

Central Europe

compiled by the editors

Early Mentionings | Slovakia, Bohemia, and Moravia | Central Hungary and Transylvania | Professions | Outlaws and Taxpayers

➤ *The fate of the Roma in Central Europe between their arrival and the 18th century is strongly determined by the countless wars and political changes that affected the region, in particular the constant conflict between the Ottoman Empire and the Holy Roman Empire. Up to the end of the 17th century, when the rapid retreat of the Turks began with the battle of Vienna in 1683, the Roma in the Hungarian lands faced two different policies. Under Ottoman rule, the Roma's craft and musicianship was largely appreciated. In the Habsburg-controlled areas, they were hardly tolerated. However, in some regions, especially the Western Hungarian counties bordering the Habsburg crown lands, these two approaches existed in parallel, thus exposing the "Gypsies" to ever changing conditions.*

INTRODUCTION

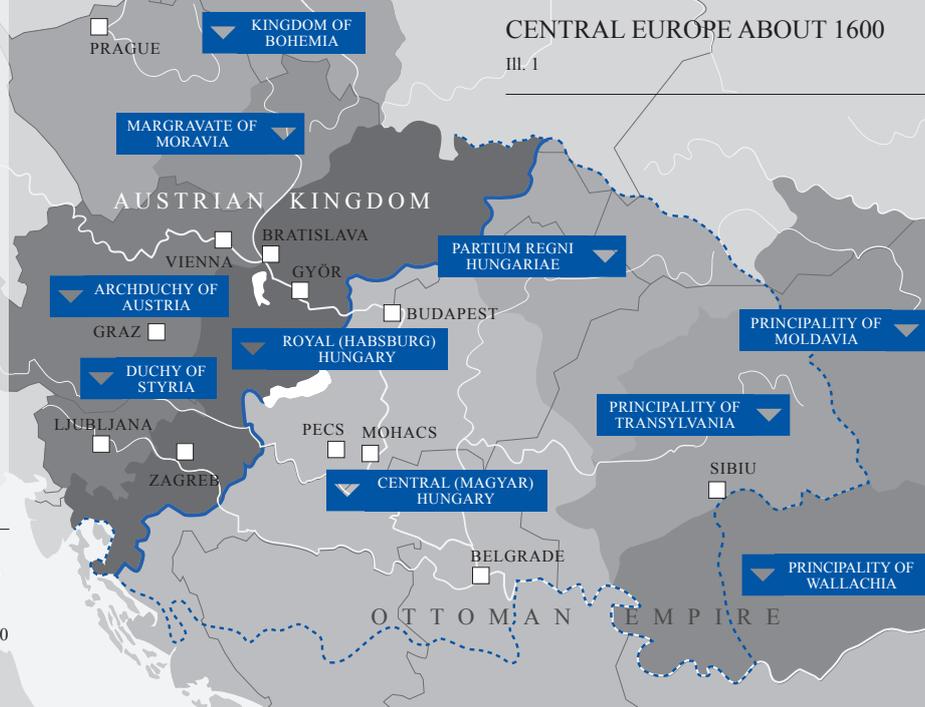
Rather than a physical entity "Central Europe" is a concept of shared history. It comprises today's Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Austro-Hungarian regions of Bukovina, Galicia, Transylvania and Vojvodina as core, and Germany, Poland and Switzerland as periphery. In this article "Central Europe" only refers to core regions.

(III. 1)

— Austrian-Ottoman borders
- - - Hungarian border
to the south and east ~1500
— Today's borders

CENTRAL EUROPE ABOUT 1600

III. 1



EARLY MENTIONINGS

For the Czech lands, it has been suggested that the Roma came there as early as the mid-13th century. Most authors hold the opinion that Roma began to appear in

the lands during the second half of the 14th century, due to an increase in references to "Gypsies" in local records in the Slovakian areas of Hungary. A village "Ciganvaja" existed there as early as in 1388, and a number of families residing there began to use the surname "Cigan" or "Cigan". In 1399 in the Book of

Executions of the Lords of Rožmberk in Southern Bohemia, it is mentioned that apart from several Germans in a robber band, there was "a certain Gypsy, the groom of Andrew". There is also evidence from the 1370s of the presence of Roma in Zagreb (Zágráb), capital of the then closely Hungary-related Croatia.

“We have reason to express ourselves concerning grievances that have reached us from the citizens of the town of Cibine. You, your people, and your followers are calling the people who have settled under the castle of this commune and who work as day labourer ‘Czigány’ or Egyptians, as can be inferred from other of our edicts. We had ordered the mayor of this commune not to touch them in their person or property and not to requisition them [for any duties and

tasks]. [...] Thus, we are taking them from your and your servants’ power and jurisdiction. We are expressly thus ordering Your Faithfulness, in the future, to enforce and order that your subjects shall not disturb, injure or requisition the aforementioned ‘Czigány’, and you are ordered to forbid this. [...]”

III. 2. From the edict by King Matthias Corvinus, of 1476.
 (from Tcherenkov / Laederich 2004, p. 97)

“THEY LEAD A VERY HARD LIFE”

The Count Palatine (imperial governor) of Royal Hungary, György Thurzo, issued a remarkable letter of safe conduct in 1616. This document refers especially to the Voivode Franciscus and his company, said to be “performing military services” (so that the authorities had a particular interest in keeping them available), but it contained a general plea for understanding of the Gypsies’ plight:

“While the birds of the sky have their nests, foxes their earths, wolves their lairs, and lions and bears their dens, and all animals have their own place of habitation, the truly wretched Egyptian race, which we call Czingaros, is assured to be pitied, although it is not known whether this was caused by the tyranny of the cruel

Pharaoh or the dictate of fate. In accordance with their ancient custom they are used to leading a very hard life, in fields and meadows outside the towns, under ragged tents. Thus have old and young, boys and children of this race learned, unprotected by walls, to bear with rain, cold and intense heat; they have no inherited goods on this earth, they do not seek cities, strongholds, towns or princely dwellings, but wander constantly with no sure resting place, knowing no riches or ambitions, but, day by day and hour by hour, looking in the open air only for food and clothing by the labour of their hands, using anvils, bellows, hammers and tongs.”

III. 3
 (from Fraser 1992, p. 155; cited there as “from the Latin in H. M. G. Grellmann, ‘Historischer Versuch über die Zigeuner’“, of 1787)

The first unchallenged evidence of Roma in Hungary dates to 1416, when records indicate that in the town of Brasov in Transylvania people provided “Lord Emaus of Egypt and his 120 companions” with food and money. King Sigismund I

(1387-1437), who was also the de facto Holy Roman Emperor, granted groups of “Gypsies” travel permits in 1417 and 1423. The first group was apparently granted free travel, because the Roma, who had spent some time in the Ottoman

Empire, possessed important military information on the Turks. The group then passed through Bohemia on the way to Western Europe. The second, 1423, permit from Sigismund was given to a leader Ladislaus and his followers.

SLOVAKIA, BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA

The Roma settlers in Slovakia worked as musicians and metal workers, and many served in the armies of Hungary’s monarchs. In the later part of the 15th century there are a number of comments about “Gypsy” troops in Hungarian records, and Roma troops were used in the conflicts that swept Slovakia throughout the next century.

Anti-“Gypsy” policy in Slovakia emerged after the Turkish victory over the Hungarians near Mohács in 1526. Some traces of this attitude had already been visible in the previous century, when the Slovaks began to see the “Gypsies” as Tartar spies. Fear of the Turks, who, after the conquest of Buda in 1541, took over Central Hungary, created a new basis

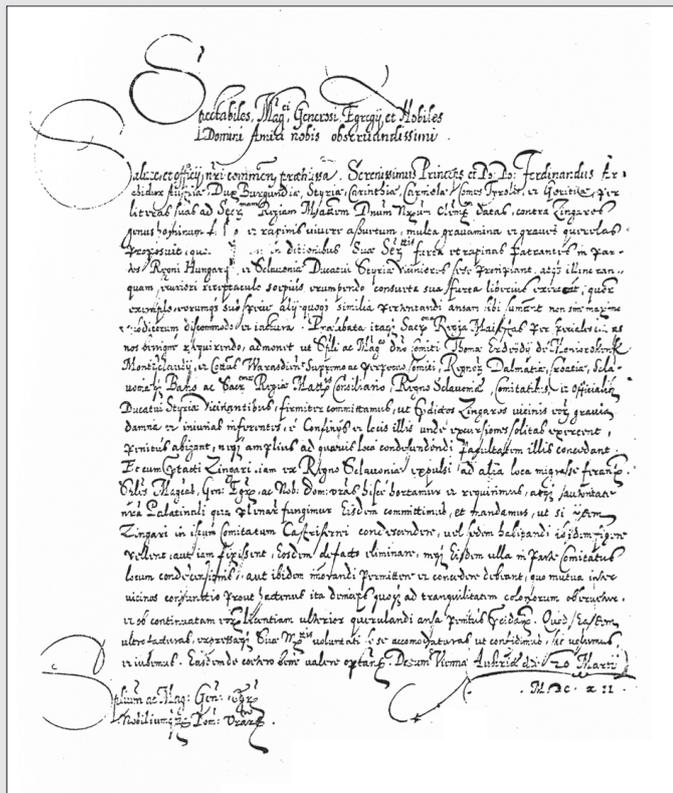
for anti-“Gypsy” sentiment in the Habsburg-controlled Northern and Western Hungarian territories. Roma in Slovakia, sedentary and nomadic, were now increasingly separated from the Slovak and Hungarian peasants, and the new “Gypsy” settlers were restricted to the periphery of towns and villages. In addition, the growing influence of the guilds kept Roma smiths from the more profitable sectors of metalworking.

After the Turkish conquest of Central Hungary three separate kingdoms were established in 1541-42. Slovakia and Western Hungary, called Royal Hungary, were under Habsburg rule, while Central – “Magyar” – Hungary was under direct Ottoman control. The Turks also created a puppet state, Transylvania. For the Roma, this meant the appliance of unequal policies. In particular, Roma in Royal Hungary suf-

fered from policies of expulsion. These in turn were dependent on the regional lords, since some appreciated and preserved the skills of the Roma, and others did not.

In Moravia and Bohemia anti-“Gypsy” legislation was issued from 1538 onwards. Apparently, in 1556, resentment towards the Roma got out of hand, and the government had to step in to forbid “the drowning of Rom women and children”. At the same time, however, local records show that alms and letters of recommendation were granted to “Gypsies” by town councils, and other Roma continued to travel the Czech lands.

The Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648) brought ever increasing resentment towards the Roma. Famine, epidemics, and flight affected the areas of Bohemia and Moravia. This caused many Roma also from other parts of Europe to flee to Slo-



CHANGING CONDITIONS

The position of the “Gypsies” in Western Hungary varied according to which county they belonged to. For example, the Counts of Batthyány, centred in Nemet-ujvár (today’s Güssing in the Burgenland, Austria), where open-minded towards the Roma, and in 1664 and 1674 a number of “Gypsy” settlements were established in the region. Other than the Batthyány, who supported the Turks, the Habsburg-affiliated Eszterházy tried to get rid of the “Gypsies” on their territories. Thus many Roma went south to the Batthyány county.

The different approaches in different counties often did not reflect the general policies of the highest power, the emperor or king. A particular ruler often issued edicts merely to appease the anti-“Gypsy” sentiments of the settled population, neglecting – or not knowing about – the fact that many Roma performed crafts of considerable importance for the counties.

Ill. 5 (see Mayerhofer 1988, p. 18)

Ill. 4
Letter of György Thurzo of 1612.
(from Mayerhofer 1988, p. 16)

vakia, were in turn the measures aimed especially against the newly arrived were strengthened. By law, the Slovak “Gypsies” were prohibited to lead a nomadic life;

yet for economic reasons, they were forced into it. From 1697 onwards, the emperors decreed increasingly severe edicts, declaring that “Gypsies” shall be “vogelfrei”

(outlaws), treated “with all possible severity both as regards body and property”, shall be hanged without trial, flogged or banished forever, branded on the back, etc.

CENTRAL HUNGARY AND TRANSYLVANIA

The Roma in Hungary were treated with more tolerance than was common in Western Europe in the 15th to the 17th century. This was partly due to the reputation they had acquired for their metal craft skills, their musicianship, and as soldiers. Above all, however, Central and Eastern Hungary from the early 16th century onwards, was part of the Ottoman Empire, which, compared to the western nations, pursued a policy of tolerance towards the many ethnic groups under its rule.

In an edict of 1476, King Matthias Corvinus made the Roma direct subjects of the king in the commune of Cibine (Hermannstadt, now Sibiu), in Transylvania. The king needed to reiterate his orders eleven years later; in this edict he mentioned the tasks the “Gypsies” had to per-

form in the defence of Cibine (Sibiu) and the special privileges they enjoyed since “times immemorial”. He then referred to the “old freedom and privileges” of the “Gypsies”, thus their direct assignment to the crown. [Ill. 2]

Ulászló (Ladislaus) II issued an edict of similar content to a Tamás Polgár, the “vayvodam Pharaonum” (Voivode of Pharaoh’s People), in 1492. This travel permit allowed Polgár “to move and settle wherever he pleased in the country with his 25 tents of Gypsy smiths”. Polgár’s smiths provided the Bishop Sigismund of Pécs, among others, with musket and cannon balls as well as other military hardware.

The letters of safe conduct issued in growing numbers from the beginning of the 15th century on, were only valid for the particular leader and his group named in the given document. Different groups of Roma were treated differently, depended on the usefulness of their services or

the degree of rioting by which the settled population expressed their sentiments against the “Gypsies”. This is well illustrated by two documents issued by György Thurzo, Palatine of Royal Hungary. A letter by Thurzo of 1612 ordered all groups of Roma who, coming from Styria, roamed through the Western Hungarian lands, to be expelled from there. The document cites the complaints of the settled population, which accused the “Gypsies” of robbery and theft. In 1616, however, Thurzo issued a letter of safe conduct addressed to a particular group of “Czingaros”, whose military services were considered useful. The latter document contains, as has been said, “an outright plea for understanding of the Gypsies’ plight”; apparently it was necessary for the palatine to state good reasons for the special protection of a group of “Czingaros”. [Ills. 3, 4]

By the 16th century the custom had become established in Hungary for a chief

of the “Gypsies” to be chosen by the authorities from among their own numbers; he was given the title of “egregius”. In each Hungarian “komitat” (county) an “egregius” was appointed; he was en-

titled to marry outside his clan and was responsible for all legal affairs concerning his 200 or 300 people. Beneath him, in each county with a Roma population, were lesser chiefs who acted as judges

in “Gypsy” matters. Tax-collection from the “Gypsies”, however, was handled by several voivodes who were drawn from the ranks of the Hungarian and Transylvanian nobility.

PROFESSIONS

Several documents from 1503 onwards show that many Roma in Central Europe were weapon-makers. Notably, the making of cannon and musket balls involved highly specialised knowledge of the most advanced war technologies of that time. A large number of Roma also served in the Hungarian army. When Janos Zápolyai took the Hungarian throne by Ottoman support in 1528, he rewarded his Rom

loyalists with the renewal of the “ancient Gypsy liberties” (antiquis libertatibus) granted by his predecessors.

Roma musicians were highly praised by nobility and members of the court. In a letter from 1543 from the Transylvanian court of Queen Isabella, wife of Janos Zápolyai, the writer states that “the most excellent Egyptian musicians play, the descendants of the Pharaohs”. He goes on to observe that the “Gypsy” cimbalom players “do not pluck the strings with their fingers but hit it with a wooden stick and sing to it with all their might”.

Many Roma in central Hungary became smiths for the Turkish army. Others were musicians, barbers, tent-makers, messengers or executioners. Ottoman tax census data from the Central Hungarian capital Buda show that 56 male Roma lived there in 1564. The number of “Gypsies” increased to 90 over the next 30 years. Particularly in Royal Hungary, some noblemen tried to make use of the Roma’s skills. Nevertheless, new Roma settlers were driven to the fringes of the villages and towns.

OUTLAWS AND TAXPAYERS

For the largest part of the 17th century, the situation in the Hungarian lands remained unstable. In Royal Hungary new restrictions were put into force, directed against foreign, nomadic “Gypsies”, but affecting all Roma in the territories. When the Habsburg-affiliated Hungarians reconquered large parts of Western Hungary in 1688, the Roma were largely without rights again. In addition to that, they lost their professions, since there were no soldiers anymore whose weapons they could mend, and whom they could accompa-

ny with music. They lacked agricultural skills, and in the widely deserted territories trade was not in demand. Therefore many of them went westwards, marauding. This was the background of the then increasingly numerous edicts and patents against the Roma, which, among other developments, in the following decades lead to outright “Gypsy”-hunts in the woods of Western Hungary.

In 1706, confirming the “Reichstag” edicts of 1497-98, the Austrian Emperor Leopold I, declared the Roma outlaws and prohibited them from entering the Habsburg domains. He had “taffeln” (warning placards) erected in order to inform Roma willing to enter the terri-

tories of these regulations. The written “taffeln” soon had to be replaced by vivid pictures of mutilated “Gypsies” for the Roma, who could not read.

The harshness of these policies began to change after 1710. The local Hungarian nobility were given a free hand in running their internal affairs in exchange for their loyalty to the crown. In addition, deserted Central Hungary was repopulated with some 400,000 people from the Slovak areas of Northern Hungary. The Hungarian court reformed the tax system; this imposed new burdens also on the “Gypsies”, who now had to pay annual taxes throughout the country, thus being acknowledged as citizens after all.

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