INTRODUCTION

The history of the migration of Roma into Europe was abruptly brought to a halt for those Roma who arrived in the Romanian territories of the Southern and Eastern Carpathian Mountains. Roma who arrived in Wallachia and Moldavia in the second half of the 14th century were forced into bondage and slavery for five centuries, and their history was marked by a turning point comparable only to the enslavement of the Afro-American population in the United States.

“Gypsies shall be born only slaves; anyone born of a slave mother shall also become a slave ...” stated the code of Wallachia at the beginning of the 19th century. Roma were owned by the Prince (as “slaves of the State” – “tigania domneasca”), monasteries and private individuals. Selling, buying and giving away whole families of slaves was common practice among the owners, who had unlimited rights over their slaves. In fact, slave-owners could do whatever they liked to their slaves, short of killing them.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, an abolitionist movement emerged among intellectuals in the Danubian Principalities, and the figure of the “Gypsy” became a frequent subject in newspaper articles, poetry, literature and plays. Once the emancipation of slaves had been achieved, it raised – and still raises today – the issue of their integration into the social and economic life of Romania.

Traces of slavery persisted in the memories of former masters and their slaves, and the period of slavery has marked relations between the descendants of these two social strata to this day.
The first undisputed evidence of Roma north of the Danube also constitutes the first evidence of slavery. In 1385, Dan I, Vovode of Wallachia, confirmed property given to the Convent of the Virgin Mary, Tismana, including 40 “salashe” (a term derived from Turkish, denoting families or tent communities) of “Atigani” (“Gypsies”).

A donation of 300 “salashe” of “Gypsies” was made to the Tismana monastery in 1388, by Lord Mircea the Old. Further documentary evidence emerges over the following decades. The Romani slaves of the Tismana monastery are mentioned in all documents confirming its possessions, until the 17th century.

A deed of August 2, 1414, issued in Suceava, Moldavia, mentions Alexander the Good, who gives Toader the Dwarf, in return for “his faithful service”, a village on the banks of the Jeravat where it flows into the Bârlad, or more precisely where “Lie” and “Tiganestii” were “cnezi” (local masters). Historians consider this deed as the first indirect documentary evidence of Roma in Moldavia, and a document from July 8, 1428 as the first direct evidence. In the latter, Vovode Alexander the Good endowed the Bistrita monastery with 31 “chelyadi” (a term derived from Slavic languages, equal in meaning to “salash”) of “Gypsies”.

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Some historians believe that the Romanians took over the institution of slavery from their eastern neighbours, the Tartars. The latter commonly turned prisoners of war into slaves, a fate suffered by many Romanians, and vice versa: in 1402, Alexander the Good gave the Moldovita monastery four Tartar families as slaves. However, slavery was known in the region well before the Roma arrived.

Historians believe that, in their migration from Greece and Bulgaria towards Central and Western Europe,
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A local custom required free peasants who had worked on a feudal estate for twelve years to become serfs ("rumani") of the boyar. There is reason to believe that the Roma were treated similarly. Another, equally important aspect is the weakness of the state in the face of the authority of the nobility. The sovereign could not exercise effective authority throughout the country in order to keep his own slaves under his direct influence. The Roma were forced into slavery by local masters.

The existence of Romani slaves in Wallachia and Moldavia underwent the most spectacular reversals with changes in the masters’ financial situation. Selling slaves was the most convenient way of repaying debts or redeeming oneself from Turk or Tartar slavery. Slaves were good for anything, equivalent to any value, sold, given as wedding presents or dowries, gifted to the monastery so that the master’s name was mentioned during mass, and exchanged for animals or cloth trousers; should they fail to submit, “they should be beaten very hard”. [Iills. 2, 10]
In 1646, the first legislative code, entitled “Carte romneasca de invatatura” (the Romanian book of education), set a number of benchmarks with regard to the rights and obligations of Romani slaves in Moldavia. For instance, a bought slave was required to help his master, and a slave who was admitted to being guilty of anything had to undergo “reasonable” punishment administered with the “cane or the whip”, and could object only if the master used “bare” weapons, in which case the slave was in danger of being killed. In fact, slave-owners could do whatever they liked to their slaves, short of killing them.

As regards marriage, the legal instruments provided that two slaves could marry, but only if the master agreed. If two slaves belonging to two different owners wanted to marry, the agreement of both masters was necessary. In most cases, the two masters reached a settle-
“GYPSIES” KNOWN AS “ZAVRAGI”

There were about 300 of these families, who were included in the category of the bear leaders.

“LAIESHI/LAYASHI GYPSIES”

Normally settled on the outskirts of villages, these Roma worked iron and made boilers.

“NETOTSI”

There were about fifty families of “Netotsi” (Romanian for “Hottentots”), who had come from Germany.

Traces of slavery persisted in the memories of former masters and their slaves, and the period of slavery has marked the relations between the descendants of these two social strata to this day.

Among the “Gypsies”, the distinction between “Layashi” and “Vatrashi”, nomadic and settled, has proven to be crucial in many ways. “Vatrashi”, regardless of to whom they belonged, the prince, monasteries or private persons, on the whole suffered from very bad conditions, whereas the life of the nomadic Roma, even compared to some categories of the majority population,
The Beginnings of Emancipation

Emancipation of Roma Owned by the Church. Act of 1847

The End of Slavery

had significant advantages. The “Vatrashi” were seen by their masters mostly as lazy thieves and liars, who did whatever was necessary to avoid their duties. Punishment was administered at the master’s whim. The most common punishment was strokes on the back with a hazel rod. The number of strokes ranged from a few dozen to two or three hundred, administered in several goes. Even the hardiest skins gave out after forty or fifty strokes, and bled profusely.

Romani huts had clay and thatched roofs with chimneys. A dormer window could be seen in the back wall. A “salash” of “Gypsies” was squeezed into each hut, comprising the father, the mother, sometimes the grandfather or grandmother and all the children not wiped out by the very frequent illnesses resulting from the squalor and poverty in which they lived. [Ill. 11]

A “shatra” (slave settlement) in Wallachia, 1862.
(from Hancock 2002, p. 18)

A “claca” (work) for the master placed many Romani slaves in a situation of extreme poverty, which shaped their very difficult economic and social position in the subsequent period. The question that arose for the majority of the sedentary Roma was simple: How can one work half the year for the master and have time to earn enough for one’s family to live on? They were farmers, and the days spent in the master’s service took up all the good weather just to work his field. It is impossible to plough, sow cereal, hoe crops and harvest at the end of the season if one owes the master up to 150 days of work a year. So, one could either work for the master and go hungry, or work one’s own field and run into debt.

Nomadic Roma, “Rudari”, “Urarari”, “Bayashi”, “Ursari”, “Lingurari”, and “Layashi”, which accounted for a considerable part (more than a half in earlier times, roughly one third by 1850) of the Romani population, enjoyed a specific kind of autonomy. They had a leader – “jude” or “juge” – recognised by the authorities in Wallachia and Moldavia, who served justice in his “salash” on the basis of Romani tradition. Their tax obligations in most cases were lighter than those of the rest of the population. They were free to move and, probably most significant, did not have the various other obligations like, for instance, “claca”. Their nomadic way of life, it has to be noted, was seasonal, in that they spent some time of the year – usually winter – in the respective estates of their owners.
The next stage in the emancipation process took place in 1847. Prince Bibesco of Wallachia submitted a bill to the National Assembly for the emancipation of Roma belonging to the Holy Metropolis, bishoprics and monasteries, and it was passed unanimously on February 11, 1847. With 2,088 Romani families, the Cozia monastery had the biggest number of slaves, thanks to the earlier COUNCIL OF EUROPE PROJECT EDUCATION OF ROMA CHILDREN IN EUROPE

**THE BEGINNINGS OF EMANCIPATION**

The idea of emancipation of the slaves slowly arose in Romanian society in the context of an overall development towards the introduction of European elements in socio-political conditions. Among the first steps, an extraordinary National Assembly was called to revise the Organic Regulations (basic acts of legislation) for Wallachia and Moldavia. In 1831 it proposed, that an investigative committee be set up to identify the slaves’ living conditions and then to find ways of improving them by encouraging the slaves to settle appropriately and to take up agriculture. [III. 6]

An amendment recommended that “these Gypsies shall settle and pay all taxes in the same way as all other taxable peasants on an estate; those who do not have a fixed abode (who live in tents) shall not be free to settle on an estate without the owner’s agreement”. It sought to persuade nomads to settle in order to pay lower taxes, like all the peasants. Probably there were very large numbers of nomads at the time, which was to lead to the emergence of a settlement policy; such policies were more hard-line following emancipation. The situation of Roma, which gradually began to be seen as a “dishonour” for the image of the Romanian people, was at the centre of intellectual debate during the middle decades of the 19th century. Things changed, and slavery was abolished for Roma owned by the state under the Act of March 22, 1843; all those who paid taxes to the Vornicia prison authorities (Roma owned by the state) came under the authority of district prefects, a measure that emancipated them from slavery and placed them within the category of Romanians subject to personal taxation. [III. 10]

**EMANCIPATION OF ROMA OWNED BY THE CHURCH. ACT OF 1847**

![Ill. 12](from Arhivele Nationale Istorice Centrale (ANIC), the Romanian National Historic Archives)

A Proclamation of June 11th 1848 reads:

“The Romanian people ceases the inhumane and dishonourable practice of slavery and proclaims the freedom of Gypsies owned by private individuals. Those who have suffered the shame of having slaves are pardoned by the Romanian people, and the motherland will compensate from its treasury anyone who suffers loss as a result of this Christian act.”

Settled Roma were later estimated at 8 and nomads at 4 pieces of gold.

![Ill. 13](from Arhivele Nationale Istorice Centrale (ANIC), the Romanian National Historic Archives)

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er charity of Voivode Alexander the Good. The Prahova district also had 8,870 individual Roma, and was the leader in this respect. In the districts of Wallachia there lived 47,245 Roma, in 11,446 families, who were former slaves to the monasteries. From further statistics, it has been estimated that in the 1850s there lived about 250,000 to 300,000 Roma in the two principalities. Thus, they counted for about 7.5 percent of the total population.

**THE END OF SLAVERY**

The emancipation of the last slaves, those owned by private individuals, took place in Moldavia in 1855 at the instigation of Prince Grigore Ghica. The sovereign sent an “ofis” to the country’s Extraordinary Council, calling for a “new bill” to emancipate Roma owned by private individuals in Moldavia. The abolition of slavery was seen as a reform that derived “from the very laws of humanity and the vital interests of the state”. In accordance with the prince’s idea, the draft contained two basic elements: “The immediate abolition of slavery in Moldavia”, and “Regulations and conditions governing the distribution of appropriate compensation to owners.” November 28 was declared a national holiday. On December 22, 1855, the “Divan” (the national assembly) passed the “Act on the End of Slavery, Regulation of Compensation and the Transformation of Emancipated Slaves into Taxpayers.”

As regards compensation for the masters, “Lingurari” and “Vatrashi” Roma (settled in villages) were estimated at 8 pieces of gold and “Layashi” (nomads) at 4 pieces of gold, irrespective of gender; only invalids and babies were exempt from payment.

The situation of Romani slaves in Wallachia took much the same direction as in Moldavia. On February 8, 1856, the Prince of Stirbei decreed the “Act for the Emancipation of all Gypsies in the Romanian Principality”. It proclaimed the end of slavery and the freeing of all “Gypsies” in this category, who were immediately registered as taxpayers to the state. The sum of 10 pieces of gold was set as compensation for each slave’s former owner. February 8 became a national holiday. [Ill. 14]

After the emancipation, the Roma continued to form a group of taxpayers at the mercy of farmers and local authorities. Some of them migrated to towns, and an equal number left Romania.

**CONCLUSION**

The picture of Romani slavery in Wallachia and Moldavia is not accessible by unidimensional interpretations. If we are to make general observations from a present-day point of view, then probably the most significant issue is the relative position of nomadic and settled Roma. Whereas the settled Roma (“Vatrashi”) lived at the disposal of their owners, enjoyed no personal rights, were often severely punished, and sold as goods, itinerant Roma (“Layashi” and others) often enjoyed a number of freedoms and even privileges which most social strata of the local inhabitants did not have. These differences can be traced to the present day in the differences between groups of Roma in Romania, and, to a certain extent, all over the world.

**Bibliography**