Nina Pavelčíková: romové v českých zemích v letech 1945–1989 (Roma in the czech lands 1945–1989)

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The issue under review represents the most compelling synthesis of the Ostrava historian Nina Pavelčíková to date. The subject of her research after 1989 became Czech (Czechslovak)-Romani coexistence covering the period from the end of the Second World War to the present. In the pages of Urban People we mention this work, especially because the Romani national minority (in Pavelčíková's concept, an ethnic group), during the period of so-called communism from the early 1950s, went through an insensitive process of a very rapid and revolutionary form of urbanization. As a result of a postwar advertising campaign looking for an unqualified labor force, the culturally distinct, linguistically – at least in the first years – different, educationally and, therefore, also socially handicapped minority came from Slovakia to Prague, Ústí nad Labem, Most, Kladno, Pilsen, Děčín, and other northern and western Czech border cities. In Moravia, they headed for Ostrava, Brno and Karviná. The special subject of interest of Nina Pavelčíková, however, became the relation of state organs to the Roma and to the so-called Romani question. As a historian, she emphasized the idea that problems of coexistence with the majority population have historic roots. Increasing Romani unemployment, the non-functioning family, various forms of addiction (to drugs, slot-machines, etc.), parasitic ways of supporting themselves, usury, etc., are the result of complicated historic development and also of different traditions. Pavelčíková characterizes Romani otherness as a difference in origin, physiognomy, language, a lack of written culture, a different socio-cultural system, a system of family, relatives and mentality and norms of behavior. Despite usage of some sources which are routinely considered non-standard in historiography (Romani literature, memoirs, remembrances, interviews, data from the fieldwork among Roma in

Vitkovice, Ostrava and southern Moravia [1999], musical recordings, film, but surprisingly no sayings and proverbs), this is a historic work based mainly on archival research of sources of authoritative provenance (the most interesting of which are printed in the concluding supplements and expanded with eight photographs of a Romani school and model pupils, Romani workers, a Romani family in Ostrava in the 1950s, and Romani officials). Meanwhile it is very significant that only few of the sources used are of Romani provenance and these are, as a rule, stimulated by the interest of the majority: Romani officials claim to be among the builders of socialism; they justify their parasitic way of living by blaming their poverty or the relation of the majority society to Gypsies as to an inferior, isolated group. As a warning, the Romani holocaust is recalled. The majority society is then called upon to be patient and to express good will toward allegedly timid and mistrustful co-citizens. Pavelčíková's analysis of the postwar period is original, especially in her attempt at periodization of the official majority attitude toward the Roma, which, to a certain extent, corresponds to the historic periodization of the postwar period (1945–1948, 1948–1957, 1958–1968, 1969–1977, 1977–1989), and further, her refusal to make a superficial evaluation of the former regime and call it a regime of ill will. On the other hand, Pavelčíková actually reveals the roots in those times of the contemporary crisis of Romani society: she sees them in the broken or disturbed institution of family and neighborhood and in the deformation of traditional Romani values of solidarity, cooperation, absence of egotism and miserliness.

A key period was, according to the Ostrava historian, the late 1950s, a time of urbanization, balancing itself with the unfriendly environment of an industrial city full of unknown elements of civilization. As a result of the zeal (often well-meant) to create a model educated, hard-working and healthy socialist citizen, however, there arose tense coexistence between the majority and the minority as well as the rise of new Romani ghettos. The Sovietization of national politics led to a new discrimination law that forbade a traveling lifestyle (1958), emanating from the myth about traveling Roma in the past (page 15 – actually we have documents about

Roma who had already settled in the
14th and 15th centuries). While the postwar
period, when only 583 Czech and
Moravian Roma returned to the Czech
lands from concentration camps, oscillated
between suggestions of repressive
measures that were comparable to Protectorate
policies (a register of persons
of Gypsy origin, forced-labor camps, reeducation
centers, removal of children
from Romani families) and an attempt
to respect Roma as a special nation with
its own culture and language, the second
stage was characterized by unconditional
assimilation. The first era was
shaped by the first migration waves of
socially handicapped Slovak Roma. At
the time of creation of the communist
conception of a solution of the so-called
Gypsy question after February 1948
when another stream of migration came,
important personalities came forward to
push for liquidation of the Romani handicapped.
Several original pedagogical and
educational institutions with remarkable
consequences for Romani children
and Romani parents were founded. The
most popular of them became the Gypsy
School of Peace in Květušin near České
Budějovice and then later in Dobrá Voda,
linked to the famous pedagogue Miroslav
Dědič. The next period beginning in
1958, on the other hand, formed the socalled
dispersal (1965–1968) or, more
precisely, the forced urbanization of the
Romani population. It was divided into
three groups: the settled Gypsies, the
most numerous semi-settled Gypsies and
the most problematic (from the point of
view of the majority) traveling Gypsies, at
whom a law regarding permanent settlement
(1958) was aimed. A positive aspect
of that era was the rise in the health,
social and educational level of the Roma,
although the Roma never achieved the
majority's average. The period around the
so-called Prague Spring activated Romani
activity of its own. The Roma created
for themselves the Union of Gypsies
(Roma) (1968–1973) and made contact
with international organizations. This
promising development was interrupted
during the time of normalization when
there was a return to the model of the
controlling, socially generous state rejecting
individuality and permitting, in its
beginnings, only small cultural activities
(the rise of Romani bands, organizing of
exhibitions of Romani crafts). The turnaround
of state policies toward the Roma
in 1989 was already foreshadowed
in the
document called Charta 77, which criticized

the state concept of the so-called
social and cultural integration of the
Roma which also devalorized the Romani
past (in fact, between 1972 and 1974,
a large-scale pig farm was built in Lety on
the land where there had been a concentration
camp for Roma under the Protectorate).
Probably the largest memorial of
unreal notions of that era was the realization
of the idea of a Romani prefabricated
housing development in the Chánov section
of the town of Most. Romani families
of very different social levels were unable
to find a modus vivendi and, for integrated
Roma, Chánov changed into a space from
which they wanted to escape. An official
party document that appeared at the end
of the 1980s was reflected in an increase
of Romani activity plus realistic thinking
about the state of the Romani community
and the causes of the failure of assimilation,
including criticism of state paternalism.
Pavelčíková's book is thus new proof of
the fact that the generous social policy of
the totalitarian state of excluding private
activity despite the declaration of a scientific
and complex solution of the problem
does more harm than good. At this point,
one can also regret that Pavelčíková did
not consider a comparison of Czechoslovak
state policies toward the Roma
with state policies of other Soviet satellites
and with state policies of advanced
capitalist states. The attentive reader,
familiar with the gains and state of contemporary
schooling and culture must,
however, come to the conclusion that
everything here has already been, even
if, e.g., a Romani boarding school in the
1950s would not be successful in the light
of postmodern pedagogy with its accent
on child nurturing in the family. At the
same time it would be very interesting
to follow the life stories of Romani children
reared in such schools, the degree of
their involvement in the majority society
and the degree of their assimilation or,
more precisely, the functioning or nonfunctioning
in direct proportion of the
help of the majority and social involvement
to the satisfaction of the minority.
Subtle anthropological research could
then, on the bases of oral-historic interviews,
augment the fascinating testimony
of the Romani activist and author Elena
Lacková
and record how the state-created
"great" history was reflected in the
fates of ordinary people.
Throughout the book, which is a useful
picture of the dark postwar period, Nina
Pavelčíková promotes a thesis about the
improvement in education of the Roma

as an assumption of the improvement of
their social success. And this intellectual
cliché is an illustration of our underestimation
of the importance of the quality
of the majority population, the degree of
their prejudices, xenophobia and racism.
It is shown that the quality of coexistence
is a two-sided matter, even if the greater
responsibility falls on the shoulders of the
advantaged (majority). Undoubtedly it
would, therefore, do the text good if the
postwar position of the Roma were followed
in comparison with the position
of other minorities and certain patterns
were revealed in the coexistence of unequal
neighbors.

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