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text: Jan Dolák, photo: Lenka Grossmannová, from Museum of Romani Culture collection

The Story of the Romani

A Permanent Exhibition in the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno

One of the main positive trends in the way museums evolve today is the marked accent on documenting and presenting minority groups of population. Museums, too, have realised that the societies in which they operate are not composed of majorities only and that in most cases they also include a number of members of ethnic or cultural minorities or migrating groups. A very strong accent on the presentation of members of ethnic minorities can be seen, for instance, in the English speaking countries (e.g. Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.), but also in South America, Asia, Africa and others. Czech Republic has two museums focusing on ethnic minorities: The Jewish Museum in Prague and the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno. In spite of a number of activities performed by other museums in this field, it still seems that Czech museums tend to maintain a conservative approach to the presentation of ethnic minorities, which may be partly due to the relative ethnic homogeneity of the Czech Republic.

The Romani are the most numerous and undoubtedly the most visible ethnic minority in the Czech Republic and it is only plausible that their culture is also presented in museums. The Museum of Romani Culture was founded in Brno in 1991, initially as a civic association transformed into a semi-budgetary organization in 2005 run directly by the Ministry of Culture. After a painstaking search for suitable venues, the museum finally began to build its permanent exhibition called "The Story of the Romani People". The exhibition shows the his-



tory of the Romani and the evolution of their culture from the time they were compelled to leave India till this day. The exhibition venues occupy an entire floor of the museum's building – covering a total area of 351 square meters – and it should be said that it is the largest and the most complete museum exhibition dedicated to the Romani, certainly in the Central European region. The exhibition layout follows a geographical criterion; the display in the first room is dedicated to the original homeland of the Romani, India, the following rooms cover their history in the European context, and the last three rooms narrow down the view to the Romani in the Czech or Czechoslovak context. The cost of exhibition was almost 10 million crowns of which part was paid by foreign sponsors: over 340,000 crowns were contributed by the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, and over 1,500,000 crowns by Anna Frank House. The museum's annual attendance is approximately 8,5 thousand and most of its visitors are primary and secondary school students whose visits form part of their school curricula. It is worth notice that that the number of foreign visitors and even visitors from the Romani community is only limited.

The building of the exhibition itself became a "story". Rooms no. 5 and 6 dedicated to the period from 1945 to 1993 and the period after 1989, respectively, were opened in 2005. Room no. 4, dedicated to the tragic period of World War II, was open a year later. Rooms 1 and 3 focusing on the oldest Romani history were

inaugurated on December 1, 2011. The scenario for the exhibition is a joint work of the museum's staff, with the participation of foremost Czech experts in Romani studies. There are apparent differences between the different rooms in terms of scene design, layout and visual presentation, but it does not pose a major problem.

What precisely can be seen in the Romani culture museum display? At the entrance are photographs of Romani men, women and children, including the speech addressed by Indira Gandhi to the Romani in 1983. The first room is dedicated to the original homeland of the Romani – India. The desirable atmosphere is evoked by emotional rather than descriptive means through the display of different products of crafts, jewellery, clothes, and a touch screen for the visitors to play the pronunciation of basic expressions in the Romani language and the language it is related to, Hindi. The ambient sound creates an Indian ambience.

The entry to the second room is characterized by a broken glass tile laid in the floor as a reference to the ancient legend explaining why the Romani population have been scattered throughout the world. The central motif of room no. 2 is a nomad wagon with equipment, and an installation of a Romani camp. Panels and showcases on the walls provide historical information on the arrival of the Romani to central Europe, including the description of the nomads' crafts, and of different forms of repression by the majority population, from expelling migrant Romani to putting





them on gallows, including an installation of a gallows as part of the display. The visual is accompanied by ambient sound. Visitors can look up additional information using a computer with an optically well-chosen location behind a large panel. The connecting corridor to the next room is dedicated to Romani magic. In order to underscore the magic ambience, the corridor floor is made of a soft flexible material which makes visitors walk in a swinging way.

The display in the third room is dedicated to the settling down of the Romani, featuring, among other items, an "in situ" Romani house with equipment, and a circus tent. Apart from crafts products, there are mainly musical instruments, and also specimen of official decrees which, though not recognising the Romani an equal status in the society, at least provided them with the status of someone having a birthplace and citizenship. This part of the display is related to the period from the mid- 18th century to the 1939, the year of extinction of Czechoslovakia. Also here the visual is accompanied by ambient sound.

If we apply the division of exhibitions into aesthetic, didactic, theatrical and associative, as suggested by the Swiss museologist M. R. Schärer, the first three rooms clearly show the prevalence of the theatrical approach. Stress

is laid on evoking both positive and negative emotions, impressions, on comprehensive perceptions, etc. At the same time, the volume of accompanying texts is sufficient to maintain the visitor within reality, without allowing excessive, spontaneous and meaningless chaining of connotations. The issue in this part, however, is the relatively small and often poorly lighted labels which are in many cases difficult to read. The didactic aspect is thus partly suppressed. The display looks comprehensive and very plastic. The price for it, however, is lack of space for the visitors, which may complicate the management of guided group visits.

The fourth room focuses on the tragic destiny of the Romani during World War II, primarily in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, Slovakia and Germany. The theme of the Romani holocaust is mainly presented by two-dimensional detailed explanation texts, photographs, memories of witnesses and period official documents. A permanent complement to this part is the projection of the film "...painful memories" (28 minutes) with testimonies of witnesses. A counterpart to a somehow "paper-like" impression produced by the display are skull casts of Romani people that had been used to sustain the racist theory of alleged inferiority of the Romani, and by installations evoking the idea of gas chambers.

The fifth room is dedicated to post-war history of the Romani in Czechoslovakia until 1993. It is divided into two separate sections: the gray and the coloured one. The former is a two-dimensional presentation of the often difficult coexistence of the Romani and the majority population. Reference is made to the attempts of the Romani community to establish an independent Gypsy – Romani Union in the late 1960's. The latter, considerable larger section of the room is devoted to the life of the Romani, and their spiritual and handicraft culture. Together with specimen of art production, there are examples of their dwelling habits, faith, etc. In the seated section, visitors can view an audiovisual record showing contemporary Romani culture. However, a lower level of protection against dust and theft or damage and not quite suitable choice of showcases may be an issue in this section. The whole display is accompanied by a "Romani voice", i.e. utterances of individual Romani people commenting on certain historic events or manifestations of specific cultural identity.

The sixth room is relatively small, with walls covered by newspaper articles from 1989 to 2005 making up a mosaic of the way contemporary media have covered the trends in the relation between the Romani minority and the majority population. The central



element of the room is a rotating wheel with newspaper headlines evoking the constant change around us. The image created shows the points of view of both the minority and the majority, without the need for additional comments. On the one hand, it puts to the foreground allegations concerning high crime rates of the Romani population and abuse of the social system, on the other it shows examples of racist and xenophobe attitudes of the majority population including the alleged sterilization of Romani women.

The difficult to read texts in the first three rooms and certain hypertrophy of texts in its second half do seem to be an issue. The texts are in Czech, with the most important parts also in Romani, and the second part of the exhibition also contains a number of texts in English. Visitors who cannot speak Czech (or Romani) may find it difficult to appreciate the displays in the first three rooms, which is something that should be remedied as soon as possible even in spite of insufficient funding.

The use of the Romani language in some of the texts also deserves attention. Some thought should be given to the fact that even though the Romani speak their language, they mostly do not read or write in it. It is very likely that



greater part of Romani visitors will limit themselves to reading the texts in Czech.

In spite of the above-mentioned issues, the exhibition ranks above the average for its unique focus and its scenic, architectonic and visual design.

There is also a project for the publication of school worksheets related to the museum exhibition which is now being finalised. The titles of the worksheets are "Big Guide for Small Visitors" and "Small Guide for Big Visitors."

The museum has a broad range of activities. Apart from the permanent exhibition, it sets up several different displays every year and organizes concerts, memorial events, discussion meetings, courses of the Romani language and tutor classes for children. It has also organized fashion shows and runs a specialised library. All this contributes to fulfilling its goal expressed below:

We are a space where different cultures meet.

We preserve examples of Romani cultural history as part of Europe's heritage.

We educate the younger generation to be tolerant and appreciate other cultures.

We are committed to fighting xenophobia and racism.

We are paving the way to a new understanding of the roots of Romani identity.

All this we do in the name of mutual understanding.

For a dialogue of cultures.

For us.

