

Roma on Romanian territory From freedom to slavery and again to freedom

According to a document dated back to 1385, Voivod Dan mentioned among the donations made by his uncle, Vladislav, to the Saint Antonie Monastery from Vodița, 40 families of “atigani”. The word “țigan” or “atigan” does not exist in the Romani language. It originates from the Byzantine Greek language and it was used to define a group which was considered “untouchable”, “pagan”, “not pure”. The term “atigan” was used in 1068 by a monk from a Georgian monastery (back then part of the Byzantine empire). The historical documents reveal the fact that the word used for the ancestors of the Roma described a status given by the majority population rather than their identity. Later on, the word “țigan” was kept in the Romanian language still having a pejorative meaning.

When they arrived in the Romanian Principalities, Roma were free people that had left the Balkan Peninsula pushed by successive waves of other Roma migrants coming from Asia Minor. When they left Bulgaria and crossed the Danube to the North, there was a time when they could move freely and they could settle wherever they wanted. Religion played an important role in the enslavement of the Roma – because they were not Christians, they were considered pagans by the majority which enslaved them.

While in Wallachia (Țara Românească) the Roma population was attested for the first time in 1385, it took a few more years for the same to happen in Transilvania (1416) and Moldavia (1428). It has to be noted that back then the Romanian regions were separated and they were forced into submissive state relations with the bigger regional powers.

Unlike the majority of Western countries which, from the very first contact with the “bohemians”, enacted very strict laws to forbid Roma to stay for a long time in the neighbourhood, the Romanian principalities accepted them and enslaved them for almost half a millennium. Although there were several attempts to free the Roma slaves starting with the XVIIIth century, the final act of liberation was released in 1856.

During and after slavery, the members of the different roma communities played a very important economic role due to their handicrafts. Their main traditional occupations were and partly still are:

- Ironmongers (make agricultural tools)
- Smith makers (repair locks, bolts, keys)
- Carriage makers (produce wheels and other parts of carriages and sledges)
- Tinmen (make roofs, rain-pipes, drains)
- Cauldroners (make and repair copper vases for domestic or religious use)
- Goldsmiths
- Woodworkers: spoonmakers, chestmakers, etc.
- Musicians

During communism (1948-1989) the Roma were forced to settle and the authorities tried and partly managed to confiscate their gold. The regime emphasised the role of work in society, therefore every inhabitant of Romania irrespective of their ethnicity had a job. Another purpose of the political regime was to uniform the differences between the ethnic groups in the country. The communists tried to suppress the Roma identity and also did not recognize them as a national minority.

After 1989 when the Iron Curtain fell in Romania, the social and economic gap between the inhabitants of Romania grew and the Roma minority was another victim of a state in transition. Education and decent living standards still remain the two big sectors where the Roma are facing the biggest hardships.

Progress has been made in the last years at state level, but acts of discrimination are still there and a most of the Roma minority is still affected by poverty.

According to the 2011 census 6,5 % of the population declared itself Hungarian and 3,3 % Roma, while the number of declared romanians amounts to 88,9%. The numbers nevertheless do not reflect reality, as the number of Roma inhabitants is estimated at around 2 millions. While the Hungarian minority is concentrated in the center of the country, representing the majory in the counties of Harghita and Covasna, the Roma minority is relatively uniformly spread across the country. The problems faced by the these two groups are also different – the Hungarians face rather political problems while the Roma face mostly social and economic difficulties. What distinguishes them is the fact that the Hungarians are a united community, while in the case of Roma it is realistic to speak about multiple different communities. Fragmentation within the minority itself makes the inclusion of Roma particularly difficult. The is a urgent need for solutions tailored on the needs of particular communities. The first steps have been done, but the road towards real inclusion and eradication of discrimination is long and it represents a maturity test for the Romanian state.

