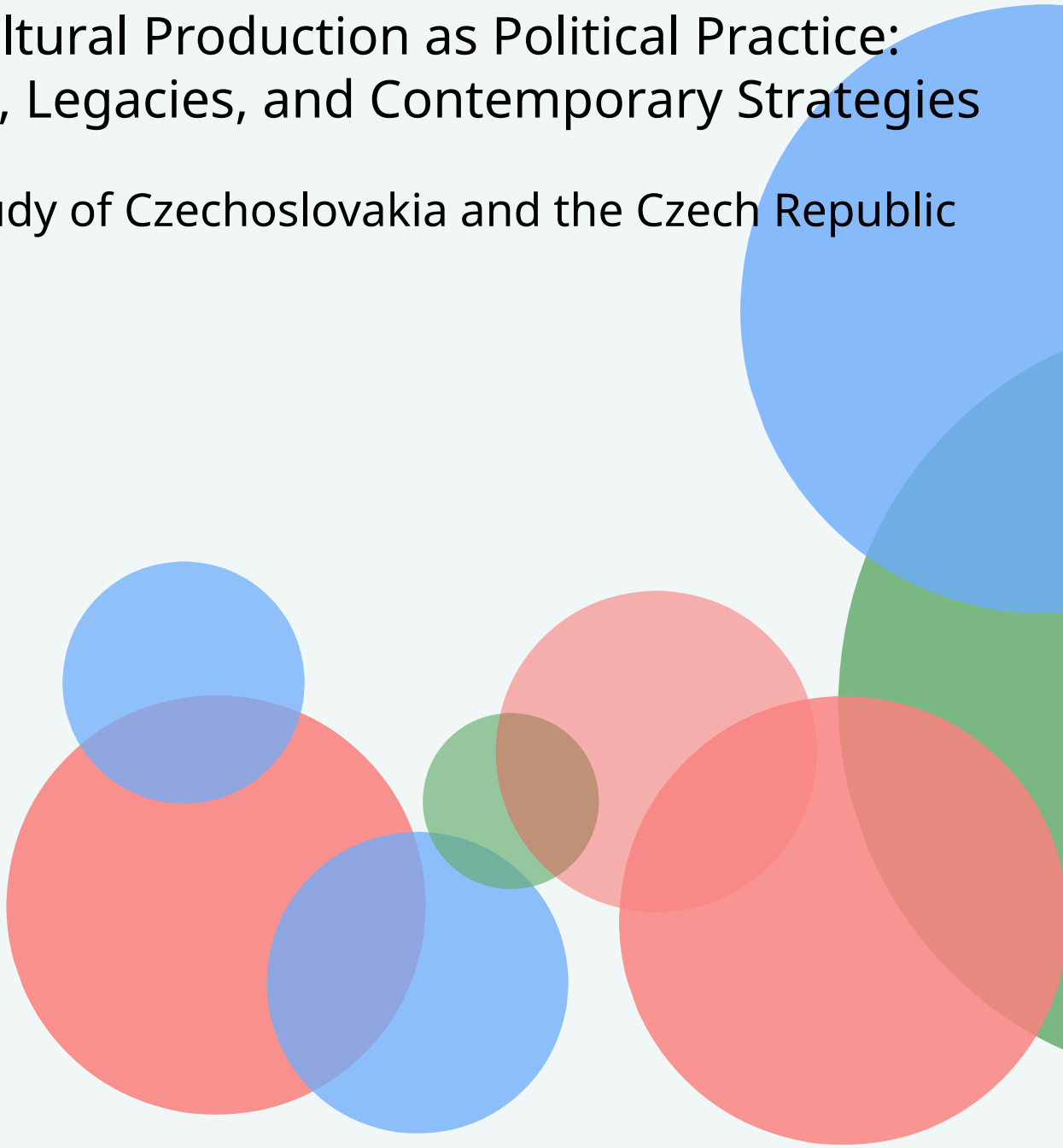
Roma Cultural Production as Political Practice: Histories, Legacies, and Contemporary Strategies

A Case Study of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic



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JEKHIPE
RECLAIMING OUR PAST, REBUILDING OUR FUTURE:
NEW APPROACHES TO FIGHTING ANTIGYPSYISM

The JEKHIPE Project

The JEKHIPE project *Reclaiming our past, rebuilding our future: new approaches to fighting antigypsyism against Roma* is a CERV-funded project aimed at improving the lives of Roma by addressing systemic and institutional antigypsyism, promoting transitional justice, fostering knowledge-building and awareness, and strengthening Roma identity and participation.

It is a follow-up to *CHACHIPEN*, an earlier CERV project, officially titled *Paving the way for a Truth and Reconciliation Process to address antigypsyism in Europe. Remembrance, Recognition, Justice and Trust-Building*. Concluded in 2023, CHACHIPEN introduced an innovative transitional justice-based approach to raising awareness of systemic injustice and ongoing antigypsyism in policymaking, while advocating for a comprehensive truth and reconciliation strategy.

JEKHIPE focuses on multiple levels of policy-making, including research, monitoring, advocacy, networking, alliances building, awareness raising, capacity building, and empowerment. It aims to engage with national and European institutions, academia, politicians, justice mechanisms, state authorities, civil society, and Roma communities themselves to challenge the status quo on approaching Roma issues, particularly antigypsyism, and propose mechanisms for increased accountability by national governments.

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Abstract

The study examines Roma cultural production in Czechoslovakia and its successor state Czech Republic as a site of resistance to systemic racism and exclusion. The first part traces anti-Roma sentiments in the Czech lands as a structuring force of European modernity, showing how exclusionary frames shaped nation- and state-building and have been repeatedly mobilized as boundary-making tools in political projects across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It highlights key moments from the early 1990s, when anti-Roma racism resurged as a backlash against the socialist quest for equality and in response to the challenges of transition to capitalism, and from the 2010s, when it became normalized within the mainstream political arena. The study demonstrates the seepage of this sentiment rooted in hate and fear into new arenas and its renewed function as a negative backdrop against which the nation redefined itself. The second part reconstructs Roma political and cultural organizing under state socialism, from paternalist policies of the 1950s to the Union of Gypsies-Roma during the Prague Spring, culminating in the founding of the Museum of Romani Culture in 1991. These initiatives show how Roma cultural work has been inherently political in the context of denied cultural rights and became a vehicle of ethnic and political mobilization. The article further explores the legacies of both anti-Roma racism and Roma cultural and political empowerment for contemporary cultural production. It examines curatorial and artistic strategies that confront racial discrimination, stereotyping, and erasure, advancing more socially responsible and inclusive representational frameworks. It highlights Roma artists' engagement with identity and collaborative projects across racial, ethnic, gender, and disability lines.

I HISTORY OF ANTI-ROMA SENTIMENTS IN THE CZECH LANDS AND ITS SUCCESSORS

The Long Continuum: Anti-Roma Racism as a Structuring Force of European Modernity

The overview of historical and current manifestations of anti-Roma racism that follows is framed by an understanding of this phenomenon not as a series of isolated episodes but as a formative and structuring element of European modernity. In this perspective, the othering of Roma has been constitutive of nation- and state-building and continues to be mobilized in contemporary boundary-making by exclusionary[1]–often populist or radical-right–political actors. Dominant imaginaries of solidarity, belonging, and national identity were produced in parallel with notions of Europeanness that relied on the constitutive exclusion of construed "non-European" others from the body politic. In line with Foucault's account of the productive effects of power, these processes forged "the Roma" as a homogeneous, administratively legible category, paradoxically constructing a putative collectivity with ascribed shared characteristics while disqualifying it as a national entity on the grounds of non-territoriality. Consequently, anti-Roma racism has operated as a formative and structuring force—not only symbolically but also spatially and materially—underpinning the regulation of territory, settlement, and labour in the consolidation of modern state formations (McGarry, 2017).[2]

Digging Up the Dead Horse: Anti-Roma Racism and the Recasting of the Nation after Socialism

Two Decades into Democracy: Anti-Roma Racism and the Mainstreaming of Extremism in Czech Politics

Since the early 1990s, anti-Roma racism in the Czech Republic has periodically spilled over from the far-right fringe into the civic mainstream. The 2011–2013 cycle of mobilizations marked a qualitative shift: marches in Varnsdorf, Rumburk, Ostrava, and České Budějovice brought together neo-Nazi cadres and sizeable numbers of 'ordinary citizens,' signaling that hostile frames were no longer confined to extremist subcultures (ERRC 2011–2013 monitoring; Romea 2013; MoI Reports on Extremism). While local responses varied, repeated mass mobilizations and confrontations gradually desensitized broader society. The absence of strong political or public counter-action not only legitimized hate-based violence as part of mainstream political expression, but also embedded exclusionary frames more deeply within Czech political culture. This normalization accelerated in the

[1] The term "exclusionary" refers to political actors who actively narrow the boundaries of the political community—through discourse and policy—to deny full membership or equal standing to minorities (here, Roma).

[2] See chapter 2 ("Strangers within the gates: territoriality and belonging") where McGarry develops a nation-/state-building argument, showing how anti-Roma racism is tied to territoriality and the drawing of boundaries of belonging in European modernity.

2010s as nativist entrepreneurs such as Tomio Okamura injected anti-Roma and anti-migrant talking points into wider political debate. Major parties, by largely avoiding robust condemnation, enabled these cues to diffuse across the political spectrum (Albert 2017; Mareš 2012; Weinerová 2014; Stauber & Cirhan 2024). Research on the 'refugee crisis' years shows how the salience of ethnicity and migration restructured Czech political conflict and pulled mainstream actors toward exclusionary frames, setting the stage for later radicalization (Brabcová & Guasti 2021; Cabada 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, a dense disinformation ecosystem—linking anti-system politics, conspiracy thinking, and xenophobic tropes—expanded through social media and chain e-mails. This played an instrumental role in further radicalization, fueling imagery of Roma localities as health risks and legitimizing selective restrictions on freedom of movement based on ethnicity (Štětka, Mazák & Vochocová 2021; Filipec 2023). Official and NGO monitoring in this period likewise recorded coordination attempts by far-right projects and the persistence of anti-Roma rhetoric within broader grievance coalitions[3], underscoring how anti-Roma racism became further normalized as a structuring axis of both extremist and 'respectable' politics (MoI 2019–2023; GLOBSEC 2023).

[3] The phrase “grievance coalitions” comes from social movement and political science research. It refers to alliances of groups, actors, or movements that unite around shared grievances (perceived injustices, losses, or threats), even if their broader ideologies differ. These coalitions often bring together far-right groups, local protestors, and sometimes “ordinary citizens,” bound less by a coherent program than by resentment and opposition (e.g., against minorities, migrants, elites, or the government). In the Czech context (and Central/Eastern Europe more broadly), it refers to fluid networks where anti-Roma rhetoric, anti-migrant sentiment, anti-EU positions, and conspiracy thinking get bundled together into a common oppositional front.

II COUNTERING ANTI-ROMA RACISM: FROM ACTS OF RESISTANCE TO RIGHTS-BASED MOVEMENTS

Participation on State Terms: Roma Political Mobilization in Socialist Czechoslovakia

Intro.[4]

From the late 1940s to the mid-1950s, the Ministry of Information and Enlightenment, together with regional and local actors, pursued a paternalist model of Roma political engagement. These initiatives, framed as cultural-enlightenment and equalization measures, were envisioned as a pathway for Roma into socialist citizenship. During the first postwar decade, when state approaches to the Roma minority were still emerging, ministry official Eva Bacíková represented what might be described as a "soft line," in contrast to the more repressive orientation of the Ministry of Interior. Bacíková encouraged cultural initiatives and supported the recognition of Roma as a distinct group with cultural rights, possibly echoing the Soviet experiments in minority policy from the early 1930s, on the assumption that such recognition would foster Roma participation in the socialist project (Pavelčíková, 2004, pp. 34–36).

By reconstructing the early 1950s, Donert shows how the category of the "citizen of Gypsy origin" was forged at the intersection of postwar policies, Communist cultural agendas, and Roma attempts at self-representation. Lacková's cultural work and her adoption of socialist rhetoric of "rebirth" symbolized the promise of Roma inclusion, yet it also highlighted the tensions between genuine agency and the state's project of assimilation and social engineering. Donert situates these developments within the broader European history of postwar social citizenship, where discourses of transformation, enlightenment, and self-sacrifice were mobilized to reconfigure marginal groups as socialist citizens.

At the same time, the article underscores the contradictions of this. The Roma were mobilized as objects of socialist modernization, expected to conform to the model of the "new socialist man," while their cultural difference was simultaneously pathologized and celebrated in limited, instrumentalized ways. Donert argues that the Stalinist framing of the "Gypsy Question" linked marginality to mass mobilization: Roma activists were encouraged to serve as intermediaries, yet they operated within a system that denied them recognition as a national minority and redefined racial discrimination as social "asociality." In this way, the Roma experience illuminates both the possibilities and limits of

[4] Building on earlier scholarship that largely concentrated on state policies and institutional approaches to Roma (Jurová, 1993, 1996; Guy, 1977; Pavelčíková, 2004; Marushiakova & Popov, 1997, 2001), Celia Donert significantly advanced Roma historiography by shifting the analytical focus toward Roma agency. In a series of works (2008, 2010, 2017), Donert reconstructs the history of Roma political mobilization in Czechoslovakia, from Stalinist-era efforts to incorporate Roma into socialist citizenship, through the constrained yet significant experiments with collective organizing during the late 1960s, to later engagements in national and transnational struggles for citizenship rights in early 1970s.

socialist citizenship—demonstrating how Romani political agency under state socialism was entangled with coercive assimilationist policies and broader Cold War debates about democracy, rights, and equality.

In her analysis of Stalinist cultural policies and the emergence of figures such as Elena Lacková, she shows how Roma were addressed as "citizens of Gypsy origin" and drawn into state-led projects of socialist mobilization. Rather than depicting them solely as marginalized subjects of paternalistic integration, Donert highlights the ambivalent spaces where Roma intellectuals and activists appropriated socialist languages of rebirth, emancipation, and collective progress to articulate their own visions of belonging and recognition.

At the same time, her work underscores the contradictions of this paternalist framework. The Roma were incorporated into socialist modernization as exemplary workers and cultural intermediaries, yet denied recognition as a national minority and subjected to coercive assimilationist measures that recast ethnic difference as "social deviance." By situating Roma mobilization within the broader European history of social citizenship, Donert demonstrates how Romani activism both conformed to and challenged state strategies of governance. This reframing makes visible the entanglement of Roma agency with socialist structures of control, revealing how political engagement under state socialism opened unprecedented opportunities for collective organization, while simultaneously reproducing systemic exclusions.

Denied Nationality, Asserting Culture – The Politicum of Roma Organizing

As described above, during the early Stalinist period several government actors—notably officials from the Ministry of Information and Enlightenment—floated proposals to recognize Roma as a distinct ethnic group and to grant them cultural rights, partly inspired by the Soviet model of supporting minority cultures (Pavelčíková 2004, 34–36). This initiative was advanced especially by ministry figures such as Eva Bacíková, who experimented with a more paternalist, recognition-oriented approach before the stricter assimilationist line of the Ministry of Interior prevailed (Pavelčíková 2004, 34–36). Later, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Roma intellectuals such as Ján Cibula again petitioned the Czechoslovak Communist Party for nationality recognition, but these were isolated efforts rather than a coordinated campaign (Donert 2010, 140).

A brief political opening during the Prague Spring of 1968–69 created new opportunities for Roma activism. Although Roma were once more denied recognition as a national minority and thus excluded from the rights, resources, and institutions tied to nationality status, Roma intellectuals together with their allies succeeded in establishing the Union of Gypsies-Roma (Svaz Cikánů-Romů, SCR), legalized in 1969 and admitted into the National Front (Pavelčíková 2004, 104; Donert 2010, 141). The Union's creation was both enabled

and constrained by the state; it was not purely autonomous. While formally conceived as a cultural and educational body aligned with the socialist project, the Union emphasized culture as a collective resource, developed programs that included advocacy on behalf of Holocaust survivors seeking recognition as victims of racial persecution, and became a platform for Roma self-representation (Závodská 2021, 130–132).

In this context, culture itself acquired an explicitly political meaning—not merely "cultural activity," but a mode of claiming space, negotiating rights, and contesting assimilation and exclusion. Roma cultural work was never reducible to folklore or heritage: it carried political weight precisely because direct political avenues, such as nationality status or formal institutional representation, remained blocked. From its inception, Roma cultural organizing thus contained an inherent political dimension, with culture functioning as a vehicle for political existence, identity, and resistance.

Commission for Romani Language
Commission for Holocaust Survivors – cooperation with the Association of the anti-fascist fighters,

1970s

From Living Room to Museum: Beginnings of Romani Visual Art and Collecting in Czechoslovakia

The "discovery" of the first Romani visual artist in Hungary in the late 1960s by art historians gave rise to the notion of the Roma art and made possible for the Roma individuals to identify as artists and claim recognition as collective agents in the framework of the larger Cultural Roma movement and vis- à -vis the state.[5] The visual art production in East Central Europe had been very uneven and nowhere it was as impressive and consistent as in Hungary. These differences are accounted for by the disparities in policies towards the Roma in individual socialist countries. Without regarding the approaches of the state socialist regimes in Hungary and Yugoslavia as monolithic, these countries nevertheless stand out as proponents of cultural rights for Roma which gave rise to the establishment of cultural organizations (Barany 2000).[6]

In Czechoslovakia, the state oscillated during the first decade of the Communist rule between the repressive assimilatory and affirmative ethno-emancipatory approaches, but as of 1958, the hardliners prevailed. The situation changed during the Prague Spring, in the context of the global wave of Counterculture and National liberation movements, when

[5] For the cultural history of the Roma Civil Rights Movement in Hungary and activities in the field of Romani visual art see Junghaus (2014, pp. 25–42).
[6] Zoltan Barany, "Politics and the Roma in State-Socialist Eastern Europe." *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 33, no. 4 (2000): 427, 428. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609398.

the Roma intellectuals' efforts to self-organize gained momentum and political endorsement and resulted in the establishment of *the Union of Gypsies-Roma* in 1969. Although the main mission of the Union,[7] was working towards gaining the status of national minority and cultural rights, this could not be promoted publicly. In the state's eye the Union was to facilitate the solving of the Gypsy Question[8] and therefore it focused on social and economic betterment of the Roma population.[9] The Union, was nevertheless active also in the area of culture and science.[10] A Romani historian Bartoloměj Daniel documented history and culture of Roma and laid foundation to the collection of the material culture. Under his expert guidance, the Union organized exhibitions of the Roma culture.

A second orientation in the field of cultural organizing and production was towards literature. *Why not also the visual art*? Considering the idiosyncratic qualities and predilections of the major personalities in the Union responsible for culture, i.e., *Andrej Pešta*, a Romani writer and photographer, *Milena Hübschmannová*, a non-Romani scholar, and *Daniel Bartoloměj*, a Romani historian, and the cultural predisposition to storytelling,[11] the only viable cultural organizing project could be a literary movement, not a visual art movement. Hübschammanová supported those Romani friends and colleagues of hers, endowed with great literary talents, to take up writing in *Romanes*. Andrej Pešta, on the other hand, was active in the editorial board of the Union's bulletin *Románi ľil*. Being both a writer and a photographer, he left a distinct mark on the visual format and the content of the periodical.[12]

Although, this fortunate development was stunted by the onset of normalization in early 1970s,[13] its members managed before the dissolution of the Union in 1973 to conceptualize and lay a foundation to the *Museum of Romani culture* with the collection of material culture administered by Daniel. Their dream came true only after the fall of communism in 1991. In the larger scheme of things, the Union of the Gypsies-Roma and the Museum of Romani culture are achievements of the whole Roma civil movement, nevertheless one family stands out in the Czechoslovak cultural history of Roma. It is the

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[7] There was a Czech and Slovak branch of the organization.

[8] The union was a member of the National Front!

[9] The union sought also recognition for the Roma as the Holocaust victims, engaged in memory work and initiated the annual memorial gathering at the place of the former concentration camp in Hodonín u Kunštátu.

[10] Among the Union's members were also several non-Roma scholars, e.g., Milena Hübschmannová, an Indologist, and a major figure in the history of knowledge production on Roma under state socialism. In 1991, due to her efforts the Romani studies department was founded at Charles University.

[11] Romani language, art of storytelling and the oral culture of Roma in general belonged among the major research interest of Hübschmannová.

[12] Apart from their obvious historical documentary value, Pešta's photos are unique as they offer a rare portrayal of Roma through the insider perspective. These photographs represent the earliest photographic imagery created by a Roma subject.

[13] The major negative consequence of this general political hardening was the adoption of the sterilization law in 1971. Although not explicitly targeting Roma, the legislation was designed to covertly control the reproduction of the Roma population.

Holomek family. Tomáš Holomek (b. 1911) and his nephew Miroslav (b. 1925) were the founding members of the Union, while Karel (b. 1927), also active in the Union, is credited with making the Museum reality. Today, the Museum's director is Karel's daughter, a historian Jana Horváthová.[14]

The available scholarship on the phenomenon of the Romani visual art in Czechoslovakia, authored mostly by Jana Horváthová, dates its emergence into early 1990s. This dating does not rule out an existence of the visual artistic practice among the Roma before 1989, however as I suggested above, no activities of the Union, we know of, were oriented in this direction. The only exception is the exhibition organized by Milena Hübschmannová of Rudolf Dzurko in 1977. Apart from a short-termed preoccupation with wood carving, Dzurko made original artworks painted with glass powders.[15] Dzurko earned popularity also in the folk-art circles. Folk art under socialism had been ideologically reframed as an authentic expression of the working class. Dzurko was a rare real representative of the folk art defined in these terms. His work within these official cultural structures was not therefore perceived and presented as Romani art, but as folk art. The ground-breaking change came in 1986, the year marked in historiography as another turning point in the state's approach towards the Roma, when Dzurko's work could be for the first time displayed as Romani art. It was at the annual folk festival *Východná 86* whose dramaturgy that year most patently reflected this political turn. The 1986 edition of the festival was entitled *Ľudia z rodu Rómov* [People of the Roma Ancestry].[16] As Dzurko constitutes an isolated phenomenon, the Horváthová's dating is substantiated.

Similarly, as was the case with the literary movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also the emergence of the Roma artists in the early 1990s is historically determined and can be interpreted as an effect of the post-socialist transition. Roma en masse lost their jobs but gained political freedom and cultural rights. Having plenty of leisure time on their hands, people took up hobbies and for some of them it was art. The "discovery" of the Roma naivist and self-educated artists was an unintended consequence of the ethnographic mapping and search for new material culture objects in Slovakia by workers of the Museum. The Museum understandably expressed interest in these works and begun collecting them. The local knowledge of cultural workers in national and ethnographic museums, and cultural organizations, along with personal contacts of Roma friends and colleagues proved invaluable and indispensable for looking up new artists. The

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[14] Tomáš Holomek earned a university degree in law already in the early 1930s. Holomek family is in the historiography of the Czech and Moravian Roma a well-researched family. The historiographical term Czech and Moravian Roma designates the pre-war population of the Czech Lands. Only around six hundred members had survived the Holocaust.

[15] This technique was his personal invention.

[16] Arne B. Mann, "Zmeny v prístupe k Rómom pred rokom 1989. O programe 'Ľudia z rodu Rómov' [A Shift in the Approach Towards the Roma before 1989. On the Program of the Folk Festival 'People of the Roma Ancestry']," in *Rómovia 30 rokov po revolúcii* [Roma Thirty Years after the Revolution], ed. Vlado Rafael, and Michal Vašečka (Bratislava: eduRoma, 2020), 35.

first artists, whose works were selected into collection, were found in towns and cities, that is in urban areas where Roma lived dispersed among the majority population, but also in the segregated rural areas, in Romani settlements. Romani volunteers mediated contact and acted also as translators. Some artists created their original art, while other copied images from magazines or famous works of art from publications. The Museum workers encouraged these individuals to develop trust in their own artistic imagination and draw inspiration from their idiosyncratic experiences, thoughts, memories, dreams, etc. The interest of the Museum sustained their practice economically, but importantly in terms of motivation. Further, by framing their works as art the cultural workers aided their self-understanding as artists. Museum may have influenced the artists also by directing their focus on Romani culture as a source of inspiration, not only formally but foremost content-wise, meaning to their identity, family, history, memory. The role of the Museum in the development of the artistic practice among the Roma is considerable. [17]

There were nevertheless also Roma artists who may have collaborated with the museum but who shaped their artistic careers independently. Since the late 1990s, the first professional artists appear on the scene, and after 2000 we see also several professional artists of Roma origin who experience great success on the Czech and Slovak contemporary art scene. Some of these professional artists do not characterize their work as Romani art or may not even identify as Roma.

Conclusion

Main findings, and their reflection.

[17] Horváthová, Jana. "Romské výtvarnictví v zemích bývalého Československa (2. část) [Romani Visual Art in the Countries of Former Czechoslovakia (part 2)]." *Romano Džaniben. Časopis romistických studií* [Romani Knowledge. Journal of the Romani Studies] 8, no. 1–2 (2001): 124–129.

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