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The Structure of Hungarian Roma Groups in Light of Linguistic Changes

ABSTRACT: Hungarian Gypsies can be divided into three main linguistic groups that are also distinguished by having their own specific life-style: Magyar speaking Romungros, the Magyar- and Romani-speaking Vlach Gypsies, and the Romanian and Magyar-speaking Boyash Gypsies. This paper examines the changes in Hungarian Gypsy population based on the data of special Gypsy census of 1893 and national surveys carried out in 1971 and 1993/94. Between 1893 and 1971, the overall Hungarian Gypsy population increased five-fold, with number of Romungros growing four-fold, the Vlach Gypsies more than nine-fold and the Boyash Gypsies eight-fold. It is suggested that this striking expansion in Gypsy population can only be explained by massive immigration from Romania and, to a lesser degree, Serbia. Attention is also drawn to the continuous shift from the Romani to Magyar language – a trend which was already noted in the last century – but one which does not inevitably lead to a loss of Gypsy identity.

For some time it has been known that “Hungarian Roma are divided from one another according to lifestyle groups” and that “linguistic factors play an important role in the development and separation of these groups.”¹ It is also known that the most significant linguistic groups are the Magyar-speaking Romungro, the Romani- and Magyar-speaking Vlach Roma, and the Romanian- and Magyar-speaking Boyash Roma.²

This study attempts to trace 100 years of linguistic changes beginning with the 1893 “Roma Census”, and following with the 1971 and 1993-94 national representative Roma studies.

The Census of 1893

According to one of the most important documents on the history of Hungarian Roma, on January 31, 1893, 280,000 Roma lived in the country.³ The number of recorded Roma was 274,940 (this is the generally cited number), but Budapest, where there were likely 500 Roma, was left out of the census. Further, “the census found no settled Roma” in several cities.⁴ The publication further states: “those who were unaware of their Roma being were excluded... and given these facts, the total number of Hungarian Roma, giving a rounded number, should be at least 280,000.”

The volume presenting the results of the census gives a breakdown of the Roma population by district. As the Peace Treaty of Trianon drew new borders through many counties and districts, and as the public administration boundaries were adjusted several times since 1893 and the county and district boundaries have been shifted, the number of Roma living at the time within today’s national borders can only be roughly estimated. According to our estimate, in 1893, 65,000 Roma lived within today’s borders.⁵ For the same year, 160 thousand Roma lived in territories which are today part of Romania, with numbers of 40–42 thousand for Slovakian and 8–10 thousand for Yugoslav territories.

Of the 65,000 persons, 23 thousand lived in the Trans-Danube area, 18 thousand between the Danube and the Tisza (excluding Bács-Bodrog county, but including the city and district of Baja and Heves county), 10 thousand in contemporary Hungary’s northern regions (including Borsod county, and those parts of Esztergom, Nógrád, Abaúj and Zemplén counties which remain in Hungary) and 14 thousand in the eastern region (including Békés, Hajdú, and Szabolcs counties, and the remaining part of Szatmár county).

The census was commissioned by Károly Hieronymi, the Minister of the Interior, who took office on November 19, 1892, and within two weeks ordered the Statistical Office to conduct the census. The introduction to the publication indicates that the Minister’s goal was “to nationally handle the issue of vagrancy and thus to settle vagrant Roma”, but the census was not limited to wandering Roma. It also covered those who “had completely assimilated into the civic and bourgeois society, and cannot be distinguished from the population by lifestyle, means of earning a living, culture,

or habits, but at most by some anthropological nuances.” The census also explored living conditions, the state of the family, religious distribution, literacy, employment, means of earning a living, and last but not least, mother-tongue groups and knowledge of languages.

The scientific analyses of the collected data and the preparation of the general report were directed by the president of the Statistical Office, Antal Hermann, who was “an ethnologist known for his Roma studies.”

The results were surprising at many points. Antal Hermann foremost thought the large number of Roma was surprising. He referred to the 1873 “Roma census”, which was commissioned by the Minister of the Interior, which gave a “rather unfounded” number of 214 thousand Roma, but he could have cited earlier data as well. The census of 1850 found 140 thousand Roma in the “legal population”. The census of 1857 found 143 thousand Roma among the “native population”.⁶

In fifty-three years the number of Roma doubled, while their proportion, as part of the total population, went from 1.16 to 1.8%. However, in this time, the natural rate of growth of the Roma could not have been significantly higher than that of the rest of the population. This is supported by the fact that the proportion of children under the age of 14 among the Roma was 37%, while for the entire population it was 36.6% in 1890.⁷

In this period, the country’s population grew by 30%, while the Roma population grew by 100%. The difference can be attributed to immigration, foremost from Romania, where the proportion of Roma was the highest. The effect of immigration can be seen by the fact that the proportion of the Roma population in the Trans-Danube and inter-Danube-Tisza regions was 0.8%, while it was almost 5% for Transylvania. For contemporary eastern counties within Hungary, the rate was 1% in Békés, 1.5% in Hajdú, 1.8% in Bihar, and 2.6% in Szabolcs. (Migration toward the northwest is shown by rates of 2.4% in Abaúj county, and 1.9% in Borsod and Zemplén counties.)

The fact and direction of further migration from Transylvania is shown by the following: according to the 1850 census, of 140,092 Roma, 78,906 (i.e., 53%) lived in Transylvania, while the number for 1893 was 105 thousand (i.e., 37.5%) of a total population of 280 thousand.

The Roma migrated from Romanian principalities to Transylvania, and from Transylvania into the Kingdom of Hungary, beginning in the 15th century. The rate of migration increased in the second half of the 18th and first half

of the 19th centuries.⁸ The rate of migration in the second half of the 19th century was considerably higher than the earlier rates.

According to József Vekerdi, the immigration of Romungro was much earlier, and followed a different path. “The so-called Magyar Roma (Romungro) came into Hungary centuries ago through Serbia (or Bulgaria), without traveling through Romanian language territories. They settled long ago, and their vast majority has forgotten Romani: they speak only Magyar.”⁹ The Romani-speaking Vlach Roma “mostly came into our country in the last one-hundred years.”¹⁰

Zsolt Csalog also thought that the Roma who had immigrated through the Balkans in the Middle Ages and stayed here had lost their Romani language and that their “descendants are the unilingual, Magyar-speaking, so-called Magyar Roma.”¹¹ He also postulates that the bilingual (Romani- and Magyar-speaking) Vlach Roma are the descendants of later immigrants. “In the case of a third group, linguistic assimilation occurred in a Romanian language territory, and the members of the group arrived in Hungary in the 18–20th centuries as native Romanian speakers, or as bilingual (Romanian- and Magyar-speaking) so-called Romanian Roma.”

Vekerdi and Csalog’s position, that the Magyar-speaking Roma are likely descendants of earlier immigrants, is likely true. It is less likely that the earlier migration was in the Middle Ages, or that ancestors arrived without traveling through Romanian language areas. The ancestors of Transylvanian Romungro, for example, certainly arrived from Romanian language territories, and a part of the Magyarized descendants of those arriving from Romanian principalities moved on to other areas of the country.

One-third of the Roma recorded on January 31, 1893, were fresh immigrants or the children of such, who arrived in the country after 1850. A further 50,000 were descendants of those who had immigrated after 1809.

Accordingly, 38 percent spoke Magyar as their native language, while 30% spoke Romani, and 24% spoke Romanian. The rest spoke Slovakian, Serbian, German, Ruthenian, Croatian or other mother tongues. Given regions of the country differed greatly in this respect.

In the region between the Danube and Tisza, 82% spoke Magyar as their native language, while 8% each spoke Romani and Serb. In the Trans-Danube area the proportion of those who spoke Magyar as their native tongue was 72%, with Romani at 11%, Romanian at 8%, and

German at 6%. Of contemporary Hungary's eastern counties, the proportion of Magyar speakers was 89% for Békés, 94% for Hajdú, 98% for Szabolcs, 70% for Szatmár, and 45% for Bihar. Romani native speakers numbered 12% in Bihar, and 17% in Szatmár, while Boyash were 29% in Bihar, and 13% in Szatmár. In the northern counties, the proportion of Romungro was 76% in Nógrád, 88% in Borsod, 75% in Abaúj, and 47% in Zemplén, while the proportion of Vlach was 16% in Nógrád, 12% in Abaúj, and 29% in Zemplén. Slovak native-speaking Roma are found in these counties: their proportion in Nógrád is 8%, 11% in Abaúj, and 22% in Zemplén. In Borsod, 10% of Roma were native speakers of Ruthenian.

Taking the contemporary territory of Hungary as a whole, in January of 1893 the proportion of Magyar native-speaking Roma was 79.5%, with a proportion of 10% for Romani-speakers, 4.5% for Romanian speakers, and a further 6% composed of speakers of Serbian, Slovakian, German, Ruthenian, Croatian, etc. There is a marked difference between the numbers for the country as a whole and for the contemporary national area. But the difference is even greater when we compare the 1893 Roma population of today's territory with that of Transylvania, where the proportion of Romani native-speakers was 42%, and that of Romanian native-speakers was 39%. In the Tisza-Maros wedge, the proportion of native Magyar-speaking Roma was only 5%.

The above leads us to believe that of the Roma living within today's borders in 1893, the most were descendants of earlier immigrants: their ancestors came not after 1850, and not even in the 19th century, but before. However, regarding non-Magyar speakers, we may think of more recent immigration: for example, in Baranya county, where Boyash and Vlach arrived from south-Slav areas, and where the proportion of Romungro was only 53%, or Bács-Bodrog county, where Vlach (22.5%), Serbian-Roma (38.5%), and Boyash (4%) arrived from the south, and where the proportion of Romungro was only 34%.

The 1971 National Survey

The native-language distribution of Hungarian Roma had changed by the time of the 1971 national survey. At this time 71.0% of Roma spoke

Magyar, 21.2% spoke Romani, 7.6% spoke Romanian, and 0.2% spoke other languages. The number of Roma was 320 thousand, of which 224 thousand were Magyar-, 61 thousand were Romani-, and 25 thousand were Romanian speakers. In the given territory, over 78 years, the total number of Roma rose almost five-fold, and within this that of Romungro grew four-fold, that of Vlach grew nine-fold, and that of Boyash grew eight-fold. Eight- or nine-fold increases – or even four- or five-fold increases – can be explained only by immigration. Immigration into Baranya and Somogy counties has been analyzed by Gábor Havas.¹² He is likely correct in stating that a part of the Teknővájó Roma were resettled by estate owners from their southern estates. Most of them moved to Hungary before 1914, but the immigration continued between the wars and immediately after World War II. Havas also shows that after resettlement there followed a scattering northward.

Katalin Kovalcsik distinguishes three ethnic sub-groups of Hungarian Boyash.¹³ The Muncsan of the southern part of Baranya county are related to the Croats living south of the border. Argyelan speak a Bánát dialect. Ticsan arrived from the Nagyvárad area from 1910-20, and after living in Szabolcs and Szatmár, they moved to the Tiszafüred area. László Pomogyi refers to archive materials in Somogy and Zala counties, which indicate that the Roma arrived from Croatia-Slavonia at the beginning of the century.¹⁴

It is worth noting that the Roma classified as native speakers of Slovak, Ruthenian, Serbian, and Croatian all disappeared without a trace by 1971, or changed their native language. The four-fold increase of Romungro cannot be explained without taking into consideration language change or language assimilation, or the settlement of Romungro.

After immigrating, in 1971 the majority of Boyash Roma lived in the southern Trans-Danube region: they form the majority of Roma in Baranya and Somogy counties. A part of the Vlach Roma crossed the same border at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, and to a lesser extent between the wars: in 1971 they made up one-fifth of the Roma of the southern part of the Trans-Danube area. Part of the Vlach of Bács, Csongrád, and Szolnok arrived from Serbia and the Bánát, who in 1971 made up 19% of the Roma of these three counties.

Vlach Roma emigrated from Transylvania/Romania into Szabolcs, Szatmár, Bihar, Békés, and Hajdú counties. Along with earlier arrivals, they make up 21.6% of this region's Roma residents.

Before 1918 it was natural that Romani-speaking Roma moved to Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén, Nógrád, and Heves counties, and this was a relatively obstacle-free path between the wars as well. László Pomogyi quotes a Ministerial decree from 1927: "Foreign, never-before seen Roma families, which wander from village to village, are appearing in communities bordering on Czechoslovakia. This is a serious drawback in terms of public health and public safety. According to reports the Czechoslovak state is banning vagrant Roma *en masse* from its territories, and hence these Roma cross relatively unguarded parts of the border and scatter from there, foremost across the territories of border communities."¹⁵

The proportion of Vlach Roma was largest in the Budapest region (Pest, Fejér and Komárom counties), at 24.1%. Their number here was around 15,000.

Beyond immigration and moving, between 1893 and 1971 provincial and Roma life underwent changes and restructuring. However, the changes between native-language groups did not decrease, and neither did the distance between them.

One of the big changes was urbanization. At the end of the last century, and in 1971, there were far fewer urban than non-urban Roma. This was particularly true of Boyash.

Distribution of Language-Groups Across Settlement Types (%)

SETTLEMENT TYPE	MAGYAR NATIVE-SPEAKER	ROMANI NATIVE-SPEAKER	ROMANIAN NATIVE-SPEAKER	TOTAL
Budapest	8,3	9,9	—	7,7
Provincial cities	15,5	11,5	6,2	13,9
Villages	76,2	78,6	93,8	78,4
Total	100,0	100,0	100,0	100,0

There was a wide difference between the given native-language groups regarding the proportion of those living in settlements: 65% of

Romungro, 75% of Vlach, and 48% of Boyash lived in settlements. This is part of the explanation (among other factors) for the fact that the average number of dwellers per home among the Vlach was 6.3, while it was 5.5 for Romungro and 4.9 for Boyash. Sixty percent of Vlach, 56% of Romungro, and 40% of Boyash lived in families with three or more children. The number of dependents per 100 earners was 250 for the Vlach, 221 for the Romungro, and 191 for the Boyash. In 1971, of those over the age of 14, 33% of Romungro, 54% of Vlach, and 57% of Boyash were illiterate.

Before World War I the proportion of children not attending school was 60% among the Romungro, 90% among the Vlach, and 100% among the Boyash. Between the wars this proportion decreased to 40% among the Romungro, and 70% for the two other groups. A bigger change took place following World War II. After 1957, the proportion of school-aged children (for whom schooling was compulsory) not attending school was 6% among the Romungro, 10% among the Boyash, and 17% among the Vlach. However, school attendance for Roma children was usually irregular, and lasted only a few years. In 1971 26% of Roma children had completed eight grades, with a breakdown of 30% for Romungro, 21% for Boyash, and 7% for Vlach.

The 1993-94 National Survey

According to the 1993-94 national study, of those who were at least 15 years of age, but no longer studying, 5.5% claimed to be Boyash, 4.4% claimed to speak native-Romani, and 6% referred to another non-Magyar language. Since the 1971 survey, the proportion of Boyash decreased from 7.6% to 5.5%, while the proportion of those speaking native Romani decreased from 21.2% to 4.4%.

Distribution of Roma According to Native Language in 1971 and 1993 (%)

YEARS	MAGYAR	BOYASH	ROMANI	OTHER	TOTAL
1971	71,0	7,6	21,2	0,2	100
1993	89,5	5,5	4,4	0,6	100

In 1971 – and well before – the Boyash and Romani-speaking Roma were bilingual: they spoke their native language and Magyar.

Distribution According to Spoken Language in 1993 (%)

MAGYAR	BOYASH	ROMANI	OTHER
77,0	11,3	11,1	0,6

Bilingualism changed among the Vlach and Boyash in a way which Zita Réger characterizes as having one language become “the in-group, intimate, familial means of communication”, with the other becoming “the formal, official” means of speaking. (“As a rule, this means the language is useful in education, official agencies, the workplace, and while when meeting members of the other language group. Further, the language is used to communicate *within* the group when themes concern education, official agencies, the workplace, etc.”)¹⁶ The movement from being a native speaker of Boyash or Romani to being one of Magyar takes place within this bilingual framework.¹⁷

A contributing factor to language change was no doubt the elimination of the majority of Roma settlements between 1965 and 1985. We have already mentioned that in 1971, 75% of Vlach Roma and 48% of Boyash lived in settlements. By the end of 1993 this proportion fell to 4.9% for the Vlach and 1.1% for the Boyash. It must be mentioned that the number of 48% for the Boyash in 1971 was the result of a long process. At the beginning of the century they lived in forest settlements far away from villages. Their resettlement into villages began between the wars, and rapidly increased after World War II.¹⁸

Moving out of settlements changes language patterns not only by loosening the bonds of community, but perhaps more so by making contact with the Magyar majority a daily event, making the use of Magyar throughout the day rather unavoidable. Language change was also brought on by the fact that by 1971, 84% of Boyash and 75% of Vlach men worked in workplaces where they by necessity spoke Magyar. At the same time a quarter of the women were in a similar situation, and this rose to one half of women by the end of the 1970s.

Welfare officers, doctors, and lawyers could only be spoken to in Magyar, and official matters could only be handled in Magyar. The biggest effect was likely found in the practices of kindergarten and school, where, with one or two exceptions, the teachers could not speak a word of Romani or Romanian. The process of language change is presented by Gabor Fleck

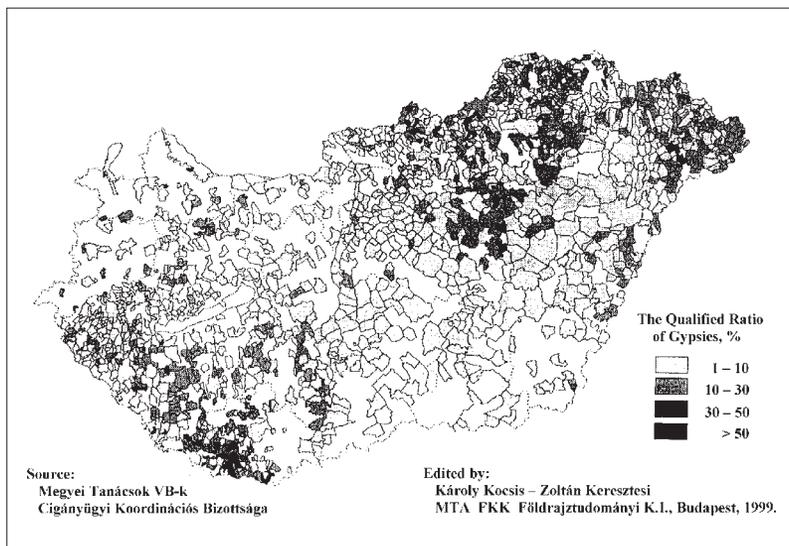
and Tünde Virág in their book (*The Past and Present of a Boyash Community*).¹⁹

Fleck and Virág identify three separate generations: the 40-50 year-old grandparents, the 20-40 year-old parents, and the children. Among the grandparents, “the functional separation of the Magyar and Boyash languages was characteristic. The Boyash language was used in the community and within the family, while Magyar was only used when speaking with peasants and in official institutions, schools, and local government.”²⁰ The parents were not successful at school, given that they did not know, or hardly knew, Magyar. For this reason, some parents only spoke Magyar with their children at home. Today it is characteristic of those between 25 and 35 to use not Boyash, but Magyar with their peers. Boyash is used when speaking with parents and the friends of parents, but the children are spoken to in Magyar. “The children, at the early age of three, are placed within the framework of institutionalized education, and kindergarten education requires the use of the Magyar language. After kindergarten and school the children do not spend the most of their time with the family, but instead are out in the street with their kindergarten and school friends. In these groups Magyar is spoken almost exclusively... the generation growing up now speaks both languages inadequately, and they are characterized by bi-half-lingualism.”²¹

Fleck and Virág, with a good conscience, report that there is an awareness in the Gilvánfa village community that the Boyash language can be used as a means of achieving nationhood and establishing political prestige. This approach is most characteristic of the mayor, whose children and grandchildren do not speak Boyash. Some of the young adults took part in a course which was designed to revive the Boyash tongue. However, in daily interaction, these young people do not use the Boyash language.

The majority of families studied by Fleck and Virág were placed in two categories: the resigners, and the strategy-changers. Among the resigners, the researchers note “a visible consistent, relatively slow, integrational death of the language.” Among the strategy-changers, conscious intra-generational language change is characteristic.

Fleck and Virág’s writing and analysis concerns the Boyash community of Gilvánfalva. The degree of language change in other Boyash and in Vlach communities is different, given that there exist differences in given



Qualified Population of Hungarian Gypsies (1984-1990)

phenomena and in the rate of behavioral occurrences, such that, naturally, unique behavioral patterns and factors will arise. However, similar patterns, causes, and consequences can be seen across the country. Factors encouraging language change remain, and factors which would limit or hold back change are weakening. Language change, then, is likely to continue, but this does not necessarily mean a weakening or loss of ethnic identity. Vlach Roma are likely to keep their identity as Vlach Roma even when they speak Romani poorly, just as Boyash Roma will cling to their identity even having lost the ability to speak Boyash well – this is especially the case if the two Roma groups continue to see one another as strangers, or even look down on one another and on the Romungro.

NOTES

¹ István Kemény, Kálmán Rupp, Zsolt Csalog, Gábor Havas, *Beszámoló a magyarországi cigányok helyzetével foglalkozó 1971-ben végzett kutatásról* (Budapest: 1976), p. 9. (This publication provides a detailed analysis of the differences between Magyar-, Gypsy-, and Romanian-speaking Roma.)

- ² On the linguistic groups, see Kamill Erdős, *A Békés megyei cigányok és cigánydialektusok Magyarországon* (Gyula: 1962).
- ³ Result of the Roma Census conducted on January 31, 1893. *Magyar Statisztikai Közlemények, Új folyam.* IX köt. Bp. 1895.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ⁵ Others have arrived at the same estimate. Árpád Mészáros and János Fóti, "A cigány népesség jellemzői Magyarországon," *Statisztikai Szemle*, 1996/11, pp. 909-10. László Pomogyi estimated a number of approximately 65-66 thousand. László Pomogyi, *Cigánykérdés és cigányügyi igazgatás a polgári Magyarországon* (Budapest: Osiris-Századvég, 1995), p. 11.
- ⁶ *Az 1850. és 1857 évi népszámlálás* (Budapest: KSH, 1993), pp. 61,67.
- ⁷ Endre Kovács and László Katus (eds.), *Magyarország története tíz kötetben. 6. kötet. 1848-1890* (Budapest: 1979), p. 1127.
- ⁸ Migration to Háromszék is reported in Ernő Albert, "A cigányok útja Háromszékre és itteni életük," in Károly Bari (ed.), *Tanulmányok a cigányságról* (Gödöllő: 1998), pp. 81-91.
- ⁹ József Vekerdí, *A cigány népmese* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1974), p. 16.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 17.
- ¹¹ Zsolt Csalog, *A cigánykérdés Magyarországon 1980 előtt* (Budapest, 1979), 2nd vol, 1991, p. 282.
- ¹² Gábor Havas, "A Baranya megyei teknővájó cigányok," in *Cigányvizsgálatok* (Budapest: Művelődéskutató Intézet, 1982), pp. 61-140.
- ¹³ Katalin Kovalcsik, "A beás cigányok népzenei hagyományai," in Gábor Barna (ed.), *Cigány néprajzi tanulmányok. 1.* (Salgotarján: Mikszáth Kiadó, 1993), pp. 231-244.
- ¹⁴ László Pomogyi, *Cigánykérdés és cigányügyi igazgatás a polgári Magyarországon* (Budapest: Századvég-Osiris, 1995), p. 11.
- ¹⁵ Pomogyi, p. 11.
- ¹⁶ Zita Reger, "A cigány nyelv: kutatások és vitapontok," *Műhelymunkák a nyelvészet és társtudományi köréből*, IV szám, 1988. augusztus. MTA Nyelvtudományi Intézet, p. 159.
- ¹⁷ Anna Borbély reports on similar changes in bilingualism and on forced language change. Anna Borbély, "A magyarországi románok nyelvhasználata a változások tükrében," *Regio*, no. 3, 1995. Language change among Slovaks was almost as rapid as it was for Vlach Gypsies between 1971 and 1993.
- ¹⁸ On resettlement into villages, see Pomogyi, pp. 231-249.
- ¹⁹ MTI PTI Ethnoregionális Kutatóközpont, Budapest, 1999.
- ²⁰ Fleck and Virág, *Egy beás közösség múltja és jelene*, p. 69.
- ²¹ Fleck and Virág.