013b, emphasis mine). National integrity is also central for Putin’s concept of a modern nation: an “integral nation in the contemporary world” depends on patriotic youth, Putin claimed, and hence the role of the youth is imperative in forming a “modern, forward-looking, [and] developing” country (2012).

While for both countries, a stronger sense of nationhood, juxtaposed with regional or global identities, and loyalty to the state are imperative ambitions, so once again the youth emerge as critical for the nation building process. But it is not just any youth who are charged of this task, but patriotic and loyal youth. Since “real patriotism is educated patriotism,” as Putin stated, schools take up a special role in constructing this loyal and patriotic society (2012). Mass schooling, as earlier chapters suggested, has always been, and remains central to, reproducing the national identity through curricula, discipline, and incorporating national ideology into school life.

Accordingly, both countries introduced mandatory classes in their national curricula promoting “national consciousness” and moral principles, usually taking the form of religious education and patriotic upbringing (Hungarian National School Curriculum 2012; Russian National Program on Patriotic Education 2015). Patriotic education was recognized as critical to teaching national identity. The former State Secretary for Education in Hungary, Rózsa Hoffmann, during a conference in 2010 stated that “it is important that the minds of students living within *political limits* of Hungary be rectified, and the knowledge corrected that is confused or lacking” (*Népszabadság* 2010). In order to increase the “knowledge of Hungarian-ness” (*magyarságismeret*), the curriculum was to include aspects such as celebration of Hungarian Unity Day in schools and possible trips to *külhön* (“outer home,” or Hungarian-populated areas outside of Hungary).

Hoffmann continued that “the tragic history of Hungary is that the Hungarians were broken up at the beginning of the twentieth century,” referring to the Trianon peace agreement after World War One. Hungarian identity, she stressed, will revive again. Importantly, it is through teachers that they hope to reveal to the students “the fundamental truth that ‘there can be a lot of homes, but only one Hungarian nation, and the Hungarians living anywhere in the world belong together’” (*Népszabadság* 2010). The Hungarian National

Assembly on October 18, 2010 accepted the resolution about the introduction of “National Unity Day” in schools, school trips to *küllhon*, and the establishment of the House of Hungarians,<sup>2</sup> an educational and cultural institution.

More recently, with the leadership and support of the Hungarian government (more precisely the Ministry of Human Resources), the *Magyarságkutató Intézet* was established, an institute to study the history, language, and origins of the Hungarian nation. Miklós Kásler, Minister of Human Resources<sup>3</sup> described one of the strategic goals of the institute is “to make the youngster’s national identity and [national] memory healthy,” and contribute to an “intellectually and culturally healthy Hungarian nation that knows its past . . . and wants to persist” (*Népszava* 2019). Allegedly, among the plans are the establishment of overgenerous museums, for example in the city of Pécs and Budapest.

Russia made international headlines with its colossal Patriot Park, a monumental theme park that opened in 2016 outside of Moscow that displays military equipment, commemorates wars, and celebrates Russian patriotism through several complexes, exhibitions, and halls in the most colossal way (unsurprisingly, some popular sources refer to it as “Russia’s military Disneyland”). On its official website, the park describes its importance as the place where “the youth can learn the concept of ‘patriotism’ while operating legendary military machinery” (Patriot Park 2019). The site also informs about plans of a “unique pedagogical-methodological center of military-patriotic education of the youth.” Youth events to the park are discussed and organized on high political levels in faraway republics like Dagestan, and some regions like Astrakhan are planning the establishment of their own Patriot Parks (RIA Dagestan 2020; Youth Agency of Astrakhan region 2020).

Russia developed its ongoing government program on patriotic education already in 2001 (Federal Archive Agency 2010). The state program “Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation for 2011–2015” is a continuation of the state program Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation for 2001–2005 and Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation for 2006–2010. The goal is “further development of patriotic consciousness of Russian citizens and to promote the unity of the nation,” as the document suggests. It is worth quoting the language of the program at length:

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2 Perhaps it would be more precise to translate it as the House of Hungarianness, *Magyarság Háza* (Magyar—Hungarian, magyarság—Hungarianness or all Hungarians, referring to those living outside of Hungary).

3 In 2012, the Ministry of Education was reorganized into the Ministry of Human Resources.

The program includes a set of legal, regulatory, organizational, teaching, research and information nationwide and interregional activities to further develop and improve the system of patriotic education of citizens, aimed at the establishment of patriotism as a moral basis for the formation of their active life position. Implementation of a unified state policy in the patriotic education of citizens of the Russian Federation shall ensure the achievement of the objectives of patriotic education through planned, continuous, and coordinated activities of state bodies, local authorities and public organizations . . . Carrying out of military-sports games and other activities aimed at the military-patriotic education of youth shall be resumed . . . [To achieve these goals, it is necessary to] enhance the role of state and public structures in the formation of high patriotic consciousness in the citizens of the Russian Federation . . . formation of positive attitudes toward military service . . . The end result of the implementation of programs assume positive growth of patriotism in the country, the increase in social and labor activity of citizens, especially young people, their contribution to the development of the main spheres of life and activities of state and society, to overcome the extreme manifestations of individual groups of citizens and other negative phenomena, the revival of spirituality and social and economic and political stability and strengthening national security.

The next recent extension of the program, Patriotic Education of Citizens of the Russian Federation 2016–2020 was written in a very similar spirit; the youth continue to occupy a central role on the patriotic education program, and various formal and non-formal learning opportunities are guaranteed to that end (Government of the Russian Federation 2015). The current patriotic school program includes instructions and preparation for the military, as well as various regional and national school competitions in military topics (consider some of the main executors of the program: the Ministry of Education and Science Federation, Russian Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Sport, Ministry of Defense, Russian State Military). Books for school children combining military and patriotic education are widely available.

What is underlying in the sense of nationhood and belonging conveyed through nationalist patriotic education in both countries is what Ryan Powell and Huub van Baar refer to as “dialectics of identification and disidentification,” where appeals to patriotism are in fact “mobilizing disidentification from those within that frame of reference,” reinforcing Roma marginalization

and ethnic divides (Powell and van Baar 2019, 110). Series of textbook analyses indeed demonstrated that the overwhelming majority of Hungarian textbooks simply ignore Roma (Orsós 2015), in some cases Roma are represented as “they” with a sense of distancing them from “us” (MONITOR 2014),<sup>4</sup> and described in the context of only a few topics, using discriminatory or stereotypical images (Binder and Pálos 2016). Research on Russian textbooks has also demonstrated that the curricular content is increasingly nationalist (e.g., Lovorn and Tsyrlina-Spady 2015). There has been limited research about how this nationalist content is disseminated in schools and how it affects the identity of the youth, especially minority youth. In the rest of this chapter, building on fieldwork I demonstrate how in state schools the stereotypical bad Gypsy image is mobilized through education, discipline, and discourse in classrooms.

### Bad Gypsies in Segregated Schools

Earlier chapters covered consolidation and nationalization of education and the power, or lack thereof, of state institutions to enforce Roma attendance in schools. What the previous historical chapters lacked, due to the dearth of historical evidence and available research, is how the dynamic between the authority, embodied by teachers and the school institution, and the group treated as subordinate, or the Roma, operates and how it is negotiated by both sides. Both Russia and Hungary have nominally inclusive education systems and intentional segregation is not permitted. Behind school walls, however, I observed creative ways of segregating Roma students. During observations I saw that teachers, who are also products of prejudiced societies, tend to embody and transmit the image of a stereotypical bad Gypsy in classrooms.

During fieldwork, I learned that some schools do not shy away from cooperating with local police to force Roma children into classrooms—often segregated classrooms with low levels of education—and some even consider their teamwork as a very sensible way to deal with Roma families’ aversion of education. The conversation with the principal of the school in Russia clearly demonstrates that in a bureaucratic, modern, rational state, Roma can be easily identified and forced to go to school:

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4 This is how Anna Balázs summarized one of the key points from the MONITOR’s study during the conference (Unyatyinszki 2016).

*Principal:* [When Gypsy children came to our school for the first time] we [leased a building from the Military that functions as the Gypsy school today] and there were 35–40 students in total, who went to classes. They attended school irregularly, and their intellectual level was similar, regardless of age . . . Now there are more children who attend school. Many children used to go fortune telling with their mothers . . . Parents simply thought that education was not important . . .

*Me:* Why did it change?

*Principal:* It changed when they were forced to attend. We involved the local authorities, the police . . . we went from house to house! Importantly, we had a list of all students of school age, we looked at their academic potential . . . We dragged [*vytashchili*] them all out to school. Every single one goes to school now. Of course there might be a few . . . but almost all go to school. When children are born, there is a record created for them, and we have these lists about each child. In May, we go to the “*tabor*,” take the list with us, go into each house according to the list where 6-year-old children live. We talk to the parents, take a copy of the birth certificate . . . (School principal, interviewed by author, Russia, February 11, 2013)

This conversation explicitly discloses the powers of the state school working cooperatively with other branches of the state, such as the police. Some Roma children undoubtedly see school attendance as nothing but an obligation; consider the following conversation in the same school:

*Teacher:* Global warming is nothing but a headache for our society!

*Roma Student:* Is that good or bad?

*Teacher:* What is good about a headache?

*Roma Student:* I wouldn't have to go to school! (field notes by author, Russia, February 18, 2013)

Let me now turn to a discussion of my observations in segregated schools, where teachers themselves were disinterested in educating those whom they perceived as irredeemable, while Roma students used many instances to defy orders and resist teacher authority. In schools I have observed, segregation of Roma students was also taken for granted and defended when they sensed disapproval of this practice. Often the logic behind segregated educational practices was explained to me as in the interests of the majority soci-

ety, and students in particular. Segregation was justified by stereotypical representation of Roma—poor hygienic standards, little interest or ability to learn in school, early marriages and laziness—all the qualities non-Roma children must be protected from. Extended conversations with Roma parents in both countries, however, clearly showed that parents indeed saw schools in most instances as vital institutions, where they experience day-to-day contact with non-Roma, and where they can access necessary knowledge to improve their future prospects.

I noticed that schoolteachers and staff are keenly aware of “Western” criticism of Roma discrimination in their countries, especially concerning segregation in schools, and view this judgment as hypocritical, imposing, and insensitive. Sometimes schools pick up a new discourse with coded words, but old practices of ethnic differentiation secretly continue. For example, one school claimed that they do not racially profile, but claimed that marking Roma with a “c” by their name on their internal list of students only served the purpose of teachers “knowing right away” and being able to “better deal” with these students. Taboos often just blanket real problems which continue to proliferate and prevent open discussion about challenges faced by all sides—teachers, students, and local communities alike. “Be very soft on the facts and feel free to tweak the real percentage of Roma attendance, make it sound lower,” was a very revealing request of one school principal in Hungary during my visit (school principal, interviewed by author, Hungary, July 9, 2013). “If you notice anything, tell me, only me, I know there are issues in this school,” was a similar request of a principal in Russia, “we don’t want the ‘usual’ criticism of how we are bad and racists” (school principal, interviewed by author, Russia, January 23, 2013).

In the Russian schools I visited, segregation was much more explicit. Segregation was described to me as unavoidable: Russian parents did not want their children exposed to Roma, and the school staff assumed that Roma must want to be separated for cultural reasons. A local anti-discrimination NGO’s director suggested that self-segregation might be a protective mechanism by the Roma community. Everyone wanted to avoid conflicts and protect their children, and hence segregation seemed as the lesser of two evils. The reasons for school segregation were considered to be the result of poor academic achievement, bad clothing, inadequate Russian knowledge, bad hygiene, dissatisfaction of Russian parents, as well as lack of mutual understanding. Many expressed their hope that these reasons are temporary and Roma children will catch up with Russians. Their optimistic expectations coupled with perceived

improvements in lifestyle, which most expressed. Namely, there is less fortune-telling and moving around.

Nadezhda Demeter in her book *Education as a Tool of Integration of Roma in the Russian Society*, calls segregation a “dead end” (2014, 33). Demeter confirms that “many Roma understand that access to school education is fundamental for the future of the Roma community” (ibid.). Demeter also attributes low attainment of education among Roma in Russia to the lack of state educational policy specifically targeting Roma, like the nativization policies did in the 1920s and ’30s. The nativization era, according to the author, truly showed how education can be mobilized for purposes of integration and adaptation of Roma (ibid., 44). Since then, Demeter continues, Roma were deprived of developing their own language and culture through the education system, and as a result, the status of Roma language has deteriorated, its knowledge also dropped among Roma and assimilation intensified (ibid., 44–45).

In the Russian school I visited, Roma children were completely isolated. They were brought in by a separate bus, they studied in a separate building—the “Gypsy school”—with adjusted curriculum, and altered teaching methodologies.<sup>5</sup> The “Russian school” was in an historical building that served as the village hospital until the end of World War Two. The “Gypsy school” was across the road in a barrack-like building, which was used by the Soviet military stationed in the town, previously known as a military town. Children were brought here with an old Soviet school bus, usually at 10 a.m., but never punctually. During my first visit, I waited for the bus on a dark, snowy winter day for two hours since I assumed it was scheduled to bring children to school by 8 a.m. It never occurred to me to ask when the school bus arrives because all school buses arrive in time to begin learning by 8 a.m. in the classroom. “They like to sleep in, they rarely wake up in time, so starting the first class at 8 a.m. is futile,” the schoolteachers unanimously explained to me. When learning actually began, the mood in the classrooms was that of despair, apathy, and lethargy. Neither Roma children nor the teachers knew why they were there. Both were forced, to some extent, to fulfill their role, or rather act in their roles as teachers and students.

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5 I do not intend to make general claims about the entire Russian education system, or even other regions’ treatment of the Roma minority in the federation. My observations are based on two Roma communities I studied. In fact, an employee of an NGO, closely involved in human rights advocacy in one of the schools where I spent most of my time, warned me that the situation in the school described is likely worse than in other places in the country.

Roma rarely met non-Roma children while in school. One teacher informed me of the etiquette: “even when they come for computer science class to the computer room, we don’t let them out during breaks because otherwise there are conflicts with Russians . . . In 5/a we can do a lot more in classes . . . they are the Russian kids and in 5/b these are the Gypsies. Misha is the best student here but even his grammar is rather bad . . . I won’t even talk about the rest!”<sup>6</sup> The teacher continued: “we can’t even let them out to eat with everyone because there are conflicts . . . so they [the Gypsies] go out during class time [and Russian kids go during break]” (teacher, interviewed by author, Russia, January 30, 2013). School rules were just as described by the teacher, and Roma students no longer questioned the normalcy of it. One day a Roma boy even repeated it to me, internalizing the rule: “we don’t leave the classroom when Russian children do, we fight with them, this is why!” (field notes by author, Russia, February 5, 2013). When I asked about any incidents that had happened, this boy contemplated for a long time and shook his head.

The “Gypsy school” discontinued education at seventh grade, while the “Russian school” went until ninth grade.<sup>7</sup> “They get married by the time they are in sixth or seventh grade, there is no need for more education,” a teacher revealed when giving me a “tour” of the “Gypsy school” to my first week there. Her calm and confident voice implied that this was an established practice in the school that everyone consented to and was comfortable with. This was further proved when a month later, as a consequence of my conversation with the principal, I doubted the assumed mutual consent to this setup. The principal confidently proposed a “spontaneous survey,” and walked into a fifth-grade classroom with a prepared question: “Girls, all of you will get married soon, probably this or next year, is that right?” Reluctantly, I followed the principal as she proved her point through this experiment. We entered the classroom, all students immediately jumped up and straightened their backs to greet the principal and the unknown guest. The principal asked the question in her authoritative, assertive voice. Roma girls nodded without even making an eye contact, then relieved, they quickly resumed playing a cooking game on computers (a computer game that was described to me as “very popular” among Roma girls).

An anti-discrimination non-governmental organization (NGO) was involved in this school’s life, for instance, by providing supporting materials

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6 No real names are used to protect identities.

7 Sixth and seventh graders study in the same classroom, eighth and ninth grades are absent from the Gypsy school.

to teachers about Roma language and culture, supplementing textbooks with Romani grammar books, working with volunteers, organizing school trips, and initiating conversations with the school regarding the intolerable conditions of Roma children. While I discuss the topic of NGO in more depth in the next chapter, here I want to stress teachers' perception of non-state actors as representatives of Western discourse, inherently criticizing the school, and at times, the entire country. There was a clear discomfort even at the mention of the NGO: teachers accused the organization of "creating artificial problems," and exacerbating problems, rather than ameliorating them. My own presence was initially interpreted as a "Westerner who came to criticize" and it took several months to gain trust. To my surprise, and contrary to my expectations, in Russia it took considerably more effort to earn the trust of Russian teachers than that of Roma students.

As a result of this antagonism, the school became more cautious or even unwilling to accept volunteers locally or from abroad, which I was told was a common practice in the past, when arranged through the NGO, these volunteers assisted in the "Gypsy school." Teachers began complaining about the disapproval they sensed from the NGO and opted for discontinuation of this practice. "Don't you see?"—complained one teacher with zeal when the topic of volunteers was brought up—"We teach them, just like we educate the Russian children! Did you see any conflicts in my class? There aren't any! Why create an artificial problem then?" (school teacher, interviewed by author, Russia, February 6, 2013). The director added that volunteers are not the solution to the profound problem they face; until Roma children are clean, without lice, with brushed hair, and own a pair of inside shoes, it is even hard to find a schoolteacher who is willing to instruct them, she claimed. Those criticizing usually do not fully understand these hardships, she implied. One day cornered by the two main teachers of the "Gypsy school," they exclaimed with surprise wondering why the West cares so much about the Roma, whereas it is them, the teachers, who need protection. The newly hired school guard overhearing the conversation stood nearby wildly nodding in agreement.

These were uncomfortable topics that I sensed might jeopardize my ability to remain in the school. My presence, in a sense, was akin to that of volunteers who were no longer welcome. Indeed, teachers were progressively uncomfortable with my daily inquiries. They thought I was nosy and not useful for the work of the school and doubted my intentions. The principal finally summoned me for a talk: "Teachers ask why you keep writing and don't help them discipline" (field notes by author, Russia, February 27, 2013). I immedi-

ately recalled the precedent when teachers left in their room during breaks for snack, chat, or to smoke, leaving the Roma children unattended in the classroom, seemingly expecting me, as the only adult, to take over discipline. As a passive observer, I vigorously wrote in my notebook about children quickly switching to Romani language, filling in the small, crowded classroom with loud chatter. They moved about the classroom briskly, stretching their bodies, having sat still uncomfortably for the duration of the class. Classrooms were so inadequately small that it was common for three students to be cramped into one desk meant for two students. With me present in the classroom, space was even more scarce. Upon returning from the break, teachers were visibly displeased with my unwillingness to interfere.

Since I heard about Roma parents discouraging their children’s education, I conducted a survey at the Roma settlement with the help of a local assistant. The survey revealed that the school and education was definitely a critical issue for the community, there was a general desire for better teaching conditions and treatment of Roma children, and over half of the respondents named the school as one of the most important challenges they face. Parents complained: “we can only dream about a normal school”; “our children have to take the bus to school, it is too far away”; “while many difficulties are slowly improving, the school remains an issue”; “we don’t have a school nearby and it is especially difficult to get to the school in the winter”; “school is in a very bad condition”; “the school is too small for this many children.”<sup>8</sup> Poor quality of education was an acute problem, yet most unquestionably saw better education as the source of progress in living standards and opportunity to improve access to work for Roma women.

Support for education was overwhelming among parents, although most adults had negligible formal education themselves. Based on the survey sample, on average adults finished 4.2 grades of education, but some people were illiterate and never went to school. The highest achievement among respondents was six grades of education. National statistics, as reported by Demeter, also shows that 6–7 grades of education is common among Roma, and only 28% of Roma women and 35% of Roma men completed eight grades of education (2014, 46). In my survey, reported reasons for low school attendance in the past were duties at home (taking care of younger siblings usually), being on the road, as well as the distance between school and home. Most expressed their

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8 As revealed earlier, the survey was done with a Roma research assistant in Russia due to cultural reasons, and these comments were recorded by her.

regret about low education and their happiness with children's perceived success in school and regular attendance. I concluded that assumptions I heard in the local school regarding Roma living in that particular community and their indifference towards education were simply ill-founded. And although Demeter herself declares that "Roma are not particularly drawn to education," later in her book she acknowledges that with time, the importance of education in the eyes of Roma improved (2014, 35, 47).

In Russia, apart from a handful of researchers and occasional media mentions, Roma receive considerably less attention than in Eastern Europe where there is a substantially larger Roma population than in Russia. In Hungary in particular, Roma integration and inclusive education are extensively discussed. Official state policy follows guidelines of equal treatment, yet realities do not always conform to these official lines. Studies prove that instead of improvement, segregation in the last decade has increased (see Havas and Liskó 2004; Havas and Zolnay 2010). During fieldwork, I witnessed "integrated schools" with segregated classrooms and segregated schools that function as "dumping schools" for nearby towns and villages, where the bad Gypsies are transferred. Ethnicity-based statistics in schools is unlawful, and yet covertly some schools keep careful data: "we know these students and their families, if they have even a drop of Gypsy blood, they'll be marked as Gypsies," said a principal in one school. Many children come to school from poor nearby settlements.

One of the Hungarian schools was founded and operated by the local church until 1948, when it was turned over to the state during socialism, and finally given back to the church after 1990. There were drastic changes in student composition after they opened their doors to Roma children of nearby villages. When I inquired why, the principal explained that while a small number of students decided to follow their teachers who did not want to teach in a religious institution after it was taken back by the church, most students were transferred by their parents who were not satisfied about the increasing number of Roma pupils. Without any explicit policy, the school now teaches almost entirely Roma students. "We tried to convince the parents to stay . . . but you know what happens when Gypsy children are in this [high] ratio . . ." shared the director with increasing discomfort just naming racist practices: "do you really want to write this down? You know what kind of society we live in . . . when someone claims that this is what happens as a consequence of many Gypsies in the classroom, they are accused of being racist" (school principal, interviewed by author, Hungary, July 9, 2013).

Noticeably, the discomfort of the principal revealed that there is a taboo around the topic of Roma students, while he also struggled to find a proper channel to address these issues. He explained that most children here are classified as “with disadvantaged background” [*hátrányos helyzetű*] and are “thrown out of other schools nearby, ending up here,” the principal explained. The school, however, to keep its door open, needs students. Since non-Roma do not come, teachers were left to actively recruit Roma children living in nearby villages, explained the principal, which is a serious yearly undertaking. To make the school more attractive and suitable, and considering that the student body consists almost entirely of Roma students, an interest arose in providing cultural classes in Roma culture and history. The principal is even thinking to introduce a Roma language class to make it more appealing for their students. So far, the school has successfully introduced a “Gypsy national dance” class.

In another school I observed in Hungary, the student body was comprised of both Roma and non-Roma, and within grades students were divided into “advanced” and “beginners” for subjects such as math, Hungarian grammar, and English. Roma students were almost exclusively in the latter group. In lower grades, when some subjects such as foreign languages are elective subjects, the head teacher explained that only two pupils attend foreign language classes, because “the rest are Gypsies.” In other words, the facultative nature of some subjects and division based on academic capacity served as motives for separation of Roma students. In this school, too, an after-school class was introduced to teach lower grade Roma students about Roma culture and history. These were playful classes with songs, arts, and crafts like coloring nomadic carts or gluing colorful decorations on Roma women’s skirts. Teachers saw the importance of these classes mainly in terms of strengthening the “weak identity” of Roma, hoping to see improvement in their behavior if they knew more about their culture. Paradoxically, when teachers themselves participated in a one-time training to learn about Roma culture and history from the same Roma teacher who held the after-school class, they noted that it might be the Roma culture itself that needs to be overcome for Roma students to succeed in their studies.

In this school, all teachers were keenly aware of existent practices of segregation, and similarly to Russia, they also resented criticism they heard from within the country, or more often from the outside, from “the “West.” Agonizing conversations unambiguously proved this point: “there are people who come into schools to pick on teachers and ‘observe Roma students,’” one teacher confronted me with my perceived role in the school, “they are conde-

scending and demanding . . . they look at Hungary as a rotten country, as if this country needed to be slapped, and part of this rottenness is the way we treat Gypsies . . . teachers don't want to be the prey of such studies, they don't want to be targets . . . we are all 'utterly racist' here, we know that's our reputation in the US," sarcastically groaned the teacher with a grin. The European Union was equally called out as hypocritical: "France discards Gypsies, but it is only the East that can be criticized, right?" was another distressed opinion among teachers. Evidently, the topic of Roma provoked strong emotions, none of which have an outlet in a society where issues of prejudice are taboo, generating fear and secrecy, or, on the contrary, are explosive, causing heated debates. In addition, a few cases of school closures or punishment for racist practices in the country contributed to teachers' anxiety.<sup>9</sup>

Segregation, similar to the Russian school, was seen as unavoidable: teachers and non-Roma parents complained about Hungarian students being "Gypsified" and so "develop backwards," or in other words, they pick up undesirable behavioral patterns dressing and speaking like Roma classmates. Likewise, the common belief was Roma indifference towards education. Teachers complained that "family pulls them back"; "they can't sit still and lack discipline"; "they leave to start a family when barely turning 14"; "they just don't care." Popular media and even academic studies also use the term "Gypsified" (*elcigányosodott*) as an adjective, to describe homogenous Roma settlements, neighborhoods, schools or other institutions, usually with substandard conditions and services. There is even a processual sense to this term, implying a regression from "normal" to *elcigányosodó*—the process of being "Gypsified"—and then finally to being "Gypsified" or *elcigányosodott*.

I conducted a survey among the Hungarian Roma community using identical methodology and questions as in Russia. The survey also showed overwhelming support for education among surveyed Roma parents. Parents clearly wishing their children to have a better future saw the answer in education: "I don't want my son to be 'garbage' like his father"; "my parents thought that I, a woman, should not go to school, but I demand that my daughter doesn't skip a single class"; "I wish for my children to go beyond elementary education and improve their lives." Overall pessimism, however, was more noticeable among Hungarian Roma, who almost without exception believed that their conditions were deteriorating. Regardless of education, some said in despair that they

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9 See, for example, the case by Chance for Children Foundation closing a segregated school in the city of Nyíregyháza under desegregation plans in 2007. Eventually, the school reopened in 2011 (Thorpe 2014).

would not get a job because of the societal prejudice. Still encouraging their children, parents had little confidence in the future. There are several studies that show the adverse influence of Roma parents on their children’s education, yet these studies either tend to conflate social problems, especially issues relating to deprivation, with Roma culture, or treat schools as flawless institutions (e.g., Nagy 2002; Szabóné Kármán 2002). To echo the astute observations of a volunteer who helped local Roma for decades, including with holding after-school programs and organizing free summer camps, “Gypsy children in school sense when they are loved and cared about—I see these as key to their educational success, which I also have experienced through my work over many years” (youth volunteer, interviewed by author, Hungary, October 20, 2013).

On a national level, the low educational attainment of Roma parents in Hungary has been consistently documented (see Fónai 2004; Kertesi and Kézdi 2010). My survey showed that local Roma adults had approximately 6 years of schooling and did not complete 8 years of elementary education. Most reported to have been disappointed in their lack of education, which they explained with poverty, troubles and alcoholism in the family, their parents’ disinterest, or duties around the house. The oldest generation was the most likely to be illiterate, but they were also the only ones still speaking their dialect of Romani language, whereas none of the children in this community did. “It is not cool anymore,” said many young parents, referring to their ancestor’s language as becoming obsolete. Many named despair and continued unemployment as major stumbling blocks, but I did not notice any indifference towards education.

Overall, what became evident in both countries is that the bad Gypsy stereotype was often used to justify practices of segregation and guided certain disciplinary practices in classrooms. The underlying assumption among teachers were the animosity between Roma and non-Roma, as well as early marriages, lacking hygiene, disinterest in school, laziness, and bad performance in school. Segregation was seen as unavoidable and even necessary. I also noticed the essentialized treatment of Roma as “the Gypsy students,” rather than more personalized discussion, which was more common when speaking of academic achievements of non-Roma. In comparison, non-Roma students were usually described by their names, but Roma as a group. Many Roma complained to me that when they attend state institutions, they perceive a similar treatment: at the doctor’s office, they are the “Gypsy” patient, never the one who is referred to by their name. This essentialized view indeed reduced a diverse Roma student body into a group of “bad Gypsy students,” disregarding their unique

skills, needs, and circumstances. For example, none of the teachers knew that one of their Roma students excelled in drawing. His pictures were proudly exhibited in the NGO building by the local Roma settlement.

### Disciplining Bad Gypsies in Classrooms

The importance of school disciplinary practices in reinforcing objectification and subordination of “the Other,” and reproduction of class, gender, and racial hierarchy were analyzed by various scholars like Timothy Mitchell (1988) and Ann Ferguson (2000). Indeed, schools are “functional sites” where through “distribution of individuals in space” and teachers’ “ideological power,” pupils are disciplined and ordered (Foucault 1997, 141, 143, 187). After months of fieldwork, it became apparent that disciplinary practices are informed by the bad Gypsy image and contribute to emphasizing negative stereotypes. I observed how discipline inside classrooms usually took the form of body discipline, verbal discipline, and ordering space and objects. Importantly, I also noticed that discipline is not unambiguously internalized, but at times was resisted, rejected, or even performed.

Building in Michel Foucault’s argument that disciplinary power produces a certain “ceremony of objectification,” these “ceremonies” were clearly discernible in classrooms where discipline was “exercised through invisibility” and yet “it impos[ed] on those whom it subjects a principle of compulsory visibility” (Foucault 1997, 187). Below I describe examples of such “rituals” inside classrooms. While admittedly teaching discipline is a general task of any school, I point out and assess practices that were used specifically and exclusively with Roma children, making them stand out as different, undesirable, and backwards.

Figures 9–12 visually illustrate some examples of various forms of classroom disciplinary practices. Figure 9 shows piles of textbooks, which Roma children were not allowed to take home in the Russian school as a punishment for “wasting and not appreciating school resources.” Body discipline in most Russian schools is helped by a chart that explains how to sit properly, on Figure 10. This chart was very commonly referenced in ensuring appropriate postures during classtime, which was more pronounced when disciplining Roma children.

In addition, non-formal educational practices often followed school-like disciplinary patterns. For example, some after-school spaces followed the seating arrangement of classrooms with frontal education, even though frontal education never took place in these spaces. Instead, these sites were commu-



Figures 9–12 Education and Discipline (photos taken by the author)

nal and offered collaborative help. Yet, as depicted in Figure 11, some charity-operated after school program carefully organized study rooms to resemble a classroom to help Roma children do their homework in an environment disciplined and ordered the same as any classroom. I also noticed during a summer camp organized primarily for Roma children that children had “canteen-like” meals, eating from carefully arranged identical plastic dishware, depicted in Figure 12, while (non-Roma) teachers, staff, and their children ate food prepared especially for them from non-plastic dishware, at dinner tables arranged at a podium-like space in the front of the spacious dining room. When children complained about dishware and quality of their food, they were called out as careless and ungrateful. Then, teachers discussed the issue amongst themselves, relating it to the broader problem of Roma living on government subsidies, behaving similarly in an unappreciative manner.

Indeed, within classrooms, strict Prussian discipline was commonplace: at the beginning of class one or a couple of students “on duty” report about missing classmates, state the date and sometimes report on the weather outside; then, the teacher glances through to check order on desks, praises those with sharp pencils, straight backs and neatly arranged pencil boxes, and chastises those with dirty notebooks, slouchy backs and unsharpened pencils. Teachers look around to identify inappropriate behavior to juxtapose that with good behavior. In this sense, bad behavior is necessary to classify good behavior, just like bad students are often used to praise the good ones.

In a similar manner, the sharp distinction between accepted norms in the school and assumed lack of norms in Roma households was revealed many times. In classrooms, teachers in both countries announced that unpleasant and undisciplined behavior only “belongs to the Gypsy slum/tabor/village,” and should be kept for their parents. Roma students were told to differentiate between their homes where they can be “as careless as they wanted,” and the school, where they have to respect rules. These messages were at times picked up by Roma students as well, calling on each other not to “act Gypsy,” “be such a Gypsy,” or “talk like a Gypsy.” Negative self-perception was more evident in Hungary, for reasons I discuss more in depth in the following chapters.<sup>10</sup> For

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10 Among the reasons I describe later, there was more intra-group diversity and intra-communal conflicts in Hungary, as well as stronger internalization of negative stereotypes without the counteracting sense of pride in their own group identity, which was more characteristic in Russia. In Russia, almost the entire Roma community was Kalderash, whereas in Hungary most of my sites comprised Roma from various groups, such as Boyash, Vlach, Romungro, and others. Roma in Russia also tended to be prouder of their identity and cultural heritage.

example, in a second-grade class of predominantly Roma students, the head teacher liked to distinguish appropriate school conduct from behavior outside the school: “Sit as if you were in school,” she chastised a girl, juxtaposing lacking discipline at home and strict discipline in school. One day, a serious young Roma boy responded, sitting sideways on his chair: “But I am in school!” Creating divides between the Roma home community and the school led to a false sense of competing values.

The universal assumption in all schools I visited was the critical role of the institution to teach discipline to Roma children. Whereas non-Roma pupils learn similar behavioral patterns at home as in the school, teachers explained, Roma lack any order in their homes. The school, consequently, must take on the role of bringing up these children “appropriately.” “There are two Armenian students in our school and one has poor understanding of Russian,” shared a teacher in the Russian school, “but they are capable of studying with Russian children because they are not Gypsies and have similar values like us.” These values, the teacher continued, were basic norms and principles concerning hygiene, school etiquette, and respect. The teacher concluded that Roma children needed a special approach, unlike other minority groups. Sometimes there was an interest in understanding Roma culture to improve the school’s ability to regulate their behavior and more consciously rid them of “inappropriate” traits.

Disciplining Roma students’ bodies followed the assumption of lacking hygiene and over-sexualized traditions that were seen as characteristic, especially of Roma girls. In both countries I witnessed “hand-checks,” when teachers examined Roma pupils’ hands before distributing books. “My pen doesn’t work anymore . . . it is because my hands are dirty,” said a third-grade Roma boy during our tutoring session in the Russian school, internalizing these messages. It was deeply disturbing that the boy attributed something as trivial as his pen running out of ink with a lack of hygiene, repeatedly explained as integral to who Gypsies are. In addition, oversexualized “traditions” in Roma communities, teachers believed, are partially responsible for high drop-out rates and births at a young age. Hence, Roma girls were especially targeted to correct for this undesirable behavior.

One Hungarian school purchased backpacks at the beginning of the school year, “Roma girls come with purses, pretending to be grown women,” complained the principal. A month later, the principal proudly showed a new purchase: makeup removal. After that, in my presence the principal liked to point out the results of their work—Roma girls who wore makeup in the past and

came to school with purses now had backpacks and no makeup. These girls were pompously singled out to me as the school's achievement in "normalizing" their looks. The jewelry of Roma girls was at the center of the Russian teachers' attention. There were no specific measures introduced at the school, but teachers boisterously disapproved every time they saw a girl with a ring or other "Gypsy jewelry." There is a widespread stereotype about Roma women wearing excessive (usually golden) jewelry, which the teachers believed Roma girls emulated.

While Roma boys were sometimes treated as soon-to-be criminals, Roma girls in schools were often seen as soon-to-be mothers, and rectifying their behavior was considered important to address "Gypsy overpopulation" and the perceived problem with incest. The issue of Roma incest was an outrage in Hungary with the "Jeszenszky affair" in 2012; the claim of "culturally acceptable incest" among Roma was actively fought against and proven wrong by intellectuals and activists.<sup>11</sup> That year, due to increased media attention, Hungarian schools were particularly keen on addressing it within their classrooms. Teachers in Hungarian schools were particularly apprehensive about large Roma families with increasing numbers of children: "they birth out their own possibilities"; "it is not natural birth rate, but multiplication like cancer growth"; "they get together like animals, and Gypsy girls have so many boy-friends like shoes," were some of the comments. No surprise the school took on the responsibility to wash off Roma girls' makeup. Yet, upon returning home from school, these girls were on the street with eyeliner even darker and lipstick even redder.

While being seen as an adult in the classroom was condemned and penalized, at home many of the Roma children were indeed expected to act as adults. Adult-like duties and corresponding responsibilities at an early age are often part of the every-day reality Roma youth face, especially growing up in deprived households. Other scholars noted as well that Roma youngsters lack a distinct childhood.<sup>12</sup> Girls miss classes because they learn how to cook, wash clothes in their houses without running water, and care for several younger siblings, while boys are missing during spring cleaning and cold winters when

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11 Géza Jeszenszky's book, *The New (Post-Communist) Europe and Its Ethnic Problems*, used as a textbook in a university course, contained a sentence explaining mental disability among Roma as a consequence of culturally acceptable incest. Subsequently, Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest organized a round-table conversation on November 22, 2012, inviting Jeszenszky and various experts (including a geneticist, historian, psychologist, sociologist, and Romologist), who with no further doubt proved the statement wrong.

12 See, for example, Stewart 1997, 52–57.

they accompany their parents to collect wood. Ildikó Menyhért calls this phenomenon of missing childhood “partnerification and parentification,” which is when parents treat their young children as partners in sharing work and coparents in bringing up younger children.<sup>13</sup> In academic literature the term “childhood adultification” is used, which involves youth assuming prematurely “extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family networks” (Burton 2007, 329). This experience, in fact, is common for low-income, disadvantaged children worldwide.

In the Russian school, it was not uncommon to see Roma parents (especially Roma mothers) join some classes as students. As earlier discussed, in both countries teachers usually saw parents as obstacles for their children’s education, or at best as treating school with apathy and disinterest. What I saw was Roma mothers, dressed in their national clothes, squeezed into the undersized desks and with their faces scrunched in concentration, learning to read and write. Yet, their presence continued to be a source of anxiety for teachers: some believed these women sat in classes to “stay warm” and “kill time.” These teachers insisted on the preconceived notion that stereotypical Gypsies do not value education and hence attended school for selfish reasons or out of necessity.

In fact, Roma mothers were involved in other aspects of school life in Russia as well: I saw mothers mediating between teachers and students, assisting their children with language barriers, and acting as interpreters in class when needed. By contrast, in the Hungarian schools I observed, Roma adults rarely got involved in school matters. Teachers comparably assumed apathy among parents, however, often suggesting the school took on the role of upbringing for the inadequacy of Roma parents to do so. The classroom obtained an imperative double-objective: to un-teach Roma children what they learn from home and teach them proper manners. “These [Roma] parents are partners in [their children] skipping classes . . . Where would the child learn self-discipline? They stay on infantile level this way, they don’t know how to wait, how to be patient, and all these are needed for personal development,” said a Hungarian teacher.

The role of Roma culture, traditions, and language was yet another source of dispute in classrooms. Verbal and lingual discipline were powerful tools

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13 Ildikó Menyhért is a Romungro woman, teacher by profession, published works on education and Roma integration, as well as the author of *Zöld az erdő*, a book that in 1999 officially received the title of Roma ethnographic textbook, yet it was not used in the curriculum; she is also director of “Utolsó Padban Egyesület” [From the Last Row Organization]. Her standpoint is not without criticism, however, see for example Szuhay 2003. In 2016 Ildikó Menyhért was later discredited by her “Jobbik affiliation” and child abuse scandals in Tiszabó school, where she taught having left Budapest (Kálmán 2016).

to place Roma at the bottom of a cultural hierarchy. “These children speak in Gypsy during Hungarian classes,” complained one teacher, “and their linguistic disadvantage is huge . . . their language lacks proper grammar and that is why they can’t follow Hungarian grammar classes and mathematics, since they can’t think logically.” An academic study proved the contrary: Romani language does not hinder academic achievement, and Hungarian language instructions are not an obstacle either, rather it is their socio-economic background that is detrimental (Derdák and Varga 1996).<sup>14</sup>

In Russia, children were also repeatedly asked to only speak Russian. Mothers or older students sometimes took on the role of translators and mediated between the teacher and rest of the class. Even during break-time, teachers continued managing their speech: “This is my ‘skamin!’” yelled a student, to which the teacher, chastising the boy, explained that he should have said *stul* (chair in Russian), not *skamejka* (bench in Russian). The teacher concluded that he did not comprehend simple words, lacked grammar, and did not know the gender rules in Russian. In fact, the student’s only fault was that he called the chair its Romani equivalent, which is indeed *skamin*, resembling the Russian word for bench, *skamejka*.

Slight accents were pointed out and recurrently corrected during classes. One day, after repeated corrective efforts, a frustrated student rejected the discipline: “that is what I said several times in a row!” Language, interestingly, did offer a protective barrier and a site of resistance, especially if the same dialect was shared by all Roma students in class. “We don’t want our teachers to understand us,” a fourth-grade student told me in a Hungarian school, who speaks only Boyash at home. Here, Boyash children learned to switch to their language during breaks and when communicating amongst themselves. The children shared that they took note of teachers who understood a few words, so they could be more careful when they speak their “secret language.” Similarly, in the Russian school, when children spoke their Kalderash dialect, it was only the teacher who did not understand; language gave them the power to position the teacher as the outsider, even if only temporarily. Powerless, teachers often left the classroom or resorted to futile punishment, emboldening students to continue their behavior. It was almost an everyday occurrence that teachers requested (in a form of shouting) that Roma children hold their tongues, which met with even more shouting and disruption.

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<sup>14</sup> There are also several studies suggesting that bilingualism, simply put, makes people smarter (e.g., Bhat-tacharjee 2012).

During recess the classroom was unbearably loud when teachers simply gave up and left the classroom.

Reproduction of stereotypes in classrooms was not only through direct discipline, but also by adjusting the curriculum to teach content that was “fitting for the Gypsies.” During a computer science class that I sat in during my first week of fieldwork, the Russian teacher proudly pointed out the topic of the last class: “in the sixth grade, Gypsies had to make a presentation about narcotics.” The teacher loudly gave instructions to the students, interrupting their excitement to have access to computers and the internet, so we could continue conversing. I inquired where such topic originated. With even more satisfaction and slightly beating his chest, he pointed his finger at himself. “I thought of this topic, and I had them do a power point presentation and it was very interesting. . . of course this all was done without proper grammar,” he continued, “but learning about the dangers of narcotics now will prevent many problems later.”

Indeed, in Russia, one of the most widespread stereotypes is that Roma are drug dealers. The current Russian “war on drugs” internal security policy is directed at the “typical drug dealer, namely the Gypsy” (ERRC 2005). The official website of the Federal Service of the Russian Federation for Narcotics Control states that the “most active criminal groups are those composed of persons of the Tajik and Azerbaijani nationalities and ethnic Roma . . . [while] the Roma specialize in selling drugs, using methods of network marketing” (Federal Drug Control Service of Russia 2011). Explicitly connecting narcotics trade with Roma, this government program not only targets the group as the most likely suspect of criminal behavior, but also reinforces a negative image of Roma as outside the law and immoral. However, this generalization cannot be further from the truth of the local Roma. At the settlement, there were no drug dealers and almost no use of drugs, according to the studies and survey of a local NGO; they make ends meet from scrap metal collection mainly (director of an anti-discrimination center, interviewed by author, Russia, January 17, 2013).

Moreover, comments reflecting stereotypes of Gypsies as thieves and parasites were common during classes. A Russian teacher claimed that there are no more pens because “Gypsies stole them all,” immediately turning to a Roma rhetorically inquiring whether they are “capable of appreciating anything at all the school gives them.” Without waiting for an answer, the teacher continued that Gypsies do not deserve the services provided in schools. In the Hungarian school, similar remarks were commonplace and were often met with growing distrust between Roma students and teachers. This skepticism culminated

when a teacher in the Hungarian school attempted to give medicine to a Roma girl who complained of a headache, but the girl refused to accept it, fearing she would be poisoned.

Despite the numerous disciplinary measures, the asserted hard work and the teachers' efforts, I was puzzled as to what purpose education then served. After all, it clearly seemed like none of the teachers, in fact, truly believed that Roma were capable of change. "Gypsies will stay Gypsies: like they steal, they will continue to do so, like they married their own cousins, they will continue doing so," complained a Russian teacher. Perhaps each side acted in their expected role—the discipliner and the disciplined—and in the process the bad Gypsy identity was powerfully mobilized and recreated in classrooms. With several points of contention centering on the role of Roma families, community, and culture, debates were common regarding the extent of schools' tolerance of Roma traditions and the necessity to adjust the curriculum to teaching bad Gypsies. The perpetual question was, subsequently, whether it is possible to make these bad Gypsies into good Gypsies.

Based on the above discussion, the following questions arise: if societal expectations are low, and the dominant image of a stereotypical Gypsy is a negative, how can we expect these bad Gypsies to act good? If children are told that bad behavior, stealing, swearing, fighting, and other forms of misconduct are appropriate in their families and in their communities, how does one presume the opposite conduct in classrooms?

## Reproducing and Contesting Stereotypes

State schools should not be seen as actors, they are sites. With my discussion, I do not intend to position all state actors as segregating and all non-state players as unambiguously fighting marginalization. In fact, I have seen the bad Gypsy image challenged in and outside of schools, whether it was a teacher in a state school describing Roma culture in a positive light, or volunteers in after-school programs encouraging young Roma children to go to universities. Conversely, reproduction of the bad Gypsy stereotype may take place through projects of well-meaning charities that unintentionally reinforce the negative stereotypes. Neither the state, nor non-state actors are uniform, and when considering actions on the ground, realities are more complicated and "fuzzy."

For example, I observed a captivating example in a Hungarian state school of a teacher who decided to incorporate a Roma tale in the reading list of his

students. He then planned to address issues of discrimination and encourage his students to be more accepting of others. After class, the teacher lamented:

in my literature class with the fifth graders, I made an attempt to read a Gypsy tale and planned to ask my students to write about their image of Gypsies, compared with the one discussed in the tale. Eventually I had to withdraw this assignment. This class, you see, is divided into two parts: I have the “better students” and there are only two Gypsies, D. and another person who doesn’t even call himself a Gypsy . . . I wanted to have them read this tale, I wanted to have a conversation with them about it. The class started on the “Gypsy rhetoric” (*cigányozás*) the moment I mentioned the assignment. My students immediately resisted: “but they [Gypsies] are over there, in another classroom!” referring to their classmates in the other group. I clearly couldn’t single out D., she would have hated me for that, she would have felt embarrassed right away . . . and the other student doesn’t even claim that identity . . . the class completely failed.

Against the teacher’s effort to contest the bad Gypsy narrative, the class did not cooperate. This attempt is particularly revealing of Roma culture being seen as unworthy of studying, and not regarded as a core component of Hungarian culture. The logic is that if Gypsies are bad, it is because their culture is inferior, their language is backwards, and their traditions are obsolete. This subordinate view of Roma culture is particularly destructive to the process of forming a healthy Roma identity.

In Russia, I initiated a similar conversation with non-Roma students about their Roma schoolmates. The attempt was to discuss issues of diversity and ethnic conflicts with senior students, the 14-year-old ninth graders. There was not a single Roma student in the classroom. Our conversation was instructive of the strict hierarchy in the classroom, taboos, and discomfort surrounding the issue of Roma, as well as the banality of antigypsyism:

*Me:* What ethnic groups live in your town?

*Students:* Russians, Byelorussians, Ukrainians, Finns . . .

*Me:* Anyone else? Maybe surrounding towns?

*Students:* *Tsygane!* [The class begins to laugh.]

*Me:* Is there any conflict with Roma/Gypsies?

*Teacher #1:* Yes there are, children, tell her!

*Me:* I want to hear from you, students, what conflicts, if any, do you have, not your teachers, not your parents, but what is *your* experience here, day to day?

*Teacher #1:* Vova<sup>15</sup>, as a student, do you experience any inter-ethnic conflicts at all? You don't, do you?

*Vova:* No!

*Teacher #2:* I was born here and grew up here; I definitely didn't experience any conflicts. Not at all! But what do we mean by nationalities? They are all Russians here, or let's say 90% Russians, and 10% rest. Gypsies are different . . . there are Gypsies in each nationality. It's a special category, it's not a nation . . . There are also Tajiks, but they are not immigrants, rather guest workers. They come to make some money . . . there are Dagestani people also . . . but very small percentage. Don't confuse immigrants with guest workers. And Dagestan is part of our country, and we must respect that! I don't tolerate such conflicts in my classroom anyways, we must respect each other . . . this is the former Soviet Union! Dagestan, moreover is part of our Federation . . .

*Me:* Does anyone have friends who are Gypsies?

*Students:* No! [Everyone unanimously shakes their head.]

*Student* [pointing at a classmate]: Dima, you always play soccer with them. [The class starts laughing at him.] You are friends with Gypsies [sarcastically].

*Teacher #2* [intervenes]: Why are you laughing at him?  
[Dima slouches his head and blushes in embarrassment.]

*Teacher #1:* Well, what he wants to say is that friendship is one thing, and playing soccer is another. He has different friends, but Gypsies are acquaintances. Vova, call them your comrades! Comrades, but not friends. You are just acquainted with them, so it's ok!

*Me:* Nobody has friends who are Roma, why?

*Students:* They smell "tasty" [laugh]; they smell bad; they don't wash; they lack hygiene.

*Teacher #1* [intervenes]: They represent different values!

*Teacher #2:* Vanya, for example do you have any friends? What nationalities?

*Vanya:* Russians and Armenians, Ukrainians too.

*Me:* Gypsy friends?

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15 All names were changed.

*Vanya*: No.

*Me*: Why?

*Teacher #1* [intervenes with increasing annoyance and great discomfort]: They don't distance themselves on purpose, don't you see?

*Teacher #2*: Gypsies have a different order of life (*poryadok zhizni*), you must understand!

*Teacher #1* [turns around the question and addresses me]: Did you go to school with Gypsies at all? Do you know Gypsies and are you friends with them? (Field notes by author, Russia, February 14, 2013)

I ended this conversation in fear of escalating tensions. Students seemed open to talk to me, but teachers were progressively uncomfortable. After this incident, I was no longer allowed to use class time in the “Russian school” to talk to students. Yet, even this one occasion sufficed to note the ubiquity of discriminatory attitudes that seemed impenetrable, shielded by unbridgeable distance between the two groups and guarded by teachers. Non-Roma students in this classroom who had any contact with Roma were mocked, even though interactions between Roma and non-Roma were very limited, if those opportunities existed at all.

Admittedly, the racial hierarchy placing Roma at the bottom and the prevailing bad Gypsy image permeated many institutions and practices. For example, many Roma settlements in Hungary have on-site non-formal educational institutions, offering after-school tutoring services and holding various youth events. These sites are also used to provide various other services: logistical, bureaucratic, or social services, for example. With no doubt, these institutions strive to help “the helpless,” but few scrutinize the effects of such assistance on identity formation.

I observed that paradoxically, some well-intended services conserved the sense of vulnerability and paternalism. A candid NGO employee, who works towards promoting civil society among marginalized Roma through youth empowerment, shared her disillusionment, “The charity took over the local government's responsibilities . . . now the local town people don't even have to face the ‘dirty Gypsies,’ because their documents, ID cards, and everything else is arranged at the charity on the slum . . . I sometimes wonder to what extent we conserve segregation, but given the shameful situation at this slum, I don't know what would work” (Roma woman, interviewed by author, Hungary, May 10, 2013). An example of such practices are the regular mobile medical screening tests for local Roma that are arranged by a Hungarian char-

ity where I volunteered; while these services were important to provide medical assistance, it also meant that Roma no longer needed to visit the town for such services.

At these non-state sites, on many other occasions I noticed how children who relied on handouts experienced that they were different or even worse than “normal”: they get broken chocolate for Christmas as donation, they wore used clothes delivered to them through charities, and they received school supplies that were unsold in stores. For example, before the beginning of the academic year, a charity located in a Roma village distributed used clothing for children, and I joined as a volunteer. The room filled with used clothes was first arranged to imitate a clothing store. Yet, the event turned out to be chaotic, with some clothes pushed on to children and their relatives who were given garbage bags and potato bags (see Figure 13) so they could bring a large quantity of clothes home. Here, similar to other sites where Roma youngsters socialize, donations come in large garbage bags, sometimes filled with second-hand clothes, and often with impractical objects, such as leftover wedding invitations.

The sense of shame and anger manifested in the behavior of young Roma; a 12-year-old girl yelled at her mother and siblings to “leave her alone” as we were all walking on the street, and asked for my confirmation that her “mother is ugly and toothless, and there are too many siblings?” I paused to think about her question, understand her motivations, self-doubts, and low self-esteem that might have led to this outcry. I was concerned that she might interpret my silence as agreement with her statements, so I immediately urged her to appreciate her caring family and enjoy the company of her many siblings. I had



**Figure 13**  
Distribution of second-hand clothes for Roma children by a charity in Hungary (photo taken by the author in August 2013).

immense respect for this family, whom I knew since the beginning of my field-work. The mother was a strict, hard-working woman, who has made significant sacrifices to provide for her children. As this scene was unfolding, I saw that onlookers’ stereotype of boisterous Roma was validated as they witnessed a shouting Roma girl with a large family.

It is blatantly clear that the bad Gypsy image is reproduced in a variety of places, and that instances to challenge this narrative are sporadic, but exist nevertheless. Undeniably, deeply-seated discriminatory practices are not easy to penetrate. In the next chapter I discuss the most organized effort to contest and replace negative content associated with the Gypsy stereotype. As part of this struggle there is a plea to call the group Roma, rather than Gypsy. A new discourse, introduced and maintained by this movement, supported by NGOs and Western institutions, promotes a positive image, that of the good Roma. Incorporation, mobilization, and dissemination of this new image is the next topic I investigate.



## Chapter 8

# Making Good Roma from Bad Gypsies

*A critical problem is the mixing of poverty, criminality, and ethnicity—this is something the local government is simply incapable to deal with . . . and since the majority of the poor are Roma, the problem gets a strong ethnic face.*

Local government employee  
(interviewed by author, Budapest, December 3, 2012)

To reiterate some of the earlier findings: originally, the word Gypsy evolved as a misnomer, mistaking Gypsies for Egyptians. Over time, a fusion of poverty, criminality, and backwardness became synonymous with Gypsy—a stereotype that had become astoundingly destructive. The meaning of this category turned into a lens through which Roma are seen and disciplined in educational institutions and beyond. To demonstrate the manifestation of such practices, the previous chapter described how antigypsyism permeated schooling practices. In this chapter, I focus on contemporary forms of antigypsyism, diverging briefly from the realm of education and illustrating its manifestation in public media discourse. This discussion is informative to understand the context in which the pro-Roma civil society is operating. In the face of discrimination against Roma, non-state actors have stepped in with the clear goal of redefining the ethnic label and imbuing it with positive attributes. In doing so, education is once again mobilized to empower Roma youth and contest negative stereotypes.

Indeed, social classifications and categories, which are critical for shaping identity, are not fixed and “are subject to regrouping and rearrangement as a result of changes in culture and social structure and a collective mobilization of . . . interests” (Starr 1992, 265). I inquire how and with what success various state and non-state actors are striving to replace the label Gypsy with Roma, or negotiate the meaning imbued in these ethnic categories. Evidently, changes in the practices of institutional classification are reflecting a political and social change, and states are no longer the exclusive actors responsible for patterns and practices of social classification. Understandably, the dominant role of the

state in educating citizens is challenged by non-state actors, and non-formal educational practices are growing in importance.

After a discussion on contemporary forms of antigypsyism, I assess the effects of the good Roma label and examine various educational projects to illuminate what mechanisms are implemented to promote positive self-identity among Roma youth. In this chapter, I examine the following non-formal educational settings: supplementary education (usually after-school programs or extracurricular activities for elementary school level), and alternative education (usually for high school education, supplementing state approved curriculum). I also continuously focus on practices within state school settings as well. To complement my study of educational practices, I also inquire about how Roma themselves define their own group identity and relationship with the state, majority society, and other Roma subgroups, as well as the role education plays in changing identity or shifting these ties.

### Contemporary Antigypsyism

In Russian media, although reports on Roma seldom appear, when the group is mentioned it is in the context of criminality. For example, RIA Novyj Den in 2014 aired a news segment titled “Gypsies Arrested with Heroin,” with two suspects shown denying allegations. The following year, Russian television viewers learned on channel Rossiya 1, a state-owned Russian television channel, about a “narcotics gang” in the city of Irkutsk that was organized by “a 58-year-old Gypsy baron,” whose “narco-business is a family affair,” and who was fined and imprisoned “with the strictest sentence” (2015a). Then, in June of 2015, this channel aired a dramatic video of special police forces breaking into a house in Kaliningrad where one Roma woman was found and accused of narco-dealing (Rossiya 1 2015b). The narration describes her as “a shy member of the nomadic group” who greeted the special forces “following their traditions”—by signing religious songs. The woman is then shown touring the special forces around her house with “golden plates on display.” In the end, the news segment shows the woman admitting her criminality.

In Hungary, the 2006 murder of a non-Roma teacher in the town of Olaszliszka by Roma greatly contributed to the rise of antigypsyism in media, and, in a sense, reintroduced “Gypsy crime” into Hungarian public discourse (Vidra and Fox 2014). What was distinct in the case of Hungarian antigypsyism, is that it had a strong anti-Western component, delegitimizing the anti-

racist discourse of pro-Roma organizations, activists, and rights defenders. Indicative of this is the opinion article published in the right-wing *Magyar Nemzet*, entitled “Gypsyiszka,” where the author claims that as a consequence of the Olaszliszka incident, “now what is to come is that the unbearably abject ‘human rights defenders’ will appear in the media with tears in their eyes,” disclosing, among other things, “that racism rages in the village and poor defenseless Gypsies are exposed to constant bullying” (quoted in Vidra and Fox 2014, 444). In a similar vein, in 2019, viewers of the Hungarian television news channel Hír TV heard an interview with László Toroczkai, the founder of the far-right Our Home Movement political party and mayor of Ásotthalom. Toroczkai first detailed the criminal activity of a Roma, described as “a little Tyson” and a “member of a Gypsy clan,” and then claimed that Roma rights defenders in fact ignite “Gypsies against us” and “do nothing else but steal funds from abroad and the Hungarian government” (Hír TV 2019). Evidently, anti-Western narrative is intertwined with nationalist pride and antigypsyism.

At this point, it is instructive to go back to an earlier argument proposed in this book and revisit the context in which pro-Roma civil society emerged and subsists today: both Hungary and Russia are nationalizing states where the interest of core nations is posited against minorities. Complementary to exclusionary nation building are deeply seated negative attitudes towards Roma. Since pro-Roma NGOs are regarded as representing Western values, these institutions are often accused of hypocrisy and are a source of fear. For example, the irritation of teachers, fueled by what they saw as EU and Western imposition on their national values without an understanding of internal dynamics were frequent: “There is money and financial assistance to Gypsies, and yet we can’t even call them that, we can’t have statistics on them, we can’t have official count of them! We simply can’t talk about them based on what their name is,” said an infuriated teacher. The teacher was enraged that “Gypsy” had become politically incorrect.

As one teacher vehemently expressed these sentiments, more joined the circle: “everybody wants to get rid of them and simply throws them back to us [Hungary] . . . look at western Europe or Canada . . . of course they don’t want them either, and then they turn it around and call us fascists.” While all nodded in agreement, another teacher finished the thought with a rhetorical question: “We are the racists because we have a race?!” (field notes by author, Hungary, November 20, 2012).

In Russia, I sensed a general wonder regarding why anyone would want to help or study Roma, a group that was still largely seen as a closed community

that rejects authority. Hence, any interference in their lives would be unwelcome, as Russian teachers explained, and suggested that the entire research is doomed to failure.

In addition, both countries pursue an explicitly nationalist educational policy, and teachers are expected to follow the official nationalist position in their teaching (Lovorn and Tsyrlina-Spady 2015, 45). Tightening control of educational institutions and incorporating normative messages in mandatory textbooks is one clear indicator of top-down reinterpretation of history in a way to support the guiding nationalist and often anti-Western ideology. In Hungary, the examples of an ethics textbook that implied Roma were leading useless lives while rapidly multiplying, stirred some uproar (Roma Press Center 2014). In Russia, Putin has been vocal about the need for a unified and standardized history textbook to unite the Russian nation (e.g., Sidorchik 2013, AiF 2012.). Today, patriotic and hyper-nationalist narratives permeate history books in Russia, which raises concerns among researchers (e.g., Lovorn and Tsyrlina-Spady 2015). Centralization of textbooks under exclusive state authority without transparency or consultation with experts are characteristic of both countries (e.g., Zsilák 2018, Teczár 2014).

Overall, in the context of growing nationalism, Roma have become increasingly marginalized. The presented media glimpses illustrate the “one-sided and derogatory” representations of Roma and “continued circulation of racialised stereotypes” that become normalized in the society (Tremlett, Messing and Kóczé 2017, 641–42). However, while mainstream media tends to reproduce the narrative associated with the bad Gypsy label, I now turn to an analysis of mediums that challenge this negative representation, and analyze how the pro-Roma discourse, disseminated through formal and non-formal educational practices and partly aimed at offsetting centuries-old negative stereotypes, generates a new ethnic label, which I refer to as the good Roma.<sup>1</sup>

In order to analyze the deployment and social effects of Roma as an ethnic category and the accompanying good Roma discourse, I briefly describe the roots and goals of the pro-Roma civil society and movement.<sup>2</sup> I show that

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1 I use “good Roma” for analytical purposes to discuss the accompanying discourse and normative ethnic label. It is important to note that I discuss “Roma discourse” in connection with “ethnopolitical practice” surrounding the Roma issue; discourse that has been developing over the last few decades as a consequence of more recent Roma activism and mushrooming of pro-Roma organizations (see Kóczé and Rövid 2012). I acknowledge that the term was used before as self-identification, since “Rom” means man or person in Romani. In addition, there were previous bottom-up attempts in history to unite all Roma people, which often were either not recorded, or simply failed to achieve their goal on a mass scale (see Hancock 1991, 256–57). Here, I am concerned with the discourse that emerged as a consequence of the most recent Roma movement.

2 The pro-Roma movement consists not only of international and supranational organizations, but also of activists and grassroots organizations, and academics who have participated in building the discourse and

the historical background of the pro-Roma movement is a reaction to deeply seated negative stereotypes about Gypsies, and that the impact of the movement is more pronounced in Hungary than in Russia. I present fieldwork findings and observations from various educational settings in order to demonstrate the process of rearrangement in social classification, which is currently at play, as well as the negotiation of ethnic labels that many Roma youth experience.

### Pro-Roma Civil Society's Roots, Goals, and Projects

Some suggest that maybe the discrimination in the past can serve as a bond between a multitude of Roma groups across the world: "The resultant shared exposure to hate and harassment . . . binds our peoples, and should of course strengthen the bonds of solidarity," wrote Damian Le Bas (2013). Building on these bonds of solidarity, numerous institutions and initiatives emerged that explicitly set out the goal of superseding the negative Gypsy label and (re-)building a new Roma identity.<sup>3</sup> For example, the stated institutional goal of the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERIAC) powerfully explains that the "European imagery and iconography had forced Roma into the conceptual ghetto of 'the Gypsy,'" and hence ERIAC's goal is to reaffirm Roma identity, "shaped and articulated by Roma themselves" through cultural and artistic practices, in order to build a "collective consciousness of the European Roma community" (ERIAC 2020).

In other words, replacement of the term Gypsy with Roma "represents an attempt to break away from social stigmas and reproduce a more positive, more neutral, and less romanticized image . . . and closely connected with the process of Romani political mobilization" (Vermeersch 2007, 13). The 1971 World Romani Congress in London is widely considered as the founding moment of this movement (e.g., Kóczé and Rövid 2012).<sup>4</sup> Besides a new label, national paraphernalia was approved during the Congress: the interna-

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the movement. There is also criticism that some major players came to dominate the discourse with their agenda, such as the "Soros Empire with their lieutenants" (scholar and Roma expert, interviewed by author, Budapest, April 10, 2014).

- 3 I give a brief description of the pro-Roma civil society and the role of NGOs with the purpose of assessing their efforts in Roma positive self-identification, rather than criticize the sector.
- 4 There were earlier attempts, albeit not as significant. For instance, during an international conference in the 1930s, United Gypsies of Europe with the leadership of Gheorghe Nicolescu proposed the establishment of various institutions representing their interests, an early flag was adopted, and plans made to strengthen trans-border solidarity (Hancock 1991).

tional Roma flag was agreed upon along with “Gelem, Gelem” as the national anthem. Zeljko Jovanovic, the director of the Open Society Foundation’s (OSF) Roma Initiatives Office, called participants of the Congress the “founding fathers of April 8th [International Roma Day]” during one of the celebrations of International Roma Day held in Budapest, Hungary (Jovanovic 2014). Furthermore, he pointed out, since Roma nationhood is not related to any state, there is no enforcing mechanism and consequently pro-Roma organizations and civil society must take up a special role, presumably in advancing Roma nation building efforts.

In addition, “at this Congress, the use of all ethnic labels for Roma of non-Roma origin, such as Gypsy, Zigeuner, Gitano or tsygan, were condemned” and “the organization itself was renamed the International Roma Committee” from International Gypsy Committee (Hancock 1991, 262).<sup>5</sup> By now, the term Roma “has come to dominate the official political discourse . . . and has acquired the legitimacy of political correctness” (Dimitrina Petrova, quoted in Vermeersch 2007, 2). The pro-Roma discourse accompanied the initiation of “Roma as a political project,” which, as Aidan McGarry describes, “has been constructed as an attempt to challenge the negative ascription of Roma identity . . . Implicit in this challenge is changing the meaning and content of Roma identity including how Roma are seen, categorised, understood, and treated by the majority” (2014, 761).

The Roma anthem and flag became usual components of various projects and events, they were displayed and performed at venues such as exhibitions, cultural events, and as symbols of various institutions. With that, the political project to create the Roma identity had begun, which envisioned Roma as a European minority and a transnational nation—claims that were increasingly echoed in the international political space through the work of international organizations and NGOs (McGarry 2014).<sup>6</sup> To that end, Roma identity building and empowerment projects, organized or funded by various international bodies, are critical interventions that foster a positive Roma self-image.

The role of education, formal and non-formal, stands out as a key area for action in articulating a different, positive representation of Roma. There are several initiatives, such as the Central European University’s Roma Graduate

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5 The roots of the pro-Roma movement contained noteworthy bottom-up efforts, but this chapter is concerned with deployment and appropriation of this new discourse by NGOs and various educational projects to disseminate this new ethnic label.

6 Furthermore, as part of EU and NGO-funded integration projects, the pro-Roma discourse has seeped into some state institutions to various degrees.

Preparation Program, the training and scholarship program Romaversitas, various projects of the Roma Education Fund, and those of OSF's Roma Initiatives Office, just to name a few, that are concerned with educating the Roma youth, as well as promoting an "identity-taking,"<sup>7</sup> proud and empowered generation of young Roma.

Several of the pro-Roma international organizations claim that education is one of their priority areas of intervention, and several researchers highlighted the links between education and maintaining cultural identity (e.g., Balogh 2012 and Pop 2012). In addition, the founder of OSF, George Soros himself repeatedly stated that Europe needs educated Roma (Soros 2010). Soros writes that "the key to success is the education of a new generation of Roma who do not seek to assimilate into the general population, but deliberately retain their identity as Roma. Educated, successful Roma will shatter the prevailing negative stereotypes by their very existence" (ibid.). Education has also been prioritized by EU officials and other major players as a way to end Roma marginalization and as a tool of empowerment. "Providing quality education for all is not only a question of human rights. It is the only way out of poverty and exclusion for millions of Roma," said Androulla Vassiliou, the former Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth (European Commission 2014).

The assertions of trans-border solidarity and shared identity among all Roma may be seen as constituting a new form of contemporary nation building, not tied to any state, but rather uniting communities across borders and led by non-state actors. While the pro-Roma movement has an ambition to unite Roma across countries, territorial autonomy has never been a demand, and thus the movement has not been a threat to territorial integrity of any state (Vermeersch 2007, 2). In Hungary, where, until recently, NGOs operated in a more unrestricted environment and with a considerably larger proportion of Roma population in the country, pro-Roma organizations and initiatives are visibly present and active.

Despite its regional (or global) scope, the movement remains embryonic, with segments of the Roma population outright rejecting this label. For instance, the Boyash residing in the Southern regions of Hungary and Northern territories of Romania and Croatia,<sup>8</sup> refuse to be associated with

7 For example, Romaversitas describes its goal as supporting "our [Roma] students to become well-balanced, identity-taking, responsible professionals" (Romaversitas 2020).

8 According to Hungarian-language literature, there are also Boyash residing in Bulgaria, Bosnia, and Serbia, but much information is missing regarding Boyash within the listed countries, or in others (Arató 2013, 45).

the term Roma (e.g., Binder 2009; Hegedűs 2007). However, certain symbols seem to be accepted even by the Boyash: the flag appears to serve as a unifying symbol, while the anthem remains a dividing line between Boyash and Lovari/Vlach, and other Roma groups (Binder 2009).<sup>9</sup>

In Russia, given the multitude of sub-groups and identities, the term Roma is even more contested, and as Marushiakova and Popov argue, “this kind of group definition is meant to address foreign donors, whereas the Gypsy community does not really accept [it]” (2003, 293).<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Marushiakova and Popov argue that the modern idea of Roma identity that belongs to a stateless transborder Roma nation has little or no influence on Gypsies in Russia, and “even the few activists belonging to the international Roma movement from the former Soviet states do not take this concept seriously, let alone the large Gypsy population in these countries, who are not even aware of its existence (or do not feel a need for it)” (2003, 298). Nevertheless, in Russia there are also institutions, especially non-state actors who are concerned with empowerment of Russian Roma and contesting societal stereotypes.

I now turn to the examination of how the ethnic categories of Roma and Gypsy are endorsed and negotiated through non-formal educational projects or activities in both Russia and Hungary.

## Negotiation of Identity and Non-state Actors

Currently, none of the analyzed countries have an environment that supports the work of non-governmental organizations, especially ones that are tied to international (foreign) donors. In Russia, NGOs that receive funding from Western sources are described as threat to national security. The “Foreign Agent” law, passed in 2012, requiring non-profit organizations with foreign donations and “political activity” to “report their activities and face financial audits,” is the clearest example of this battle where the state reaffirmed its power over non-state actors (RFE/RL 2020). Recently, in December of 2020, the law was expanded, punishment increased, and the definition of “foreign agents” was broadened. Hungary, which used to be a hub for many human rights and

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9 Just like the Roma movement is in embryonic stage, local communities, such as the Boyash, have seen their identities revived. The Boyash language, for example, has been developed over the last quarter of a century into a literary language that is growing in importance. See an excellent study by Hegedűs (2007).

10 The authors also argue that the international Roma movement from its very inception in the 1970s had little or no effect on the Soviet Roma (Marushiakova and Popov 2003).

pro-Roma organizations, followed suit and introduced its own law on foreign funded NGOs in 2017. Similarly, this law requires NGOs with funding from abroad above a certain sum to register as “organization receiving foreign funding,” and they are obligated to “annually report about their foreign funding, and to indicate the label on their website and publications” (TASZ 2015). In this context, the operation of NGOs is highly politicized.

Anti-Discrimination Center Memorial (ADC Memorial) in Russia is a prime case for the arduousness of functioning in an increasingly illiberal climate. The organization is concerned with defending “the rights of victims of discrimination by proactively responding to human rights violations through advocacy, legal assistance, human rights education, research, and publications” (ADC Memorial 2020; see also European Parliament n.d.). As part of their awareness building and human rights work, ADC Memorial has worked with the Russian Roma communities, taking special interest in assuring equal access to quality education to Roma children. During fieldwork, I observed their involvement in reducing discrimination against Roma by providing alternative perspectives and supplementary educational materials, with the aim of increasing awareness about Roma culture and changing discriminatory attitudes. Shortly after I completed fieldwork, ADC Memorial had gone through administrative harassments, and then they were officially declared as “foreign agents” in December 2013, and soon were forced to shut down their operation in Russia (International Federation for Human Rights 2013; FIDH 2013; CSCE 2014, Human Rights First 2014).

The organization published literature for teachers and the Roma community on topics of Roma culture, language, traditions and the like, and organized trips and various events to provide meeting grounds for Roma and non-Roma communities. Among their publications, for example, is a primer for Romani language, a bilingual Romani-Russian primer, a coloring book and Romani language storybook and many others. “Teachers work in a context of racism and our office has shown many years of resistance to this system,” said a leading member of ADC Memorial (interviewed by author, Russia, January 21, 2013). Concerned about segregated education in a nearby school, the interviewee continued: “We organized and paid for a trip for the school; we hired an expensive bus and we paid for it; we thought this would be a good time for the two groups to get out together . . . when we came, we were told that all the Russian kids got sick, all of them . . . the next time all the Roma kids got sick . . . all of them.”

The organization, based on the words of one of its former employees, generated fear among the teachers and the school principal who grew increasingly

uncomfortable with what they saw as disruptions of their work by the NGO's projects. While the organization's work and goals to end segregation and mistreatment of Roma children brought the issue more to the surface—deepening animosities at times—ADC Memorial maintains that with the “pressure” of their presence, Roma children were less neglected and even gained positive memories from their school years by attending trips and extracurricular activities, as well as learning from volunteer teachers sensitive to their culture. In the school, Roma children fondly described their memories from their trips organized by ADC Memorial, and when asked about their favorite teachers, they only named volunteers recruited by the NGO, because their current teachers “did not like them.” They warmly remembered the young volunteers, some from abroad and some locals, arranged by the NGO, until the school discontinued this practice.

ADC Memorial conducted their work in close collaboration with the local Roma community, and they propitiously recruited a prominent Roma woman,<sup>11</sup> who was actively promoting change; she was a Roma woman with many children and even more grandchildren, known by everyone as the “Baron-in-skirt” (ADC Memorial volunteer, interview by author, Russia, February 2, 2013). She has been active in promoting change within her own community and at the school. In this community there was not one, but two authority figures: the conservative Baron<sup>12</sup> and progressive Baron-in-skirt. The Baron was an elderly man, whose conservatism was described to me as “he doesn't really understand what's happening in the world . . . he is conservative in a way that he thinks [Roma] children do not need to study” (volunteer at the Roma community, interviewed by author online, April 16, 2013).

Teachers in the local schools especially liked to quote the Baron when justifying their neglect towards educating Roma children, wondering why the school was expected to have academic demand of these children if “even their Baron does not want education.” On numerous occasions I heard teachers mention the Baron during “*lineyka*”, a performative disciplinary activity where students line up and their school achievements are evaluated. One teacher shouted at students for misbehaving, threatening to report to the principal or “maybe even to the Baron” (field notes by author, Russia, February 5, 2013). The Baron rep-

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11 During conversations at ADC Memorial's office, this woman was referred to as *sotrudnica*, or employee/collaborator.

12 The Baron, according to Mariushkova and Popov, is a mystified and stereotype-based authoritative institution of Roma, produced not only by non-Roma, but often by Roma themselves (2007, 71). However, historical sources mention Barons as typical authoritative figures of Roma, as the central person that Roma were “answerable to . . . all matters save offences carrying the death penalty” (Liégeois 1994, 19).

resented conservative, archaic, and primitive views in the eyes of the teachers, which corresponded impeccably to the stereotype of Roma as an outdated and uneducated group of wanderers. The Baron-in-skirt, on the other hand, had progressive views and sought out ways to improve the living conditions of her community, which she saw primarily rooted in the level of education. This woman and her beliefs, however, did not match so neatly the preconceived notions about Roma, and her name or authority was rarely mentioned in the school.

The Baron-in-skirt, for example, held after-school classes and tutoring sessions at her house with the support of the NGO where volunteers could come and help Roma pupils with their homework. The setup of these sessions was similar to the Hungarian *tanoda program*—educational extra-curricular development usually hosted by community houses and run by NGOs or charities. At the house of the Baron-in-skirt, learning was informal and yet well organized: students knew when they were expected to come, they came with their notebooks and tasks prepared. Often sessions began with a reminder that “we are not here to do homework, but we are here to learn,” turning the attention away from the individual task and towards the process of receiving education. My observations of the tutoring sessions as well as survey conducted among the community, all demonstrated the central role of education. During the survey, one parent said: “I very much support my children’s education because I know this will determine their future.” Although most parents had little formal education themselves, many accompanied their children to the house of the Baron-in-skirt, where parents silently sat and listened.

Undoubtedly, both the NGO and the Baron-in-skirt had the same vision: empowering their community through quality education, challenging negative stereotypes, and contributing to positive change within the community, and through that transformation, to ascertain the value and role that Russian Roma have in their societies. Close cooperation between the organization and an influential member of the local community allowed them to join forces in working with the school, as well as Gypsy children in promoting better education. The NGO needed the Roma woman to act as a catalyst of change and a role model for her community; in turn, the partnership of the school was also indispensable for the NGO and the Roma community to reach their goals. Since the school discontinued “Gypsy classes” after four or five grades, any aspiration to study beyond those grades was virtually unattainable.

Yet, this did not discourage Roma parents who reported during my survey that they would fight for a better education for their children; one expressed their hope for sending their children to university. The community saw the

NGO as their ally, through their dedicated work with the local children. Both the NGO and the Baron-in-skirt attempted to dissuade me from volunteering in the school; they saw more value in me taking “their side” in trying to convince the school principal to offer upper classes for Roma and stop in-school segregation. This time during fieldwork was particularly taxing—in trying to earn everyone’s trust, it became clear that there was no neutral position to take. I was positioned as an ally or foe, a sympathizer or opponent based on my action and inaction alike.

In comparison to Russia, there are many both national and international organizations in Hungary aiming at Roma empowerment and equal access to education. Many pro-Roma projects in the country also have an identity-building component, striving to instill pride and strengthen the idea of a trans-border Roma nation. For instance, to qualify for the Roma Education Fund’s (REF) scholarships, applicants must “declare themselves as Roma; declare as willing to appear publicly as Roma,” among other stipulations (REF 2020). Hungary also has an extensive network of Roma student colleges (*szakkollégium*), “all of which aim to support Roma or Gypsy students in higher education” (Andl 2015, 98). One such example is Romaversitas, which strives to raise a generation of “identity-taking” youth who will assume Roma identity and responsibility for their ethnic kin (Romaversitas 2020; HR Portal 2009).

There are also secondary schools that are “designed to address the unique needs of Roma students” (World Bank 2001, 9). Kalyi Jag Minority Professional School in Hungary is among these secondary institutions aimed at introducing “literature written by Gypsy writers and authors” to Roma youth, “teaching their mother tongue or re-teaching it to those who forgot it,” and to be “conscious about their origin and how they retained their identity over time” (Kalyi Jag 2020a). In the process of education, I observed that the meaning and content of Gypsy and Roma was continuously questioned, challenged, and reinterpreted. The school, which initially functioned in an apartment in its early years, received funding from the Open Society Foundations, but was also supported by other state and non-state institutions.

Kalyi Jag Roma Secondary School opened its doors in 1994 in Budapest; the founder, Gusztáv Varga, a Roma musician, established the institution with a sense of responsibility to provide education to his people, to incorporate Roma culture in its curriculum and to preserve Roma identity. “We need to give them [Roma] back their prestige and identity,” Gusztáv Varga claimed, and besides conventional classes, students take subjects on Roma culture, music, and history (interviewed by author, Hungary, December 6, 2012; see

also Kalyi Jag 2020b). Schools like Kalyi Jag are not simply bringing Roma culture into the curriculum, but consciously fight existing negative stereotypes associated with Gypsies in order to cultivate a positive identity. Despite early criticism and doubts, several campuses opened in the country, in addition to the one in Budapest.<sup>13</sup> Field work observations from this school were particularly revealing of the process, how instructors in schools can actively promote rethinking the meaning of the Gypsy as ethnic label. The way this term was perceived, resisted, or negotiated in class was also indicative of the tension that young Roma experience when relating to their own group.

A renown Roma poet taught a Roma ethnography class in the school during my visit. He explained during class to his students:

This school came into existence . . . so that it can teach Gypsy children in order to keep their own identity! So that you all can keep your identities! . . . In another school, let's say a normal Hungarian school, and then a university, in 7 years you can lose your identity because you only learn Hungarian culture and you simply put aside the Gypsy culture. (Field notes by author, Hungary, December 6, 2012)

The teacher pointed out to his students that in order to become full members of society, Gypsies need to be educated, adapt, and yet not lose their identity. "If a Gypsy person loses his or her identity, that means they don't care about the culture of their people, they forget their own, and take on a foreign nation's culture and want to represent that culture, rather than their own" (field notes by author, Hungary, December 6, 2012). Students add that perhaps some Gypsies look down on their own culture, implying that the very process of forgetting the culture is in fact a conscious decision to leave it behind. "We shouldn't be ashamed of where we come from," the teacher immediately retaliated, "don't you think that Gypsy is one who is grungy and dirty [*retkes és piszkos*], that's not a Gypsy! Gypsies are as valuable as any other nation!"

Indeed, the teacher explicitly named the problem: young Roma come to school representing the majority opinion about their ethnic kin, which is filled with negative stereotypes. At times it is even hard to accept that being Gypsy might imply good qualities: "Józsi bácsi,<sup>14</sup> I was in the store the other day and

13 Being aware of many issues and problems surrounding this school, I do not discuss them here as I am solely concerned with the content of education.

14 *Bácsi* means uncle or man, used to refer to teachers in schools along with their first names. The name was changed for anonymity.

I wanted to pay with a ten-thousand-forint note [approximately 45 USD] and the clerk asked me if the family support arrived [implying that Gypsies only have money from family support]; I didn't say anything and didn't even start yelling at him, but the money was from my father, who works!" The class sat in silence as the student continued with swelling emotions: "but seriously, they look down on us, but why?" The response, dry and sharp, came from a classmate: "Because you are Gypsy!" (Field notes by author, Hungary, December 6, 2012). The class was silent, with many students visibly empathizing with their classmates.

Józsi bácsi was from a generation when the term Roma was not charged with the same political meaning as it is today. In another class, however, a young Roma teacher who benefitted from a Roma identity-building and educational program herself, addressed the question of identity labeling directly in her classroom: do students prefer Roma or Gypsy? The answers are quoted below:

*Student 1:* I prefer Roma—Gypsy is an ugly word! [Teacher: But I heard you use it yourself!]

*Student 2:* I think we should use the word Roma, but many use Gypsy instead . . .

*Student 3:* I'm used to saying Gypsy . . .

*Student 4:* I'm used to Gypsy, too.

*Student 5:* Definitely Gypsy!

*Student 6:* I don't care!

*Student 7:* Gypsy.

*Student 8:* Roma . . . when I am surrounded by non-Roma people; but when I am around Roma people, I say Gypsy . . . it's because Gypsy is an uglier word.

*Student 9:* I don't even understand why we have to be called "minority." I don't like that, and that is ugly also.

*Student 10:* About myself, I'd say Gypsy. If someone else talks about me, [pauses to think] . . . they can use Gypsy also.

*Teacher:* I noticed when we say something positive, we use the word Roma, and just by listening to you all talk about this topic, I noticed the same pattern: you use the word Roma when you want to say something good; however, when you say something negative, then you all used the term Gypsy instead of Roma . . .

The last point the teacher highlighted closely corresponds to my own observations in other contexts in the country. For instance, the earlier mentioned

verb *elcigányosodik*, or “becomes Gypsified,” is almost exclusively used in negative context: teachers use it for students who change from good students to bad students. Reports on neighborhoods that change from prospering to poor and neglected and populated by poor Roma are also Gypsified; Roma students use it to describe non-Roma who become similar to them. That day, students left the young teacher’s class with an ad hoc homework assignment to think about when they use Roma versus Gypsy, and what feelings do the two words evoke.

During class, authenticity of who is a “real Gypsy” was one aspect of identity negotiation. Some students were uneasy about the loss of culture or language, which they equated with ethnic identity. Those who spoke Romanes (Vlach Roma) grouped together against their classmates, who did not speak the language (Romungro):<sup>15</sup>

*Teacher:* Who spoke Romanes at home?

[three people raise their hands.]

*Teacher:* Do you find it a useful language?

*Student 1:* . . . One absolutely has to learn this language at home! It’s our mother tongue, which we can’t forget because otherwise it makes us Hungarians with darker skin.

*Student 2:* My grandmother spoke it, but I never had a chance to learn. Since I came to this school, I have a lot more interest in learning it.

[Students discuss why they haven’t had a chance to learn Romanes growing up.]

*Student 1:* A “pure Gypsy” speaks the language as their mother tongue! I will be honest, I am always honest: A Romungro is not a real Gypsy! They don’t speak Romanes, they are just not real Gypsies to me! I don’t think they should be grouped together with us.

[Class gets increasingly frustrated; teacher discontinues discussion and resumes the class. She begins with brief history of Hungarian Gypsies comprising three large groups, Vlach, Romungro, and Boyash, all of whom are Gypsies, she repeats.]

Interestingly, the question of “ethnic authenticity”—not only who is a “real Gypsy” but also what is “real Gypsy culture”—emerged multiple times in various locations, not only in schools. Authenticity was questioned not only along

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15 Romungro, or Hungarian Roma, most definitely “lost” their language after Maria Theresa’s forced assimilation campaign and Joseph II’s consecutive prohibition of Romani language in 1783. See Chapter 3 for more details.

intra-ethnic lines, constructing a hierarchy of Roma groups based on their adherence to “true” Gypsy culture, but also between generations, accusing Roma youth of sacrificing their culture (and sometimes identity) in order to assimilate. A middle-aged Roma man lamented about the youth losing sight of their culture: “Two Roma would relate to one another in a brotherly way . . . but unfortunately, now it is not the case . . . unfortunately our culture got tainted and especially the youth that live so differently [from the older generation].” In Kalyi Jag, many students brought up their parents or grandparents, either as the measure of authenticity or to juxtapose with their lack of Romani language proficiency, a gap of knowledge they were ready to fill.

Gifted Roma students also have the opportunity to participate in university preparatory trainings after high school or join various educational and scholarship programs upon being admitted to universities. Participation in prestigious training programs for Roma may lead to prominent future jobs, opening opportunities for national and international employment. Most importantly, there is an emerging network of successful, educated Roma; these educated Roma youth constitute the “rising Roma elite.”<sup>16</sup> These programs may be funded by influential philanthropies, branches of the EU or even state bodies. Roma university students, who are meager in numbers, have a good likelihood in participating in at least one of these educational projects.<sup>17</sup>

For instance, Romaversitas offers scholarships to Roma students and has an unequivocal goal to create a Roma intellectual elite “committed to the advancement of Romani population” (Friedman and Garaz 2013, 154). Romaversitas started by offering summer university courses in 1997, initially funded through OSI, and steadily grew and became an independent foundation by 2001. Romaversitas has been rather successful in its years of operation. Many of the enrolled Roma youth were first-generation university students, and studies report that as a result of training, the students’ Roma identity was strengthened and they had a higher likelihood of finishing university (ibid., 154; see also Arnold et al. 2011).

An established Roma intellectual offered classes on Roma poetry to Romaversitas students during my visit. “The biggest tragedy . . . is the loss of belief in community. You hang in the air . . . you have no ground . . . you don’t know who you are and you don’t know what it’s like to belong to a community

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16 This term was used, for example, by the Roma Education Fund during their 2011 grant ceremony (REF 2011).

17 According to a 2010 study in Hungary, university attendance rate among non-Roma is approximately 40%, while it is about 1% among Roma youth (Szociális és Munkaügyi Minisztérium 2010, 137).

... you have no idea where you are coming from,” he explained to students in the classroom. “There is a wall that surrounds you. Why? Because you are surrounded by values of another culture, where you cannot open up; the school is alienating . . . and here is ‘Romver’ [Romaversitas], which bridges our family values and the school values,” he continued. Students sat silently, listening with strong emotions on their faces. The teacher, to whom everyone listened in admiration, carried on lamenting about changing times: “in 1971 I was the only Gypsy university student [in Hungary], I was an ‘exotic beast,’ but you are not exotic beasts anymore” (field notes by author, Hungary, December 7, 2012). This teacher was an empowering role model for his students: a man who mobilized his education to enrich the canon of Roma literature, to educate young Roma, and to actively participate in the cultural and political life of his country, representing other Roma.

During my visit, other topics of discussion included development of presentation skills and unpacking issues of poverty. The latter was particularly useful in discussing strategies on how to tackle false stereotypes about Gypsies living parasitic lifestyles and relying on welfare due to their large families. Students also had a chance to meet not only renowned Roma intellectuals and scholars, but also get closely acquainted with the network of pro-Roma programs and organizations. For example, I witnessed discussions about opportunities offered to Roma youth from the United States, mainly mediated through the US Embassy in Budapest. Importantly, Romaversitas provides the venue for socialization, encourages confidence in Roma identity, and provides knowledge to succeed in the labor market.

During five interviews with selected students in December 2012, professional training and community aspects were named as the most valuable features of Romaversitas, which help students stay connected to their culture and aspire for a successful professional career. Staying connected with Roma culture after completing education, however, is a much-discussed topic. Although the number of Roma students in universities is arguably improving,<sup>18</sup> some scholars nevertheless point out that “ties to local Romani communities are weakened in the process of becoming a self-identifying Romani intellectual and/or professional” (Friedman and Garaz 2013, 154).

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18 In 1996/1997, 0.22% university students were Roma, in 2001/2002 the number grew to 0.6%, later in 2010 to approximately 1.3–1.5% (Polónyi 2004, 20). More recently, Viktor Orbán claimed in a radio interview in January of 2020 that the number of Roma university students had doubled since 2010 (Koncz 2020), a number that was criticized as unsubstantiated, given that no statistics is available on students’ ethnicity in Hungarian higher education institutions.

In summary, the discussed example from both countries demonstrate that there is a conscious effort by various actors, ranging from charismatic individuals to foundations and organizations, to bring about meaningful change in redefining Roma identity. Through education, the discussed projects were concerned with promoting pride, empowering, and raising a group of “identity-taking” Roma intellectuals, or simply problematizing the negative content of the Gypsy label. Not surprisingly, more explicit identity forming education starts beyond elementary education; as one young educated Roma woman said, “I was aware of differences as a child, but only in high school did those differences become more conscious and I started questioning my own belonging” (Roma teacher, interviewed by author, Hungary, December 4, 2012).

Fieldwork observations also revealed that in Hungary, the label Roma was used noticeably more in a positive context, while Gypsy was used in its negative connotation. Since “it is impossible to see Gypsiness in positive light today in Hungary,” as Nóra L. Ritók suggests, many programs appropriated the internationally acceptable Roma as ethnic label, instead of the negatively charged “Gypsy.”<sup>19</sup> Such differentiation, however, was not noticeable during fieldwork in Russia, where the term Roma was rarely used, if at all.

In the next chapter, I turn to the question of what it means to be a Gypsy or a Roma. A corollary question is how Roma define their own belonging, either to the community or their respective countries? In discussing these questions, I show that while antigypsyism is prevalent in both countries and Roma have internalized many negative stereotypes, yet Roma had a strong sense of community and felt rooted in Russia. In Hungary, on the contrary, Roma were pessimistic and had a weak sense of belonging. It appeared to me that the ethnic labels in Hungary were more static, with Gypsy implying negative stereotypes and often used pejoratively, while Roma espoused positive attributes. In Russia, where the Roma label was virtually unfamiliar, the meaning of Gypsy as an ethnic label was more dynamic.

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19 Nóra L. Ritók is the Director of Igazgyöngy Alapítvány [Real Pearl Foundation], an educator and a frequent guest at various round-table conversations and workshops regarding education of Roma children. She also writes a blog, “Nyomor széle” [Edge of poverty] (Szemere 2014).

## Chapter 9

# Negotiating Identity

*Wherever I go or wherever I am, I am always a Gypsy. Is there anything I can do about that?*

30-year-old Hungarian Roma man  
(interviewed by author, Hungary, April 13, 2013)

Having discussed how the two dominant images—bad Gypsies and good Roma—developed over time and are mobilized in formal and non-formal educational institutions, this chapter is concerned with how identities are negotiated by Roma themselves in Hungary and Russia. Remarkably, many informants during fieldwork explicitly remembered and knew when and how they learned about the negative connotation of being Gypsy, and how they were able to develop coping mechanisms. In a revealing conversation a young Roma woman recalled her younger years:

I was proud of being Gypsy, I used to go to Gypsy parties all the time. It was a good thing. Only lately I started understanding how much Gypsies are looked down upon, and it makes me so sad that I don't want to be called a Gypsy anymore . . . I don't even want to think about being a Gypsy, I am not a Gypsy!

She went on to explain that in the small village in Hungary where she grew up, she was not aware of any negative perception about Gypsies. Only later, over time did she become ashamed of being a Gypsy. She struggled to express the thought that being a Gypsy, in fact, did not mean a personal, lived experience for her, but rather it reflected societal stereotype, or what others thought Gypsies were.

In this chapter I discuss the role education played in the identity struggles of my informants. Through my fieldwork observations, I concluded that Roma groups in both Russia and Hungary internalized similar negative stereotypes and face a similar essentialized bad Gypsy image, yet the Russian community developed stronger communal ties and expressed pride in their culture.

This difference may stem from historical legacies of nativization, when Gypsy culture was institutionalized, and the Gypsy group was imagined within an inclusive Soviet nation. In Hungary, on the contrary, disunity, sense of hopelessness, and irreverence towards Roma culture had debilitating effects. Yet, pro-Roma non-state actors were more prevalent in Hungary and provided a critical space for socialization, developing talents, and increasing self-esteem, which in turn planted the seeds of more community-oriented attitude among some of the youth.

### Identity Struggles

The difference in attitude toward a collective identity between uneducated Roma parents in rural Hungarian settlements and the educated Roma university students was striking during fieldwork. When referring to themselves as “we,” the young educated Roma were energized by their new understanding of Roma as a trans-border nation with a rich history and culture, as well as their language and national symbols. The same “we” in settlements at best referred to one sub-group of Roma who lived within the community. “We, the *kolompár Gypsies*, we know how to keep our homes clean, it’s the ‘other Gypsies’ that are trouble,” was a common conversation I heard in Hungary. On the contrary, having participated in what I called “identity-building projects,” Roma tended to share their dreams with me of “helping their Roma nation,” aspiring to work for state or non-state institutions, especially in formulating policies. I followed the lives of some of my informants, and years after I completed fieldwork, many of the educated Roma assumed jobs in Brussels, Budapest, and other big cities.

The identity-building projects, especially the ones that followed the earlier described pro-Roma political discourse, indisputably had a profound impact. One participant of Romaversitas learned about the Roma anthem and flag as part of the training: “My identity was certainly affected [by the program], I realized that what the Roma anthem stands for is also who I am . . . now I know the Roma and Hungarian anthems,” he continued, “and I feel proud to be a Roma” (Roma student, interviewed by author, Hungary, March 14, 2014). This young Roma university student also claimed that neither he nor his community use the term Roma: “I used to refer to myself as a Gypsy . . . I didn’t even know the term Roma until I came to the capital, I probably heard it from the TV first . . . nobody in my community, nor my parents affiliate

with this term.” Yet, during our exchange, he consistently referred to himself as Roma. He added that his peers in his native village continue using Gypsy as self-identification, and some even get offended when addressed as Roma. The student also shared that he got used to Roma as self-identification in the process applying for various pro-Roma grants, fellowship, internships, and other opportunities.

Outside of big cities, the rural Roma population is rarely exposed to the pro-Roma discourse and symbols, and when they are, it tends to be a distorted or meaningless use of pro-Roma discourse. When I inquired on multiple occasions whether the Roma flag or anthem was meaningful in Hungarian small towns and villages, I often received frustrated and annoyed responses: “I don’t know it and I don’t care.” I also witnessed educational projects funded by NGOs in rural Hungary that were aimed at promoting Roma culture. These youth projects were often limited to performing Roma culture: teaching basket-weaving, baking traditional bread, and passing time at playgrounds decorated with the international Roma flag that few students recognized (see Figure 14).

Confusion about the pro-Roma discourse was pointed out to me by an emerging Romologist with extensive fieldwork experience, who started noticing an attitude of “if Gypsy is bad and Roma is good, I’ll surely be Roma!” among his respondents (scholar, interviewed online by author, March 18, 2014). For the majority of Roma, living in impoverished and isolated environments, there seemed to be little hope for assuming a good Roma identity to replace that of bad Gypsy. In these places, very few children succeed in studying beyond elementary school, and finishing eight grades was seen as an achievement. When they were aware of the pro-Roma organizations and initiatives, there was often a general disillusionment.



**Figure 14** Youth project in rural Hungary to promote Roma culture. Photo taken by the author in 2014.

It became evident that when discussing the meaning of being Roma or Gypsy, there was a certain set of expectations of the essentialized bad Gypsy that was the context of my conversations. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with local residents in the Russian and Hungarian settlements, I collected adjectives respondents used to describe their own identity. As Table 4 below shows, the most frequently mentioned attributes used to define the group identity in both countries were “lacking discipline” and “deficient education.” Although I would caution the readers from generalizing based on this small-scale survey sample, there is a strong indication of internalized negative stereotypes.

For example, when discussing their every-day lives, respondents often said that “*despite* being a Gypsy, I work,” or “*even* though I am a Gypsy, I am educated.” Others saw poverty as an important constituent of their identity, claiming that they were happy living poor and dying poor and would never want to be Magyars and live rich. “You are an intelligent and well-spoken woman, one can barely tell you are a Gypsy,” said one local woman to another during a conversation. “Yes, that’s true, and I indeed feel different: I don’t drink, I am not a vagabond, I work, I’ve always been working, and I was married to my husband for 37 years,” responded the 52-year-old woman, who makes ends meet with public work and finished five grades all together. Again, the juxtaposition of being Gypsy with good qualities, which Gypsies presumably do not possess, was evident.

The woman quoted above wanted to be a hairdresser, but after fifth grade never returned to school because her parents decided to keep her at home, and when she turned 16, her oldest daughter was born. She remembered her teachers coming to visit many times, trying to persuade her parents, but to no avail. She lived in the poor settlement for 25 years, until she finally moved out with her husband. “It doesn’t matter if a Gypsy has no education . . . but I had the stamina, the desire to make a change in my life,” she shared her determination.

As the table below reveals, besides cultural characteristics, most defined their ethnic identity in terms of lacking education, deficient discipline, and uncleanness in both Russia and Hungary. The question then follows: if these negative traits are eliminated and one becomes educated, disciplined, and clean, does the Gypsy category become obsolete? Or does it change in content?

I noticed that defining Gypsiness with negative attributes often lead to performing those very attributes in order to display the ethnic identity one belongs to. For example, Roma youth performed the bad Gypsy identity when posing for photographs. In the Hungarian settlement that I researched for

**Table 4** What Does it Mean to be “Gypsy”?

What does it mean to be “Gypsy”?	
Russia	Hungary
Lack of Discipline Laws, norms, traditions, culture Illiteracy, lack of education	
Language and accent Dress Skin color Eyes	Poverty Lack of “cleanliness” (in many meanings: doing “clean” work, skin color, hygiene) Skin color
What is the relationship between “Gypsies” and the state?	
Place of residence, homeland, “my country”	Distrust, suspicion, dependency
Future outlook	
Hopeful, there are improvements	Hopelessness, no positive future outlook

over six months, the 12- and 13-year-old Roma, some of whom had excellent drawing talents, singing skills, or exceptional aptitude for foreign languages, to my surprise posed as “gangsters” and “fighters,” or in the case of girls they hastily reached out for a toddler or a baby to hold for the photo or posed promiscuously. These early teens were visibly performing what they thought was the meaning of Gypsiness for the outside world, which to them was man-



**Figures 15 and 16** Performing “Gypsiness”

ifested through the camera that in one glimpse captured their identity. In Russia, young Roma girls tended to highlight their jewelry or loosen their hair when posing for photographs, and boys asked to be photographed together, in groups or “gangs” as they called it, rather than alone.

I also noticed an immediate reaction to the very choice of ethnic label I used; Roma or Gypsy evoked strong feelings. For example, in Hungary, most respondents described themselves as Gypsy unless I initiated questions using Roma instead of Gypsy. Some respondents continued using Roma, others rejected it and implied that embracing the term Roma would mean denial of their Gypsy identity. “Just say it, say Gypsy,” one respondent said in anger, implying my fear of using Gypsy for its negative content. “Yes, I’m Gypsy, should I be ashamed of it?” said one of the elderly members of the Hungarian community. These instances were powerful in making me recognize that my attempt at what I saw as being politically correct by using the term Roma, in fact, made my respondents feel that I concede to Gypsy being derogatory, an identity that many of them in fact identified with.

I had an opportunity to discuss the topic negotiating ethnic labels among international Roma students in Hungary, a group that included Hungarian Roma as well. All students completed their secondary education, some were enrolled in preparatory programs and others in universities. The Hungarian Roma students began discussing their identity struggles, suggesting that their peers from other countries have similar experiences. Indeed, a young Romanian Roma woman echoed the experience of the Hungarian Roma:

my father told me that the moment I leave his house [to go to school] I will not be received the same way [by the community] . . . I did not know with whom to speak, what to do . . . Many of my friends were already married at 14 and I was the only one unmarried . . . After I finished university, . . . I became even more uncertain about coming back home, I no longer knew who I was. I am less of a Roma in my community, but more of a Roma outside of my community, like in my school . . . In my community I was Roma 30%, in school, I was Roma 100%.” (Romanian Roma, interviewed by author, Hungary, June 13, 2013)

Although she still harbored a fear of rejection by her own community, where having completed high school she was regarded as “less of a Roma,” many of her peers could no longer relate to her, and Roma men her age refused to date her, this courageous young Roma woman returned to make a difference. She

has nearly completed the scholarship program in Budapest, and lamented that as much as she feels attached to her community, she had no clear understanding of how her education can apply to the context of her local community; nevertheless, she did not lose faith.

## Identity and Belonging

To return to the findings illustrated in Table 4 earlier, fieldwork surveys revealed that while in Russia my respondents looked at their group as nested within *Rossiyanе*, in Hungary respondents saw their ethnic group identity in opposition with that of Magyars. A brief return to Chapter 4, where the concept of nested identity and civic belonging was first introduced is instructive. Nested identities can be defined as “concentric circles or Russian Matruska dolls, one inside the next . . . [so that] everyone in a smaller community is also a member of a larger community” (Herrmann and Brewer 2004, 8). During nativization of the early Soviet Union, national minorities, including Roma were seen as groups “nested” within the broader socialist society. Besides the past experience of “nested structure of Soviet ethno-federalism” (Marquardt 2018, 855), the contemporary civic, non-ethnic *Rossiyanе* identity, which “interprets Russianness as an affiliation with the Russian state and territory” (Lynn and Bogorov 1999, 106) and “embraces members of other ethnic communities” (Tishkov 2008), may explain why Roma felt more rooted in the Russian society than in Hungary.

In addition to rootedness, in Russia the Roma community was hopeful, identifying significant improvements and anticipating more positive developments in the future (e.g., sedentarized lifestyle, growing number of working women, some improvements in schooling), while in Hungary almost all reported deteriorating conditions and expected the future to be worse. At times, Hungarian Roma were also pessimistic about education, primarily due to societal discrimination: education was seen by some a “ticket” to a society that rejects Gypsies, integration policies meet a wall of exclusion, improvements in living conditions seem too distant, and hopelessness debilitates and paralyzes community initiatives. In Russia, the Gypsy ethnic label seemed more fluid and open for change: residents reported improving habits and many pointed out that fortune-telling is increasingly obsolete. In other words, they saw the content of being Gypsy change over time. Also, in Russia all respondents claimed to vote during elections, while in Hungary the most common

answer was “why should I?” Political awareness and willingness to participate in national political processes was significantly lower among Hungarian respondents than in Russia.

More precisely, to the survey question regarding how their life changed since regime change, all Russian Roma respondents said it changed for the better. Many hoped for more improvement, but overall the most frequent responses were that there has been better education and higher attendance in schools, more stable life, “better jobs” (i.e., respondents gave examples such as “we don’t beg any more”; “no more or rare fortune-telling”; “we strive to have jobs”), and change in lifestyle. To the question of how the situation will change in the future, there were either general answers of hope for the better, or optimism stemming from an increased education level and job opportunities. In addition, through conversations with Russian Roma, many expressed their confidence about receiving attention from local and national politicians.

In Hungary, however, Roma communities were generally more pessimistic and hopeless. Most saw no improvement in life and saw deteriorating conditions since the regime change. To illustrate this, below are the responses from elderly members of the community to the question how the situation changed since 1989: “We did not see such high prices then as now! People are different, too! Everybody is looking after their own private gain; it has been much worse since regime change,” said an 83-year-old Roma widow (interviewed by author, Hungary, April 4, 2013). “Everything changed a lot. People are just looking at how to make some profit; there are scams and lies,” shared a Roma man, who worked as a mechanic and carpenter (interviewed by author, Hungary, April 7, 2013). “Back then it wasn’t a problem that I am a Gypsy . . . back then all Magyars loved us,” complained a 71-year-old Roma woman (interviewed by author, Hungary, October 16, 2013).

Russian Roma were also less pessimistic about politics, and in one community, a local Roma baron explained at length his attempts at collaborating with the local administration to improve the conditions of the tabor. He was optimistic his hard work would yield results. In Hungary, a prominent Roma intellectual complained in the name of his “entire community” (Hungarian Roma, presumably) that there is no trust in institutions and politicians. He explained that a political identity among Gypsies did not develop even as a result of national symbols and institutional representation, referring to the pro-Roma movement’s achievements, and “there is still the same ignorance and recklessness without a functioning class of [Roma] intellectuals” (field notes by author, Hungary, November 2, 2013).

My observations in Hungarian settlements revealed an overall angst about politics, which manifested in skepticism about political leaders in general. Many Roma residents complained:

it doesn't matter if we are represented by Gypsies or non-Gypsies, or the so-called Roma, they're all the same, searching for their own benefit . . . look, if I steal a chicken, I'm a criminal and get 5 years [in jail], but if you [pointing at me, the only non-Roma in the room] misappropriate 5 million forints, you'd get at most suspended. (Roma woman, interviewed by author, Hungary, September 7, 2013)

The message is clear: one must not trust bureaucrats and politicians; their ethnicity and political messages are irrelevant, as they all have selfish material goals.

The question of belonging extended beyond that of national space: did certain groups of Roma feel as if they belonged to the broad Roma or Gypsy group? A 38-year-old Romungro woman from a mixed settlement lamented: "The truth is that I love Hungarians way more than Gypsies." A 71-year-old Roma woman stated: "I don't want to wait for more rights . . . but even if the situation changes, those Vlach Gypsies are so power-hungry, they want riches, they want millions." She then whispered in my ear privately, she'd rather be called Hungarian than Gypsy.

I noticed frequent comments from Hungarian Roma referring to the counterproductive rivalry about who is a "real" Roma/Gypsy and who is not, already mentioned in the previous chapter. The essentialized view of Roma/Gypsy erroneously presumes a single culture, and intra-ethnic conflicts seemed to have stemmed from a competition as to whose culture it was. In turn, this counter-productive quest for a single definition of "true" Roma culture and identity also averted the formation of communal ties, sense of solidarity, and social networks.

Education, or its lack thereof, was clearly a decisive factor in the sense of belonging. For the bad Gypsies in the Hungarian settlement, education meant "whitening out." The manager of the local Hungarian charity explained: "A uniqueness about the Roma here is that they assimilate once they become more educated, they turn 'whiter' [*kifehérednek*]." The manager smiled, acknowledging how ludicrous this explanation might have sounded. In fact, a very small segment of Roma continues to identify with their ethnic kin after schooling, the manager complained, because their "identity of misery" [*nyo-*

*morult identitástudat*] precludes the existence of an educated class. The tension, perhaps even contradiction, between being a Gypsy and being educated was also revealed in conversation I witnessed between a Roma woman and man in a settlement in Hungary: “you have rather dark skin, you are visibly Gypsy, but your education overshadows your skin color.” One concludes, based on these observations, that dark skin color and education are seen as contradicting one another.

When Roma children in the schools I observed wanted to feel as if they belonged to the non-Roma society, sometimes they were left with denying their Gypsy identity: they tended to be good students, they were not bad, and since badness was synonymous with Gypsiness, they did not want to be Gypsies. These children usually did not like to identify with other Roma children in the classroom, and visibly distanced themselves from everything associated with their Roma peers. Parents were well aware. A 41-year-old mother lamented that her children pretend to be Magyars, “They know that they are Gypsies, but they grow up denying this and I allow them to do this . . . Sometimes one can’t tell I’m a Gypsy also, my skin is rather light,” maintained the mother. She was explicitly clear about her children’s ability to “disguise” their Gypsiness because of their light skin color, something that others with darker skin cannot do.

In a similar vein, I witnessed a conversation between a mother and daughter at a Roma settlement in Hungary. The mother, Edit is a Romungro social worker who was born and raised in the settlement, married a Vlach Roma man, and moved out of the settlement to raise her two children. Her daughter, Viki, is 10 years old and openly rejects being a Gypsy:

*Viki:* I hate Gypsies. I’m a *paraszt*.<sup>1</sup> The *paraszt* also hate Gypsies . . . . In the school, my classmates don’t consider me a Gypsy either, they told me that. Our teachers are racists in school, they won’t accept me as a Magyar and they look at me like I’m a Gypsy.

*Me:* What makes them racist?

*Edit (mother):* [Quickly answers instead of her daughter] No, they hate Gypsies!

*Viki:* Yes, they say things like “you won’t become anything anyways” and that Gypsies steal, are criminals, they are like this and like that . . .

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<sup>1</sup> *Paraszt* in Hungarian means peasant. Roma often call non-Roma Hungarians “peasants,” which is often used as a derogatory term, but most likely has historical roots and this label has carried on until today (Pusko 2005, 119).

*Edit (mother)*: I don't consider myself Gypsy either . . . terrible to even think about being a Gypsy . . . I work with Gypsies as a social worker, it's enough for me. When I go to the doctor to arrange medication for my patients, they never call them by name, like they call Hungarians, but instead say "Gypsy woman," while other patients are Erika, Zsuzsa, or you name it . . . we are all just Gypsies. But I don't like my daughter's attitude because if she hates Gypsies now, she will hate them later. But my children can't be fully Hungarians, it is physically impossible. Their father is Vlach and I'm [Romungro] Gypsy.

This conversation was packed with emotions, the struggles and consequences of belonging to certain ethnic categories defined their lives. "You can't have any goals in life, if you are a Gypsy. You don't gain anything from being a Gypsy," Edit complained.

Physical features, especially skin color, were clearly the most visible marker of being Roma. A casual conversation I had at the settlement with the father of one of the Roma students culminated in the question of how to achieve equality. After a long pause, the young Roma man responded: "How would it be possible to achieve equality in Hungary? Well, people should go to tanning booths so everyone is equally dark!" (Field notes by author, Hungary, May 25, 2013). During fieldwork, I learnt to appreciate sarcasm and decipher its meaning, which I found very informative. Indeed, the man experienced in his life that regardless of his achievements, he was treated as a Gypsy by others. He was dark-skinned. Then others need to change, he concluded, if not their behavior, then their appearance.

Belonging to certain ethnic categories was more fluid for those who could disguise themselves as non-Roma or had lighter skin. At times, Viki even joked that she might "pass as a tan Hungarian." Skin color, rather than education or social status, was seen by many as a possibility to shed the bad Gypsy image. In several Hungarian settlements when I inquired about ethnicity, skin color was immediately brought up: "I am so black, I could never deny I'm a Gypsy." During a conversation with Edit, I learnt of an exception: a dark-skinned Roma who "made it" against all odds. "From thousands of people there are few who are like Zoli, who is visibly a Gypsy, grew up in the settlement and yet became a respected member of the community; he even was involved with the local Gypsy Self-Government." Not only visibly a Gypsy, but his name is revealing as well, Edit maintained, so normally when someone introduces himself with that name during a job call, "they hang up the phone on him or if he is lucky, send him to pick tomatoes."

“Gypsies have to study so that it is not their names that matter, but their professions,” Edit suggested after thinking for some time, referring to the importance of education in transforming the self-image and future possibilities. However, once the conventional bad Gypsy label no longer applies, it is ambiguous where Gypsies belong. Unique stories from those who “studied their way out of” being bad Gypsies and have experienced first-hand this crisis of belonging are revealing. For instance, a female Hungarian Roma scholar described her struggle:

I finished elementary school and it was absolutely a coincidence that I went to grammar school . . . In grammar school there were no Roma before or after me. I think that was the first time in my life that I really had to face the fact of who I am and where I come from . . . I knew something was not ok, people were watching me in an interesting way and particularly when we had the parents’ meetings . . . [my parents] were functionally illiterate . . . So it was truly a psychological issue for me, and I could not discuss it with my parents or schoolmates . . . I finished the grammar school and of course had no encouragement to apply to university. None of my teachers supported me . . . They thought it is already a big deal [to finish grammar school as a Gypsy] . . . and it was enough . . . they had so many preconceptions [and those are also] entrenched in the Hungarian culture and system . . . I felt shame [about being Gypsy] . . . I wanted to deny my graduation . . . It would be a big shame I thought for all the parents to see my father and all my sisters; my father was “black” . . . of course my sisters found the invitation letter in my [school] bag and it was a huge outcry in our family . . . they just didn’t understand my position, my own identity in a specific context. Also, none of my teachers were really open to discuss this issue . . . (Roma scholar, interviewed by author, Hungary, November 23, 2013)

Another young Hungarian Roma, now a secondary school teacher, also shared her story:

I had issues of belonging [in my own community] during high school . . . I think I sensed I was a bit different, but only when I was in high school did it become more conscious. Back in my community, we gathered together during big family events, and what I saw was that all my peers were married, had children. They’d ask me why I study, point out that

I am old . . . it is the same atmosphere today in my family. I stopped feeling comfortable at home, I felt like an outsider . . . I felt like an outsider here [home] and there [school]. (Roma woman, interviewed by author, Hungary, December 6, 2013)

These stories show the way young Roma defeated negative stereotypes and as a result felt as outsiders in their own communities. They were no longer “typical Gypsies.” One informant shared that through her interactions with her peers, she felt as if she was “from a different planet.” Yet, in their schools, they were treated as the “typical Gypsy,” expecting them to drop out of schools before finishing education.

In summary, the critical question that emerges from this discussion is where educated Gypsies belong. To tackle this complex problem, one Hungarian Roma intellectual believed that “a real Gypsy class of intellectuals is needed, or young people who can think innovatively, who know the history and traditions and in an innovative way can adapt those” (Roma man, interviewed by author, Hungary, November 3, 2012). No one can expect to make “good Hungarian citizens” out of “Gypsies with distorted identities,” he continued, stressing that Hungarian Gypsies must think of themselves as Hungarian citizens. Perhaps the Russian case can also serve here as a lesson: Roma in Russia were aware and proud of their culture, which was not seen as mutually exclusive with Russian culture; rather, Roma was a “nested identity” within the broader civic identity of *Rossiyanе*.

## Kinship and Community

Despair is pervasive in this settlement. Everyone smokes, even pregnant women. They smoke visibly, almost inviting criticism and judgment from visitors, just to tell them off. This is their settlement, they can do what they want, even tell people off here, rather than being told off themselves. Helga<sup>2</sup>, a girl about 9 years old who repeated second grade twice already, runs around and picks up cigarette butts. She asks me on every occasion if I have some cigarettes or money to buy her a pack. (Field notes by author, Hungary, October 5, 2012)

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2 All names are changed.

The short excerpt from my fieldnotes above reflects hopelessness and desperation common in impoverished settlements, where smoking and alcoholism are rampant, and life expectancy is low due to poor health conditions. During fieldwork, it was hard to imagine anyone breaking out from such environments, although there were always stories about a few who did. In the Hungarian settlement, despair coupled with bitter fights among Roma residents, blaming the Vlachs, the Romungro, particular families, or newcomers. I heard nothing but problems: there was no functioning garbage disposal, communal baths ran out of water too often, the local charity gave selected help to “their protégés” as locals saw it, incomes were insufficient to sustain a normal livelihood, health problems, especially diabetes, were prevalent, living situations were miserable, and despair, hopelessness and a sense of feebleness was rampant. “What can we do?” complained the program manager of the local charity, “we give money for rebuilding their houses, they spend it on other things; we install a new door, they burn it to heat the house!”

Visitors were not uncommon in the Hungarian Roma settlement where I spent the majority of my time: academics, NGO leaders, students, and volunteers all came to “learn” and “understand” how Gypsies need to be “elevated” and “integrated.” I assisted two scholars, neither of whom spoke Hungarian, and one visited the country to gain comparative experience for a research project he was involved in at the time. Youth gathered together in the charity’s social space to find out who the strangers were. The foreign researchers wanted to know about the leadership aspirations of local Roma youth and identify desired tools of empowerment, especially for Roma girls and women. They wondered what they, young Roma people, needed, what was missing, what they hoped for. In other words, the question was, again, what they thought would transform bad Gypsies into good Roma? (Field notes by author, Hungary, May 20, 2013). These questions were initially met with sarcasm and cynicism:

*Roma girl 1:* I would want to buy a new house and get rid of everyone else from this slum!

*Roma girl 2:* I would not accept a leadership role because I do not like Gypsies.

*Researchers:* Why do you not like the Gypsies?

*Roma girl 2:* Because they are rude, annoying.

*Roma boy 1:* It is impossible to lead the Gypsies to the right direction.

*Researchers:* Why?

*Roma boy 1:* Because the Gypsies here are stupid and they don't listen to each other.

*Researchers:* If people worked together would there be any changes? What?

*Roma boy 2:* Yes. But we would need some order!

*Researchers:* What is order, what kind of order?

*Roma girl 3:* I don't know. [All sit silent and confused.]

*Researchers:* What are your future plans?

*Roma girl 4:* Nothing! [Thinks for few minutes.] It's not true! I want to have a girl and a boy. I want to have a job. I want to be a waitress. I want to stay in the slum, this is where I grew up. I want to see some change in the slum, however, and the change should come from Gypsies themselves creating order.

*Roma boy 3:* I want to work. I want to be a carpenter.

*Brigi (Roma girl, seventh grade):* I want to have children, a boy and a girl. I want to be a cook and don't want to stay in the slum. I want to move to London, where my sister lives. She moved there half a year ago and she likes it there.

*Roma girl 5:* I want to have two children, both girls. I want to be a hair-dresser. I would not move from here.

*Matyi (Roma boy, 19 years old):* I want to have a good paying job and family, but not yet. I want to create an environment that is good and positive. For this environment one needs a good job, good house and a wife, then I would start a family.

*Researchers:* Would you allow your wife to be independent and make a living, participate in decision-making process?

*Matyi:* Of course, and I would work as well. I would listen to her if she made good decisions. I don't know if other people [in the settlement] would agree with me on this.

*Researchers:* What do you want to do [employment]?

*Roma girl 6:* That does not even matter, any job.

*Laci<sup>3</sup> (seventh-grade Roma boy, recipient of one of the scholarships for young Roma):* I want to go to a university and be an architect.

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3 All names were changed.

*Matyi (Roma boy, 19 years old):* Because of the economic crisis in Hungary even Hungarians [non-Roma] have hard time finding a job.

*Researchers:* What is the role of women in the community?

*Roma girl 7:* Being sluts!

*Roma boy 4:* Women with or without children? There is a difference. Women without children have to go to school and help out at home. Roma women with children have to raise those children. They should stay home at least while those children are small.

*Roma girl 8:* Women should not work, that's what the men are here for! Women should cook and clean.

*Roma boy 4:* After 3 children women qualify for subsidies so they should not work.

There are several lessons that emerge from this conversation, and three protagonists to consider. Disorder in the community was rife and damaging, but many wanted to see change. Brigi, whose sister lived in London, was the most pessimistic: with a potential way out of her Roma settlement, she no longer identified with her community. I noticed that she tended to make friends with the non-Roma in school, did not do homework as a team with her Roma peers during tutoring at the charity, and had a rather negative attitude towards her Roma friends at the settlement. Laci was a young man with six siblings, and his father was a former alcoholic who misused resources given by the charity and never built appropriate housing for his family. His oldest sibling, upon assuming employment moved out of the settlement, and this reportedly gave hope to the father, who with renewed efforts started caring for the rest of his family, including Laci.

Matyi was a charismatic and sophisticated young man who exhibited much maturity based on above responses and based on my interactions with him. Both Matyi and Laci emerged as local “stars”: Matyi was the most active member of the soccer team, exhibited his drawings during a small charity-organized exhibition, and showed his singing skills during a talent show at the charity, while Laci developed his music skills playing cello at the charity and performed at a small event in Budapest. Laci also received a scholarship to study in a high school after his elementary education, which made his entire family and community proud and sad simultaneously. Immensely delighted for their son, the family feared of losing him “to education.”

All three protagonists had very different connections to their community. Laci, given the scholarship, was leaving to study in another town, with high

ambitions to continue on to university and study architecture. His family was supportive and happy, while concerned to lose their son. Brigi saw one sole goal in front of her: to leave the settlement and join her sister abroad. She was interested in education but saw it as means to that end—to leave her life behind, which for her was defined by her Gypsy identity. Matyi was not engaged in any formal education but spends much time at the charity and felt deeply invested in his community. On paper, as he likes to say, he is “completely ignorant,” yet in real life he has more experience than “those researchers who come to study us.” He volunteered his time and works to build communal places and maintained close ties with members of the community in order to identify immediate needs and contribute to their solution.

In Hungary, while adults were divided by intra-ethnic divisions and dissatisfied about selected help provided by the charity, the youth often found refuge and positive reinforcement in non-formal social and educational spaces, especially geared towards uncovering and developing talents. Young Roma tended to see these spaces as a chance for Roma and non-Roma interaction and forming friendships during the various sports, talent shows, educational and cultural events offered. The visiting foreign researchers inquired about the importance of the charity space as well, which animated everyone:

*Researchers:* Why is this charity important? And what else would you want?

*Reini:* We can come here to study.

*Jani:* To do homework here, to get smarter.

*Kati:* I like to fool around here.

*Matyi:* They engage the very little kids here, they also have an Addiction Community Care Center, they help with paperwork and documents, have computer rooms, and organize various programs . . . people would otherwise hang around in the streets.

*Tomii:* We also love soccer.

*Gizi:* We want more computers.

*Niki:* I want other people, for example non-Roma to come here from Budapest.

*Gusztii:* I would also like non-Roma to come here but they do not need to come from Budapest.

*Esztii:* I want to see something for the girls. Soccer team is only for the boys. I would like some dance classes for example.

*Matyi:* Renovate all houses, if money was not an issue. If the houses were not so ran down and there was running water, people would really appreciate it.

By comparison, in the relatively homogeneous Russian Roma community, there were much fewer opportunities to develop talents and participate in extracurricular learning activities, but the sense of community was strong.<sup>4</sup> As I have demonstrated above, while there were similarities in self-perception among Hungarian and Russian Roma groups I studied, there were also critical differences: among the Russian Roma there was a stronger sense of belonging in Russian society, a dynamic view of their culture, and optimism towards the future. While many adults reported improving conditions in the Russian settlement, their peers in Hungary were pessimistic. Through my interactions with Russian Roma children in the school, “breaking out” did not mean leaving the community behind, but simply becoming more educated and more productive. There were better off members in the settlement, such as the Baron-in-skirt and her extended family, but poverty was still debilitating. In the Hungarian case, those who could afford to moved away from the settlement.

Stronger kinship ties in Russia were visible among the youth as well. During fieldwork, I asked children about their future plans, and they often answered collectively, as if speaking for their entire community, and all had plans to stay on the settlement. “We will work in the ‘Gypsy factory’ when we are done with school,” said one girl. “We want to work there because wages are good and we can stay with our family,” continued another student. Similarly, I interpreted children’s collective response to school discipline or resisting teachers’ authority as a manifestation of kinship ties as well. In the “Gypsy school,” many classes proceeded chaotically: sometimes students only got one book for each desk (for two students), at times several grades and age groups were combined and three students were crammed at each desk. Teachers often lost control, took breaks during class time, and did not return for over ten minutes; when they returned, shouting continued. One could easily hear the usual “Shut your mouth, sit down, face me, and quit it,” even from behind the walls. Students responded collectively. They also talked in Romani language among themselves, and when they switched to Russian, they asked questions just to provoke annoyance (“Do we all have to shut our mouths?” “What class is it even now?”). Often teaching could not begin even 20 minutes after class started. Collective rule breaking resulted in collective disciplining as well:

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4 My observations are more limited in Russia due to the shorter span of fieldwork. In addition, the Russian Roma community was less accessible for me.

[During Lineyka<sup>5</sup>]

*Principal:* And now tell us about your behavior. Misha<sup>6</sup>, you can start. How did you behave this week? Were you chastised by teachers?

*Misha:* Yes, I was.

*Principal:* Rita?

*Rita:* Yes.

*Principal:* Albert?

*Albert:* Yes [the class laughs and it angers the teachers present].

*Teacher:* What's so funny about what Albert said?

*Principal:* Liliya?

*Liliya:* Yes.

*Principal:* Dasha? Kolya? Sasha? Was Sasha not chastised for anything? Boris? Misha?

*Children:* Yes! [all laughing again]

*Teacher:* Oh, so funny! [Sarcastic and furious]

*Principal:* Ok, my dear class, I gave you a week to improve . . . What should we do next?

[Children speak in Romani and continue laughing and misbehaving.]

*Teacher:* A., we did not hire clowns for here [yelling]! . . .

*Teacher:* There are two teachers and in the [Gypsy] school and we can't deal with you! Also, Mrs. Principal, we have a problem with chewing gum. I don't know what to do, each teacher must begin the class by ordering them to go to the garbage and spit it out . . . and after all that, they manage to blow balloons with the gum. [Children laugh.] It's not funny! Rita, why are you laughing? It's insane, there are 17 people in the class, each with a gum . . . I've exhausted all the names I can call them!

Teachers routinely expressed their lack of authority and inability to act. They seemed disempowered by collective defiance of orders.

I have not observed such unified response to school discipline and collective responses among Hungarian communities I visited.<sup>7</sup> Stronger communal ties and solidarity no doubt in part resulted from treating Gypsy culture

5 Lineyka is a weekly disciplining "show" when students line up and their school behavior is publicly evaluated, usually by the principal or director of the school.

6 All names are changed.

7 In the more homogeneous Boyash villages in Southern Hungary, where most children spoke Boyash in school and at home, children were more unified in their responses and community seemed stronger, but divisions still existed based on village affiliation or subdivision within the Boyash group.

as valuable. For instance, children were particularly eager to teach me words in Romani and share their culture, unlike the Roma children in the diverse Hungarian settlement. Below are observations from Folk and National Art class on a day when Maslenitsa was the topic:<sup>8</sup>

[Discussion about Maslenitsa in a classroom located in the Russian school, when children interrupt and start speaking in Romanes among each other.]

*Teacher:* Can you please speak in Russian? And only speak when you are asked to? Also, don't show your lack of culture and lack of manners in front of outsiders.<sup>9</sup>

[The class listens to three Russian songs about Maslenitsa.]

*Teacher:* This was a fun last song about Maslenitsa, next class we will listen to more songs.

*Students:* Can you sing *that* song again?

*Teacher:* Which song? "Oh Nane Tsokhe" again?<sup>10</sup>

*Students:* YES! [yelling collectively] Please!

*Teacher:* Get your belongings together at once [it's the end of class]!

*Students:* Oh please! [They beg together.]

*Teacher:* It's a class about Folk and National Art and I have to sing in Gypsy language?

*Students:* Oh please, please!

*Teacher:* Calm down, get your belongings!

*Students:* Oh please, please!

*Teacher:* OK, I will sing it . . .

*Students:* Please do!

*Teacher:* But then you have to listen and sit back to your places.

[Teacher sings, the class is very animated, and teacher stops after two stanzas, half of the song.]

*Teacher:* And so on, and so forth!

*Students:* [very animated] BRAVO! [Applaud]

*Teacher:* [end of class] Don't forget to leave your "*bakhily*" here!<sup>11</sup>

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8 Maslenitsa is a folk holiday celebrated the last week before Great Lent.

9 The "outsider" clearly referred to my presence in the room; the Russian word *beskulturniye* verbatim means "without culture," but depending on context may mean lacking manners, culture, or ignorance.

10 The song "Nane Tsokhe" (2006) is a famous song from one of the most known films about Roma from Soviet times, *Gypsies Are Found Near Heaven*. The film was arguably the most attended in the USSR after its release in 1976.

11 *Bakhily* are plastic shoe-overs, usually used in the winter in public places (museums, hospitals, clinics, etc.) to keep the floor clean. Roma children wear these in the Russian school because they don't have changing shoes.

The music teacher knew a song that was dear to the students, a song that she could sing in Romani. During the song, students were well-behaved and kept looking at me, glancing for approval, admiration, and appreciation of their culture, their language, and their music. The children were proud. That moment, the sense of being Gypsy was positive and gratified—a sense I rarely got in Hungarian schools.



# Concluding Remarks



## Chapter 10

# Summary and Best Practices

This book has covered much ground to unpack the historical and contemporary ethnic labeling practices and Roma identity formation in Hungary and Russia. After the initial historical examination of state legacies and state institutions, I turned to contemporary non-state actors and bottom-up identity formation in the second part of the book. Each chapter looked at how ethnic labels charged with normative content—“bad Gypsies” and “good Roma”—developed over time and became mobilized through formal and non-formal educational institutions through time.

I also showed how antigypsyism developed in relation to the state and nation building projects. I identified five distinctive phases: pre-modern, early-modern, early socialism (nativization), state socialism, and neo-modern nation building. The two initial phases laid the foundation of historical development of antigypsyism and the bad Gypsy image by juxtaposing the “common Gypsy” to the useful Gypsy. At this time, anti-Gypsy policies, attitudes, discourse, and state orders were steadily built into the fabric of society and incorporated into the institutional landscape, remaining intact until today. Socialism provided a fruitful context to assess nation building efforts motivated by an ideology. First the USSR’s nativization policies institutionalized Roma culture as part of Soviet society. The Roma way of life was to be corrected and adjusted to the values of communism, while a particular vision of Roma culture was celebrated. Socialism after Lenin’s death, and especially post-World War Two, treated them differently, assuming that the very existence of Roma signified backwardness and thus their identities were denied.

In the modern phase of nation building we see a return to nationalist tendencies, and patriotic education in schools increasingly excludes Roma. Contemporary analysis of the bad Gypsy image and its reproduction through formal and non-formal educational practices raised a question: if Roma children are taught during their education what it means to be a bad Gypsy, can

we expect them to act good? As a response to the deeply rooted negative stereotypes that were internalized by the majority and minority society alike, various initiatives emerged that are concerned with Roma empowerment. These projects are often supported and sustained by non-state actors and promote a positive image of Roma.

My research suggested that education surfaced as the bulwark in Hungary: if lacking education is part of the Gypsy identity, how does identity change after successfully acquiring education? In addition to the astoundingly destructive and tainting nature of stereotypes, in Hungary the homogenous view of Roma people and culture contributes to numerous intra-ethnic conflicts. In Russia, however, education was not seen in such cautionary terms, likely due to their close community ties and rootedness in Russian society.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the essentialized bad Gypsy image manifests itself in many ways, negative attributes have been internalized and acted upon, and they often exist in the background of all actions, future prospects, and relations that Roma experience in the settlements that I visited. In this book I also reflected on contemporary Roma/Gypsy “belonging crisis,”<sup>2</sup> which stems from the incongruity of policies aimed at Roma empowerment through education along with the new pro-Roma movement and deeply rooted and internalized stereotypes regarding uneducated Gypsies. I presented powerful personal journeys of those children in the settlement who consciously rejected their identity and those who succeeded in overcoming such daunting conditions and became “dangerous educated Gypsies.”<sup>3</sup>

I analyzed the lacking social ties in Roma communities, especially in Hungary, and nascent efforts to foster such bonds.<sup>4</sup> Stronger community and pride in their culture in Russia was for instance noticeable by pupils’ collective resistance to authority in school. In Hungarian communities, intra-ethnic animosity was all too common. Projects that treat the Roma as homogenous, therefore, may be predestined to fail, and efforts at Roma empowerment, let alone mobilization, without communal ties and some sense of solidarity

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1 In addition, in Russia a strong Roma educated class emerged during the 1920s nativization policies, making “educated Gypsies,” especially among Ruska Roma, not so out of the ordinary.

2 The belonging crisis is a topic discussed by several Romologists, some who refer to it as identity crisis. Namely, “crisis of legitimacy [of Romani identity]” is a consequence of exclusion of the educated upper- and middle-class Roma who “no longer live in traditional conditions” (Gheorghie 1997, 157; Ladányi and Széleányi 2006; Koulis 2005).

3 Borrowing the suggestive title of Ian Hancock’s edited book, *Danger! Educated Gypsy* (2010).

4 Social divisions existed on various grounds: intra-ethnic, linguistic, generational, and other. However, intra-ethnic divides seemed the deepest.

may be difficult to achieve. Social spaces, usually offering non-formal education services, where interaction (among sub-groups of Roma or between Roma and non-Roma) did not reinforce objectification of ethnic identities were the most successful efforts to improve living conditions, social status, and create kinship bonds.

Roma in Hungary are fragmented and impoverished. Innovative youth that were tied to and inspired by their own community with a forward-looking vision, therefore, appeared critical in building some sense of solidarity, community, and social networks. These can also be vital building blocks for a strong sense of community, which perhaps will also lead to a heightened political awareness and eventually political mobilization. With these lessons in mind, as an extension of my concluding remarks, the discussion now turns to the role of non-formal educational projects with non-ethnic membership as some of the most critical sites to bring about change in terms of quality of life for the Roma and improve their relationship with each other and the broader society.

### Best Practices

To offset the apparent gloominess that possibly permeated this book, I saved positive practices and examples for the end, encouraging optimism and confidence in finding a solution to end Roma marginalization. During my time spent in the field, I remarked that it usually took small efforts, local initiatives, and creative people to bring about lasting and sustainable change. These positive practices were encouraged and supported by various sources, often non-state organizations, but realized by local communities through mobilizing and activating many members. I give some examples below.

In addition, it was also evident that the more opportunities there were for Roma to socialize with non-Roma in the framework of any activity that did not focus on integration, marginalization, or any other aspect that insinuated the need to “lift up the Gypsies,” it was nearly always successful in inter-cultural learning and understanding. These activities could be planned, or sometimes encounters happened spontaneously, such as at a workplace. A young Hungarian woman shared:

I was raised up by a racist mother, and everything I saw about Gypsies on TV was that they are aggressive and drug-users who don't work. So of course I had my stereotypes. Then I started my first job wrapping food,

and unexpectedly most of my colleagues were Gypsies. They were kind and hard-working people, some of them travelled four hours a day just for work. That was the time when my stereotypes about them simply withered away.

This woman explained that the single story she knew was about the bad Gypsies, a story that was unchallenged until she had her own encounter. Considering that there are few or virtually no opportunities for personal interactions between Roma and non-Roma, negative stereotypes take on a larger role in defining the relationship between the majority and minority groups.

*Positive Practices: Example from Russia*

In an earlier chapter, I already introduced the “Baron-in-skirt,” the progressive thinking promoter of change in the Russian Roma community. Her confidence and determination struck me immediately upon meeting her in her house. She was open to visitors and sincere about her work but cautious, guarded, and protective when talking about the community, especially to an outsider. I only understood the scope of her activism when during an international academic conference, Roma presenters talked fondly about this very woman, who was, to our similarly stunned surprise, a mutual acquaintance. Her dedicated work was acknowledged not only within her community, but among international circles as well.

The “Baron-in-skirt” was the necessary link between many parties involved: NGO and the community, school and the community, local Roma and other Roma in Russia. The NGO treated her as an employee whose authority legitimized their projects in the eyes of local Roma families. She “actively participated in projects,” as one of ADC Memorial’s report states, and assisted with the yearly summer camps for the children, which strove to provide skills and compensate for inadequate education in the segregated school.<sup>5</sup> In return, the NGO supported her initiatives, like teaching Russian at her home, which served the same goal of improving the conditions of local Roma.

The “Baron-in-skirt” was also a bold activist who spoke out against the mistreatment and lack of respect her community faced. “She once gave an interview to a TV station about how bad the school is, criticizing it; the school principal called the Baron . . . he took the principal’s side, chastising this woman

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5 I do not reference the report here to avoid identifying Baron-in-skirt.

for making problems,” said a former employee of ADC Memorial who also volunteered at the community and developed an intimate understanding of the inner functioning and power dynamics of the local Roma community. This is an excellent example of internal debate within the Roma community, in which the Baron sided with the school, and the “Baron-in-skirt” was supported by the NGO. It also indicates the dynamism and change within Roma communities that are initiated from within.

There was another courageous incident that challenged the marginalization of Roma instigated by the “Baron-in-skirt,” as explained to me by the NGO. The “Baron-in-skirt” decided to confront the schools’ stereotypes about Roma and openly challenge their segregationist practices by insisting that one of her younger daughters is placed in a class together with Russian children, becoming the first Roma to do so in the school. Interestingly, accounts differ on both sides remembering what happened, but the “experiment” did not last long. The Roma woman described it as negligence from the teachers’ side and Russian children’s prejudice, while the school principal claimed that the Roma girl could read well, but nevertheless was slow understanding texts and couldn’t keep up with the rest of the class. The girl withdrew from the “Russian school” and returned to the “Gypsy school,” but this instance nevertheless generated a discussion and may have set precedence for future attempts at inclusive education.

### *Positive Practices: Example from Hungary*

Similar to Russia, the best practices and most sustainable change that I observed came from a courageous, innovative, and motivated person: a young Roma man, whom I will refer to as Csaba to protect his privacy. A meek-eyed young man with a few missing phalanges and particularly calm voice, Csaba was always smiling and ready to help all children at the settlement, regardless of their problems and needs. He shared with me his hope to be a “link,” assisting Roma in their integration. He grew up in an orphanage and in this institution, he explained, “Roma and non-Roma were together, we partied together, studied together . . . I was aware that I was Roma, but nevertheless spent much time in diverse company” (Csaba, interviewed by author, November 20, 2012). In the institution, everyone was an orphan first and foremost, ethnic differences were irrelevant. Already as a child, Csaba learned to value sports not only as a pastime, but also as a collaborative experience; Csaba saw teaching sports as an important “field” where such interaction between Roma and non-Roma



**Figure 17**

Visitors to the settlement are immediately taken to the charity to see various awards that are lined up above the “no sunflower seeds” sign (it is a common stereotype to describe Gypsies as eating sunflower seeds and carelessly throwing shells on the ground)

can happen, and where ethnicity becomes irrelevant, replaced by differences in speed, strength, and tactical thinking.

Originally hired by the charity as a tutor, he initiated a small soccer team, which expanded over time. In addition, Csaba took up a role mentoring local children, helping them mediate family problems and school progress, and visited the local school like the “Baron-in-skirt,” serving as a liaison. He was a vital link especially for parents who could not meet with teachers themselves. In addition, Csaba was vocal about his concern regarding the over-dependence of the local Roma community on the charity, repeating the importance of “destroying the wall of the Gypsy slum” and “building bridges between Gypsies with non-Gypsies.” He envisioned this through soccer and other sports. After many years of work, Csaba successfully trained a soccer team who even had a chance to travel internationally to compete. Upon coming to the settlement, the youth immediately show the visitors, with pride and much pleasure, their achievements in sports, displayed at the charity building (Figure 17).

Csaba wanted to see sustainable, effective, and long-term change. “What will happen to the kids when the charity closes its doors in December [for holidays]?” he asked woefully. The social worker became defensive when she heard

this question, as if accused that she was not doing her work appropriately. But Csaba was not discouraged by the opposition he received and continued:

It is important to destroy the “walls” of the slum. We must bring them [local Gypsies] together with non-settlement kids, as soon as possible. I already began recruiting for the Gypsy soccer team in the school, and three non-Roma boys signed up. I hope there will be more joining, I just made a flyer for it.

Csaba already developed a good reputation at the school, so the administration was also willing to cooperate with him on recruiting boys for the soccer team. On numerous occasions Csaba was invited to the school as the representative of the Roma community; he talked to the teachers in the school and reported back to the charity, tutors, and parents so that the problems that the children faced could be tackled collectively. “Teachers complain about Karcsi,<sup>6</sup> that he is violent with his peers, chastises teachers . . . I promised to discipline him more during soccer trainings, he is in love with soccer and I can motivate him to behave better at school like that,” shared Csaba.

From this inspirational person I learned about the importance of sports in divided, marginalized, and impoverished communities: it builds community ties, improves health, it is rewarding, develops discipline, and adds routine to life (field notes by author, Hungary, November 21, 2012). At the community I visited, regular soccer meetings brought together not only Vlach and Romungro youth, but also non-Roma. This was an invaluable meeting venue due to its voluntary nature, and rather than advertising under the label of anti-discrimination or pro-Roma, these projects achieved the same goals through a medium of sports. Children received donations as rewards for their achievements, and did not look at those as granted or simply given to them, they earned them.

### *Empowering Communities and Moving Forward*

The described best practices with visible and sustainable improvements are comparable across both countries: similarly to the “Baron-in-skirt” in Russia, a young Hungarian Roma man was equally dedicated to improving the conditions of the community, initiating lasting change, and building lasting ties between members of Roma and non-Roma groups. Both instances demonstrate how problem-oriented, educational or recreational activities, none of which prescribe ethnic identities, nevertheless promote equality, mutual respect, friendship, and a sense of pride. As a result of these individual and

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<sup>6</sup> All names are changed.

local efforts, the local Roma formed a community with a set of values and the desire to help and strengthen communal bonds. Their ethnic identity did not stand ahead of their other roles as youth, as students, or community members. I suggested that the most meaningful change came from personal initiatives, which are rarely recognized by outside observers, and often remain invisible and undetected.

Moving forward in the most constructive way involves several critical lessons, which clearly emerged from this research as a result of the deep historical analysis and comparison between Russia and Hungary. On the one hand, the current situation of Roma should not be considered in a vacuum, but must be contextualized in the historical, economic, political, societal, and cultural milieu. One contextual aspect worth paying attention to is what kind of societies Roma are integrated into, which I assessed through analyzing the nature of nation building efforts. Exclusionary nations, strictly defined in ethnic terms, are hostile environments for integration or inclusion. In addition, it is also important to recognize that mindsets and attitudes developed over time, and changing those must be a parallel goal of any integration effort. Negative attitudes towards Gypsies have become so ingrained that they became commonplace.

On the other hand, several themes developed as a result of my research that might require further consideration: 1) the role of modernization of Roma traditions, top-down or bottom-up, in identity formation; 2) the importance of unity among the Roma for stronger community bonds and solidarity; 3) the contemporary process of nation building led by non-state actors; 4) the significance of transborder nationhood in modern societies. These issues and questions are still under-researched and should be further studied.

Furthermore, some policy-relevant findings are also worth mentioning. First, for a more sensitive approach, NGOs and other organizations may find it effective to identify and work together with a local community leader who is not picked by the NGO, but rather organically emerges as a charismatic personality. These individuals can serve as the liaison between the organization and the community, enjoying the trust of their peers and capable of communicating the needs and cultural nuances of the community to the organization. Second, any community development projects should be a bottom-up endeavor, involving members of the Roma community. Such projects can build solidarity and cohesiveness, as well as reduce intra-community conflicts, while also providing opportunity for non-formal education and training. Third, it is critical to divert resources towards educating the majority society about tol-

erance and multiculturalism in general, and Roma culture in particular. The entangled view of Roma culture and the culture of poverty has been dreadfully damaging, in addition to negative stereotypes that are often unchallenged. I argued in previous chapters that efforts of pro-Roma NGOs are halted by increasing nationalism and xenophobia in the region, which puts Roma, along with many other minorities, in the crossfire.

A provocative article was published in a Hungarian political and cultural journal where the author gives a personal story of an elderly woman and suggests that racism is a general tendency (Révész 2014). He concludes that disposing of it is a civilizational task and that no one stands above the collective to believe they are rid of this bias. Writing about antigypsyism, the author calls for a paradigm change in how we think about racism. As a consequence, we would learn how to treat problems associated with racism differently, he writes, if the tendency behind it was acknowledged as an objective. In other words, treating racist tendencies not as a sin, but as an issue to be solved. The important message here is that antigypsyism should be regarded as a societal problem with long historical and cultural roots, as a practice of “Othering” that generations have been socialized in and continue to perpetuate. Challenging it is imperative, while also recognizing that antigypsyism is tightly connected with ignorance and lack of interaction between the Roma and non-Roma.

With no intention to reduce the complexity of the issue at hand, I hope for more communication between the two sides, between Roma and non-Roma, in all parts of the world. Honest, voluntary, and open interactions, whether in the form of soccer games, boxing training, collegial relationships, or even simple conversations, all have made a tremendous difference in perceptions. As my own initiative shows, bringing relatives and close friends to meet Roma at settlements made a lasting impact, having personal conversations and contact with local Roma changed their views entirely. “If I saw this man on the street, I’d certainly cross the street to walk on the other side immediately,” said a surprised acquaintance who had a heartening discussion with a Roma man. “And now?” I inquired. “Now I will think twice before I judge,” my acquaintance admitted. This was the most effective way of learning and recognizing, or breaking free from the “imprisonment of our own biases,” as my acquaintance put it on that day.



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## About the Author

JEKATYERINA DUNAJEVA is Assistant Professor at the Department of Political Science, Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest, Hungary.

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