

Vlaxika Rom in Slovakia and the Czech Republic

3.3

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The Vlaxika or Olaši represent the Vlach group within Bohemia and Slovakia. Generally they have preserved a lot of older Romani traditions and until recently have been itinerant. The prototype profession is trading and peddling, in the past also with horses. The sexual roles are clearly defined and strictly separated. The internal rules of the community are regulated by the society as a whole and by a self-governmental body, kris. Family ceremonies are very formalised and solemn, as is speech in unusual situations. The culture is self-reliant, covering all aspects of life down to dressing, singing and naming.



THE VLAXIKA ROM

On the territory of Bohemia and Slovakia there is mainly one group of the *Vlach* type, calling itself *Rom* (pl. *Rom*). The word *Rom* also means ‘man’ (as in ‘male’, not as in ‘human’, which is *manuš*) and occasionally excludes other Romani groups. In order to distinguish the group from others it may be specified as *Vlaxika Rom* ‘Vlach Roma’, a denomination without further meaning to them, *čače Rom* ‘true Roma’ or *amare Rom* ‘our Roma’. Moreover, there are some hundred *Koritara* / *Beyaša* (Romanian-speaking producers of mangers and other wooden items) in the far east of Slovakia and newly

immigrated Romanian *Kalderaš Roma* ‘kettle makers’. The *Vlaxika Rom* are called *Olaši* by the majority and number several thousand. They are clearly culturally delineated from the other groups, collectively labelled by the *Vlaxika* as *Rumungro*. Only the *Cintura* ‘Sinti’ community is not part of this denotation. This group is commonly remembered as the “people from the circus”, without any personal contact to other groups. Contact may have existed before the Sinti became victims of the Nazi genocide.

The majority commonly confuse the *Vlaxika* with other groups. Reports about extremely poor (Slovak) Roma are pseudo-contrasted to rich celebrations, to ostentatious golden jewellery or to

presentations of a “Romani king” or “Romani president” by some *Vlaxika Rom*.

DISTRIBUTION, PROFESSIONS

The *Vlaxika* are closely related to groups referred to as the Western branch of the Northern Vlach, mostly called *Lovara*, originally inhabiting Hungary, Slovakia and the Transylvanian part of today’s Romania. Some generations ago they also moved to Austria, Poland, Bohemia, Germany and overseas – now they can be found all over the world. In Bohemia the name *Lovara* is rarely used and generally considered an old-fashioned expression without a clearly defined

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The kris is a self-governmental and judicial institution, independent from majority law. It recaps the letters of safe conduct issued by medieval emperors to Gypsy groups, whereby they had received internal judgement rights above the group itself. The kris is made up of several, e.g. five, older, reputable men (not women), called krisinako Rom. They meet in the case of severe offences against the rules. Punishment may comprise fines such as (temporary) expulsion from the group, the so-called magerimo or prasto. The nature of the magerimo, being the highest punishment, reveals the advantages of belonging to the community for an individual: It means assistance, advice and general solidarity, support in emergency cases and conspiracy in confrontation with majority rules. Following the example of the majority, the kris system is increasingly misused for enforcing individual interest and power manipulation or simply for enrichment of some members of the kris. Being a rule giving institution, too, this has severe consequences for the society. Subsequently, ways of living like dodging through life without expressing a strong, rigid character is becoming more acceptable (III. 3).

meaning, ranging from ‘a certain clan’ to ‘our people, from a global point of view’. The *Vlaxika Rom* are rarely scattered, but rather concentrate upon several tens of locations in Bohemia and Slovakia, e.g. central Bohemia, selected cities of Moravia and in south-western Slovakia, as well as in several villages of eastern Slovakia (see III.1). The *Vlaxika Rom* maintain tight contact among each other all across Bohemia and south-western Slovakia. Contacts comprise family ties, visits on a regular basis, attending family celebrations, business exchanges and last but not least searching for brides. The network extends alongside family bounds to other countries, too. Especially Hungary is known for a good – not only linguistic – comprehensibility of the local Roma, which is linked to the fact that most *Vlaxika Rom* live there and that the homeland of the *Vlaxika* historically was in Hungary. A number of *Vlaxika* live in several villages in eastern Slovakia. They are separated from the other *Vlaxika*, have their own linguistic and cultural characteristics, mainly due to close relationships, including marriages, with the numerous *Servika Roma*, but nonetheless keep their strong *Vlax* identity.

The *Vlaxika Rom* were itinerant until a single generation ago, even if some of them owned houses in south-western Slovakia (usually used in the winter). They toured especially around western Slovakia and northern Hungary, but

their trips also led them to neighbouring Bohemia and Moravia, Germany and Austria. Few Roma survived the genocide during the Second World War and after its end many Slovak *Vlaxika Rom* took their chances and went to seek labour and business in Bohemia. In 1959, the law on prohibition of itinerancy came into effect. Wherever in Bohemia or Slovakia an itinerant group was staying at the registration date of February 3 to 6 1959, they were forced to settle. Initially they stayed in caravans, without horses and wheels, then they moved into houses offered by the authorities.

The key occupations of the *Vlaxika* is trading and peddling textile, household equipment, antiques, body care products, cars etc., and until recently also horses, which has been iconic to them (see the widely spread appellation *Lovara* from Hungarian *ló* ‘horse’). Part of the older generation additionally grew up begging and thieving comestibles. Due to a lack of formally acknowledged education their businesses are not registered and so a great number of them are officially unemployed. Some possess second-hand car stores and pawnshops. Different sources of earning one’s livelihood are combined. Mainstream education is being taken increasingly seriously, business and law schools are given a particularly high status, together with trained waiters, cooks or hotel managers. In some locations, the *Vlaxika* are giving loans to members of other Romani groups.

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

At a very general level, a *Vlaxiko Rom* belongs to one of the matrilineal groups, who share a certain schematic image like being rich, incompetent, noble, poor etc. *Nipo* ‘relative, relatives or clan’ is a more relevant social distinction, putting together persons who are relatives, sharing common grandparents, not taking into account married links. Members of the *nipo* are the first choice for extending a business, planning a marriage, lending money etc. and they are expected to attend family events. The entity living together in a flat or house is called *čalado* and its composition differs little from European families. It constitutes the primary instance for budget planning and education, even if part of the latter is accomplished by the *nipo* as a whole. A *čalado* is embedded in the network of the *nipo* and can rely on its support and control in many respects.

Male descendants were traditionally preferred for the following reasons: They are capable of maintaining the family profession and are expected to be the basis for future wealth. They strengthen the *zor* ‘power’ of the family and will save it from a bad position in a *marimo* ‘physical resolution of conflicts’.

In a traditional community the woman’s role is trained from early childhood where a girl helps to care for her younger siblings or children of other families. The true value of a female



III.3 (Photo: Stojka & Pivoň, p. 15)

FAMILY EVENTS

III. 2

The urajmo (dressing) is an important instrument of presentation of the family. Whenever going andej Rom 'to the (society of) Roma' expensive materials are chosen, and the women wear gold jewellery and traditionally also several layers of skirts. Esteemed men also have batons and hats. Except for the đaso 'time of mourning', when black is the only acceptable colour, very light colours are preferred, among which red is the first choice, avoiding any black. Children are full members of the family, but of course in general they do not wear attributes of wisdom, wealth and age like heavy jewellery or batons.

becomes obvious when she becomes a *šej*, when she comes of age. From that date, the whole family ensures that she does not find herself in the presence of a strange man. She must mind not to look lasciviously and she must not be the subject of gossip. When she proves to be demure at this age, she will be well prepared for marriage where fidelity has a very high value. Thus she will be highly valuable for the future husband and the family. After the marriage, usually still as a young girl, she moves to her husband's place and continues to be educated in her role by her husband's mother and adopts the style of housekeeping "suitable" to that family. After she has raised several children, at a time when she herself becomes a grandmother, she becomes the centre of the family and enjoys maximum honour from all the members. In songs *dej* 'mother', in appellations *mamo*, is the most frequently adored family member.

The social life of the *Vlaxika* is governed by commonly known rules called *romane sokaša*, *romimo*, or alternatively *romanimo*. They are understood as social rules, good manners, educational principles or common philosophy or opinion. They are not codified but are passed down from one generation to the next via comments on good or bad examples, proverbs (*jekh vorba*, explicit explanations or warnings. Part of passing the rules to the new generation is the *sitarimo* 'teaching', the process of acquiring occupational or housekeeping proficiency from the elders. The *romane sokaša* are felt as inherited

from the ancestors, unchanging across generations and a *conditio sine qua non* of Romani identity. Social control is conducted by the immediate (Romani) surrounding, covered by the warning not to be subject to gossip: *te na phenen e Rom* 'that the Roma won't say a word'. Control is restricted to the internal hierarchy, generally posing man above woman, older above younger, decisions of the *kris* (see III.2) above ordinary opinions.

FAMILY EVENTS

The most important family events like baptisms, marriages or funerals are comprised of two ceremonies with different meanings, one for the families involved and another for the public. They may be separated by several weeks or months, only in the case of a funeral is one the direct continuation of the other. Official ceremonies are very strictly formalised. The formal ceremony is, mainly in the case of baptisms and funerals, held by a consecrate person like a priest in the church of the majority. After this a public celebration takes place. It is a matter of prestige to ensure it is a generous and ostentatious event involving a huge amount of food and drinking *e mesaja te phad'on e tekhanestar* 'so that the tables break under the weight of the food'. The guests are expected to be dressed well, demonstrating their status and wealth. Key steps during the ceremony and celebration

are accompanied by ornate wishes, greetings, speeches and songs, introduced by solemn formulae like *Devlesa rakhav tume Romale! T'aven saste taj barvale!* 'Welcome, fellows! Be healthy and fortunate!' Men and women sit separately. Music is supplied mostly by the *Servika Roma*, who had to learn to interpret *Vlaxika* songs. Celebrations are supposed to last until the morning hours or sometimes for several days. Gatherings of this kind may happen without social impetus, in which case they are called *pa'iv*.

The *kirvimo* institution, as well as the adjoined *kerečigo* ceremony, originates from giving safety to a newborn child. The *kirvo* 'family ally, patron' is supposed to substitute the parents in an emergency case and gives the name to a child. The *kirvimo* 'kirvo-ship' is confirmed during a meeting of both parties, usually before the child's birth. From that moment on they call one another *kirvo*. Both families prepare and carry out the *kerečigo*, the large baptism celebration, where they invite members of the wider family. The *kirvimo* constitutes a narrow alliance between families which may be established also without intermediation of a child being baptised. Even a child may have its *kirvo*, being itself also a child.

Analogously the *kutelejmo* institution precedes the *biav* 'wedding' ceremony. During the *kutelejmo* both parties negotiate the conditions of a future marriage of their son and daughter, especially a bride price, the organisation

of the wedding and the like. From this date both are reserved for one another until the wedding day. Part of the *biav* is the *mangavimo* ceremony, where the bride's family visits the bridegroom's family. After that the celebration begins. An alternative way to yield a bride, beside *kutelejmo*, is to *našavel* 'to abduct' her in an unguarded moment.

The parting of a family member is also carried out in two steps. It starts with the *verastaši* ceremony, lasting three nights after death. The family pays their last respects to their mother, father or other relative, while sleeping during the day. More and more members of the wider family join the grieving community, until the funeral date, when a priest from the majority performs the public *prakomo* 'funeral ceremony'.

The most common celebrations not linked to family events are *krečuno* and *patrađi*. *Krečuno* is the winter holiday, held during the Christmas holidays. It is beginning to be mixed with local *gažo* Christmas traditions like eating fish or giving presents, and a Christmas tree is already standard. The family comes together, enjoys singing and being together and consumes food, mainly poultry (not so much turkey) and baked specialities *rejteška* and *bokoli*. *Patrađi* is celebrated in spring during Easter. The families visit one another and offer meals. Men go around and spray water and perfume on (unmarried) women. Women get up early in the morning to be in time with cooking the *frištiko* 'breakfast' as the first warm food at eight o'clock.

LANGUAGE CULTURE

An important element of the *romimo* is considered the *romani šib taj i vorba*, 'the Romani language and sayings', the way to express oneself. There is no tradition of writing, and the only written code is the language of the *gaže*, even in internal communication. The *Vlaxika Rom* (as well as the *Servika Roma*) consider their dialect as pure, unspoiled by *gažo* loans. The *Vlaxika* are aware of the fact that their language is understood by Roma in different countries, which is confirmed by relatives living abroad. The dialect of the *Servika Roma* is alleged to be understood well, but only unidirectionally, as the *Servika Roma* are said not to understand the *Vlaxika*. Finally the chosen code of communication between both is that of the *gaže*, i.e. Czech or Slovak.

Especially men are educated from early childhood to express themselves in a good manner, *žanel te vorbij*, and indeed six year old boys may introduce themselves ritually when they start to sing a song in the (family) public. Encounters with persons who are not met every day are initiated by a longer welcome dialog, containing wishes for the life and welfare of the other, always in the name of God.

A Romani *anav* 'name' has little in common with European names. Some relate to Jewish-Christian and general European traditions via intermediate languages (*Joško* via Slovak as Joseph, *Ferko* via Slovak as Ferdinand), some show European etymology, e.g. *Citrom* from Latin 'lemon', *Grofo* from Greek 'count'), others are opaque, e.g. *Pinka*,

Mundra, or completely pre-European, e.g. *Patrin*, *Kali* from Romani 'leaf' and 'black (fem.)', respectively. Names consist of a single word. Further identification, if necessary, is made by a link to the father, e.g. *i Kali e Bertseski (šej)* 'Bertsi's (daughter) Kali', or by the living place: *i Pinka anda Požono* 'Pinka from Bratislava'. Nicknames are very popular, at different ages and in varying contexts several may be in use simultaneously. Of course the *gažikano anav* 'European-style name', a first name followed by the family name, is compulsory. They are used in contact with the majority, i.e. with authorities, schools, *gažo* friends. Frequently these are known only to the narrow family.

The *d'ili* (song) is a more condensed level of saying, and the accompanying singing support its emotional message. The *Vlaxika Rom* do not use musical instruments, only hands and tongue to underline the rhythm, although electronic music players are now also used at home. There are no bands in the traditional community, everybody who is supposed to have a good voice or is in a way esteemed, is invited to sing in front of the community, e.g. during a celebration. *Loki d'ili* 'slow song', otherwise called *mulatošo d'ili*, is a slow and sad song, sung in a sad mood or during sad occasions like *verastaši* 'mourning'. On the contrary, *khelimaski d'ili* 'dancing song' is a faster and lively song, used for dancing and expressing a good mood. The traditional songs are still being passed on to the younger generation who learn to like them and sing them at official occasions. The songs express any nuances of the life of the Roma, from tragic to funny, from lyric to relaxed.

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