

Zsolt Csalog

GYPSIES IN THE HUNGARIAN LABOUR MARKET

In the centuries following their appearance in Central Europe, Gypsies came to be integrated into feudal society's division of labour by practicing certain traditional crafts. These crafts found no support in the guild system; they were 'uncodified', and lacked legal regulation and protection. In this respect Gypsy trade much resembled cottage industry, with one significant difference: while craftwork represented a supplementary source of income for peasants, it provided the sole source of income for Gypsies.

For the most part Gypsies manufactured goods and provided services which had always had restricted markets; thus both the production and the sale of their products forced Gypsies to maintain a semi-nomadic lifestyle. This circumstance accounts for the fact that Gypsies took centuries to settle following their migration into the Carpathian basin. Their mobility, for its part - a result of traditions as well as of persecution by the authorities - prevented Gypsies from taking up non-traditional occupations. This explains why the Gypsies, once they had made the transition to a sedentary existence, remained dispersed and failed to establish large, homogeneous settlements. Despite evidence from the eighteenth century of a few larger settled groups, Gypsies have, for the most part, remained in diaspora.

Among other trades, traditional Gypsies might be coppersmiths, tinkers, or ironworkers: craftsmen who produced a limited range of products using archaic technology.

Each tribe had its own occupation and spoke a separate language or dialect of Romany (the original Gypsy tongue). Romanian-speaking Gypsies who became linguistically assimilated in Romania and came to Hungary relatively recently, worked with wood and made baskets. Hungarian-speaking Gypsies, or Romungros who were among the first to come to Hungary centuries ago, produced bricks and did other work with adobe. Romungros were also musicians from the eighteenth century onwards. One Roma speaking group, the Sinti, were peddlars and street performers (This list is, of course, far from complete.)

In feudal times the most important rights were the rights to possess or use land. By the time the Gypsies came in Hungary, a land use system had been established. Gypsies were thus excluded from land ownership and use. (There probably were a few cases where Gypsies were allowed to cultivate land, but these people must have subsequently been completely assimilated by the Hungarian population.) Therefore Gypsies were always marginal economic actors in the feudal system and played no role in agriculture, the most important part of the economy in East and Central Europe. Destitute migrant Gypsies could only make a living by performing the most despised tasks. (The reverse is also true: any work associated with Gypsies automatically sank to the lowest rung in the prestige hierarchy of occupations.)

Consequently, Gypsies could only be 'relatively' socially integrated. Their traditional occupations just allowed them to occupy the bottom level of feudal and late feudal society. Still, the bottom was at least a place - a position that could be accepted by resignation to a life of more or less bearable 'decent poverty'. Social contempt and exclusion were somewhat mitigated by the patriarchal attitudes and relative tolerance of Central European peasantry, a

tolerance based on peasants' religious principles. (Even today Gypsy life is more tolerable in certain 'archaic' parts of the country than in modern, industrialised areas.)

By European standards, this social structure survived for a very long time - into the twentieth century. The market for traditional Gypsy crafts and services was destroyed by the appearance and expansion of modern industrial production and commerce: hand-made products were pushed out of the market by mass-produced goods; the products of Gypsy metalworkers, coppersmiths, and woodworkers became redundant; services provided by Gypsies (e.g., adobe work) became outdated; and Gypsy peddlars lost their markets with the development of modern systems of distribution. The last important Gypsy profession, musical entertainment also lost ground in the course of the social structural changes of the nineteenfifties. The loss of this profession was the final stroke, for the rapid disintegration of the traditional structure had already taken place in the interwar period. As a result, robbed of their sources of income, Gypsies experienced dramatic downward mobility. No matter how low, they lost their former social status as well. During the twenties and thirties the entire Gypsy population was, in effect, unemployed, sharing the lot of the country's 'three million beggars'. They irrevocably lost their old basis of living - their historically accumulated 'capital' - without having any chance to enter the modern labour market. In this they shared the lot of the agrarian proletariat of the time - yet there remained one crucial difference: the Hungarian peasant enjoyed the solidarity of the nation and the support of political or humanitarian ideologies and movements, while Gypsies, as 'foreigners', had to do without society's compassion and sympathy.

It is important to keep in mind that our generation's image of Gypsies does not reflect an ancient condition, but is a profound and general side effect of downward mobility: 'Decent' poverty has been exchanged for a slum - the lamentable result of a people's historic catastrophe.

We should note here that the rock-bottom fall of Gypsies' financial welfare and social prestige was an integral precedent for the Holocaust as well. The mass deportation of Gypsies to Nazi death camps with the indifferent assistance of Hungarian society only happened because the majority of society perceived Gypsies as useless parasites incapable of carrying out a day's work, and as potential (if not active) criminals.

After 1944-45 far reaching but contradictory changes began to occur in the lives of the region's Gypsies.

In the 1940s the majority of Gypsies lived in isolated villages as the original consumers of their products and services were primarily village dwellers. These Gypsies kept body and soul together with seasonal agricultural work. In this sense they had a share in agriculture (just as did Hungarian farm workers). In 1945 the social order of Hungarian villages was transformed by radical agrarian reform and a very widespread redistribution of land. Unlike Hungarian farm workers, Gypsies were left out of these reforms. This development was of disastrous significance: Gypsies were squeezed out of agriculture for the long term. Initially, when Hungarian agriculturalists went through dramatic ordeals after the Communist takeover (confiscation of peasant land, violent pressure to enter industry, social condemnation) the exclusion of Gypsies from agriculture did not appear to be so disadvantageous. It became clear in the seventies though (and is especially clear now) that once again Gypsies had fallen into a tragic trap.

At the same time the extensive, politically motivated industrialisation programs of the 1950s definitely led to an upturn. The job market suddenly widened and unemployment disappeared. Gypsies gained places in industry - especially in factories and construction - and for the first time in their history were able to join the modern employment market. Within a short decade and a half Hungarian Gypsies came to be fully employed: at the start of the seventies practically all able-bodied men, and half of all working-aged women were employed. (Women were employed at a lesser rate than men for two reasons: 1. village women could only reach work after a long trip - mothers of families were hardly capable of this - and the situation was worsened by the lack of adequate child-care facilities in villages; 2. according to Gypsy tradition, a woman's place is in the home.) The significance to Gypsies of this step forward must not be underestimated.

The new situation was, however, fraught with serious problems.

The segregation and marginalisation of Gypsies emerged (or rather re-emerged) and took root. Gypsies were typically assigned the hardest physical labour, dangerous work, work at the bottom of the prestige hierarchy, or irrationally underpaid work. Gypsies were typically employed as unskilled workers at construction sites, smelters and mines, bottling factories, rendering plants, in public sanitation, etc.

In addition, Gypsies were given work requiring long travels and life in worker hostels. Gypsies became the classic Gastarbeiter in Hungary.

The transformation of Hungarian peasants into industrial workers took some eighty years to complete - Gypsies made this transformation in a short two decades, at the cost of incredible physical exertions (we would not err in seeing a connection between Gypsies' short lifespans and their struggles). Hungarian peasants had centuries as peasants to acquire a work ethic, while Gypsies went from being unemployed, or occasionally employed, to being industrial workers: the ordeals inherent in such a transformation were thus aggravated.

The undeniable embourgeoisement of Hungary in the Kádár period arose from the so-called 'second economy', where the accumulation of capital was possible. By contrast, Gypsy migrant workers were excluded from the second economy (and thus from access to embourgeoisement) at the outset: they had no agricultural base at home, and had neither the spare time (they travelled in their spare time) nor the familiarity with conditions at their distant workplaces necessary to allow them to take on extra work.

Gypsies gained a respite from worries about where to find their daily bread and were granted relatively secure lives by socialism (how Gypsies' consequent loyalty to the political 'powers that be' further damaged their social standing is another story). Their progress, however, was so insignificant that Gypsies were practically unable to accumulate material or cultural capital, and were excluded from embourgeoisement. The unexpected gift of subsistence did not arouse ambitions to further educations. The artificially low wages paid for 'Gypsy work' made it impossible for the younger generations to advance. In the decades of the 'great leap forward' a growing number of Gypsies were barely able to maintain their standards of living. At this time the gap between Gypsies and other Hungarians grew tragically.

A question thus arises: what sort of workers are Hungarian Gypsies? A rather widespread belief holds them to be inferior or worthless workers. Reality is, of course, far more complex. In its technical culture and morals the core of the Hungarian industrial labour force was of the

highest quality; even as late as the 1970s it notably differed from the newer workers who had come from the countryside as a result of forced extensive industrialisation. Naturally, the even newer, historically even less experienced Gypsy workforce was and is a step farther away from this standard: the average Gypsy worker is even more 'Eastern European' and more backward in cultural level, education, ethics, and (we should not forget) in a poorer physical condition. Of course there are no-end of Gypsy workers who do not fit this mold - Gypsy workers, well aware of their underprivileged situation who believe that through almost suicidal self-exploitation they can overcome their disadvantages. Naturally, such efforts also fail to improve their situation and do not increase their chances - for just as they have not had the opportunity to learn how to preserve material gains, they are unable to rationally use their strength. Are they good workers? Not really: they lack long-term stability. Instead, this is just another face of the tragedy.

Similarly, in the Hungarian economic crisis and shrinkage that started at the end of the 1980s, Gypsies were the first to be fired. While today unemployment nationally is near 11%, some 60% of all Gypsies are estimated to be unemployed (according to some estimates 70%). In certain regions however (mainly in North-East Hungary) these figures approach 100%. This dramatic loss of income has not been countered by adequate social policies. The causes of Gypsy unemployment are twofold: 'objective' in that Hungary's economy in crisis really has no need for unskilled workers; but discrimination is palpably in the background - skilled Gypsy workers are just as likely to be unemployed as the unskilled majority, whereas young Gypsies approaching working age, regardless of qualifications, have virtually no hope of finding a job. Clearly in such a situation more than just standards of living are at risk - strategies and perspectives for development and even survival are destroyed, and already inadequate education levels fall to their deepest possible point. The psychological load is enormous. International surveys warn us that the moral fibre of the unemployed can become frayed to such a degree after a few years of unemployment that there is no longer any way to re-establish it. In this sense the current crisis is not only becoming unbearable for Hungarian Gypsies, their perspectives are also closing down: Gypsies are now losing their hard-won historical capital, for the second time in this century.

And social tensions related to Gypsies are rising dramatically. It seems that neither the government nor the Hungarian public is capable of realizing that if a change is not made in the way this problem is handled - and quickly - it may lead to a social explosion.