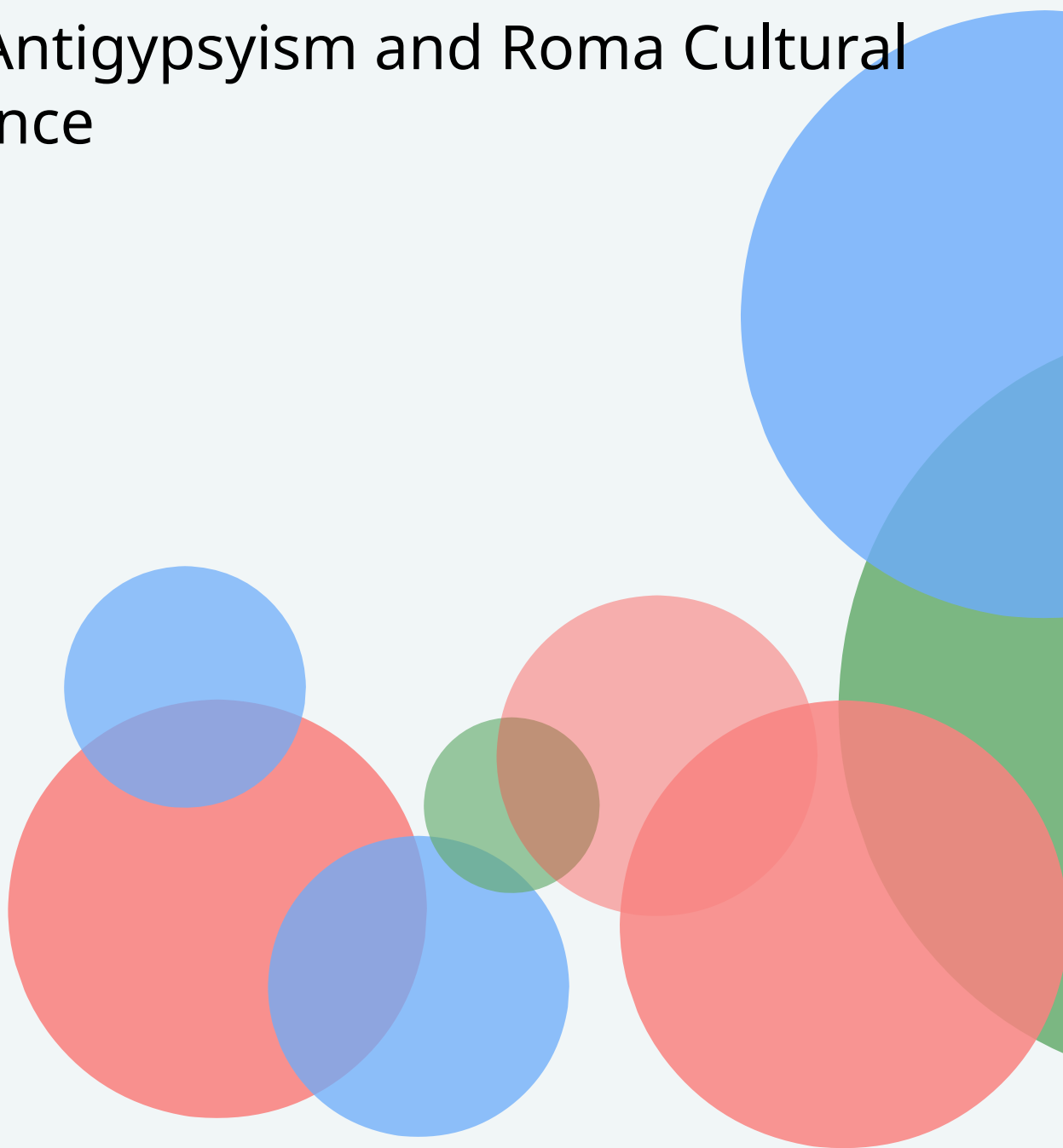

Czech Antigypsyism and Roma Cultural Resistance



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European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture (ERiac)

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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* 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 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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Executive Summary

This research summarizes the history and present of antigypsyism in the Czech-speaking part of Europe and Roma resistance to this inimical force. It reviews the cultural history of Roma communities in the Czech lands and discusses how Romani people use art to resist antigypsyism, assimilation, discrimination, and segregation.

The first section covers the history of antigypsyism until the present, covering major historical milestones such as the establishment of a democratic Czechoslovakia, the Nazi occupation, the postwar communist coup and totalitarian rule, the Warsaw Pact invasion and the normalization era, and the transition to democracy after 1989 from the perspective of Roma. The genocide of the Roma and Sinti during the Holocaust; the postwar forced sterilization of Roma women, which continued into the 21st century; the forced assimilation, proletarianization, and sedentarization of the Roma during communism; and their segregated undereducation that left them tragically uncompetitive in the transition to democracy and a market economy are all discussed.

The second section discusses Roma resistance to the foregoing by those who fought the Nazis; survived the Holocaust and fought for its dignified remembrance; survived forced sterilization and fought to be compensated; struggled to maintain their customs, identity, language, and traditions during communism; and struggle to put an end to the assimilation, discrimination, and segregation experienced by Roma today, including the resurgence of fatal ultra-right violence by non-state actors and the harms of the digital era. Roma civil society and the development of Roma institutions are reviewed.

The third section discusses the cultural history of Roma in the Czech lands, noting the geographical differences in their dispersal, including of Roma subgroups, and the different histories of their interaction with local economies, as well as the impact of such contacts on their cultural output. This section also describes the impact of Roma interaction with Czech academia on the preservation of the Romani language.

The final section discusses how Romani artists have contributed to resisting antigypsyism, assimilation, discrimination, and segregation up until the present. Through literature, music, performance, and visual arts, Roma have told their own stories as they see fit, irrespective of the pushback they receive from the larger society. Fortunately, many artworks about Roma subject matter or produced by Roma artists have crossed over into mainstream society, where they have been received warmly, even when they reveal unpleasant truths.

Note on Methodology

This report draws heavily on the author's 30-year personal engagement with the issue of equal treatment for Roma in Czech society. It relies mostly on secondary sources, access to some of which would not have been possible without assistance. In this respect the author would like to thank Mirek Vodrážka of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes for providing the material from the communist-era state security archives referenced here.

There is not room in this report to discuss an aspect of Roma involvement in cultural output that is probably more salient, in many ways, to more people in the Czech environment than are many of the examples of the art of Roma resistance detailed in this report. Czech film and television productions, as well as Czech advertising, have consistently featured antigypsyist tropes, and even Roma performers embodying such tropes, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries, in content that is considered lowbrow. Such performers are criticized within the Roma community for perpetuating the harm of internalizing and reenacting antigypsyist stereotypes, whether they be dehumanizing, exoticizing, or romanticizing. The existence of this material highlights the need for Roma themselves to be in charge of producing their own images, both of themselves and of the larger society of which they are a part. Actors of Roma origin have also been featured in art house films starting with the Czechoslovak New Wave through to the present. In the role of directors or screenwriters, Roma have so far produced documentary films in the Czech environment.

Antigypsyism, Past and Present

Antigypsyism, or aversion to Romani people, who have been racialized as “gypsies” for centuries, has been a permanent feature of society in the Czech lands (Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia) from before the early 20th-century independence of Czechoslovakia, during the communist era, and into the Czech Republic today.¹ It has seriously damaged inter-ethnic relations and resulted in the intergenerational segregation of Roma away from non-Roma from the very first moments of their socialization through the education system, a situation that persists to this day and has been extensively documented, litigated, and resisted.²

During the Holy Roman Empire and the earlier part of the Habsburg Monarchy/Austro-Hungarian Empire, Roma in the Czech lands were targeted with bans enforced through their killing and mutilation, motivating their itinerancy as a survival strategy; over the centuries, authorities abandoned the goal of eliminating them entirely (with the exception of a revival of this aim during the Holocaust) and instead sought their mandatory settlement and assimilation.³ Romani people have maintained their own culture, language, and worldview here despite ceaseless efforts to erase them.

Czechoslovakia declared independence in 1918 and became a parliamentary democracy.⁴ In 1927, Parliament passed the “Act on Wandering Gypsies”, which discriminatorily empowered local police to maintain registries of those racialized as “gypsies” and required each such person aged 14 and older to carry an identification passbook at all times; the point was to criminalize and curtail the freedom of movement of those so targeted.⁵

In 1938, Nazi Germany seized Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia and began expelling all non-Germans. The Second Czechoslovak Republic (October 1938-March 1939) updated the registration of the Roma that had first been undertaken in the late 1920s, creating records which would soon facilitate the Nazi persecution and genocide of Roma and Sinti there and, after sending a delegation to Nazi Germany to study how such camps were designed and managed, discriminatorily established “labor camps” for those designated as “gypsies or living in the gypsy way” in Czechoslovakia.⁶

¹ Albert, Gwendolyn, *Antigypsyism in the Czech Republic: From Recognition to Transitional Justice?* (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2025), p. 2

² *Ibid.*, pp. 44-6

³ Vera Sokolova, *Cultural Politics of Ethnicity: Discourses on Roma in Communist Czechoslovakia*, ibidem-Verlag, Stuttgart (2008), p. 53.

⁴ The territory covered by Czechoslovakia in 1918 included what is today Slovakia and part of Ukraine. This report will not cover developments there.

⁵ *Zákon ze 14.VII.1927 č. 117 Sb. o potulných cikánech*. See Markus Pape, *A Nikdo Vám Nebude Věřit...*, GplusG (1997), p. 25; Celia Donert, *The Rights of the Roma* (Cambridge 2017) p. 22; Sokolova, p. 83.

⁶ Pape, p. 26.

In March 1939, the Czech lands became the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia of the Nazi German Reich. Some Roma and Sinti escaped; for those who remained, the authorities ordered in November 1939 that they and other itinerants either settle by January 1940 or be imprisoned in penal labor camps. One such camp was established in Bohemia (Lety) and another in Moravia (Hodonín), where itinerant men of any ethnicity could be incarcerated for up to three months.⁷ In 1942, both sites became “Gypsy Camps” (*Zigeunerlager*), where people designated as “gypsies” were imprisoned indefinitely irrespective of age or gender. The camps closed in 1943 after their inmates had either escaped, died there, or been deported to Auschwitz II-Birkenau.

Today we understand Hodonín and Lety to have been concentration camps. The roundup of their inmates on 1-3 August 1942 captured about a third of the 6,500 Roma registered in the Protectorate.⁸ The camps were run by Czech officials and their extreme mismanagement meant the “Gypsy Camp” phase did not last even a year, with both sites closing after outbreaks of typhus in the winter. There were frequent injuries, hard labor, high morbidity and mortality, lack of medical care, and undernourishment in these camps, as those running them stole the prisoners’ rations to sell on the black market. Some inmates tried to escape, and some who succeeded joined the resistance, which will be discussed in the next section.

At least 2,645 Protectorate Roma and Sinti were murdered in Auschwitz II-Birkenau alone. Unknown numbers were persecuted as “asocials” and murdered on that basis. The number of Sinti and Roma sent directly from the border regions to extermination camps has yet to be determined. Just 583 Roma concentration camp prisoners returned to postwar Czechoslovakia.⁹ The genocide of the Roma and Sinti in the Protectorate was one of the most successful perpetrated by the Nazis and their local collaborators.

After the war, there were almost no successful prosecutions of those responsible for the genocide of the Roma and Sinti. A German police official was charged in 1946 with complicity in the deaths of the Czechoslovak Roma and Sinti murdered in Auschwitz and extradited to face an Extraordinary People’s Tribunal.¹⁰ He testified that the deportation of “gypsies” from the Protectorate had been “desired by the Czech population”. He was convicted in 1947, sentenced to 10 years, then released early after authorities noted that among those sent to Auschwitz had been “about 2,000 professional and habitual criminals”, which they apparently viewed as an ameliorating circumstance. He was repatriated to Germany thereafter.¹¹

⁷ Pape, p. 27

⁸ Ctibor Nečas, *Českoslovenští Romové v letech 1938-45*, Brno: Masarykova univerzita (1995).

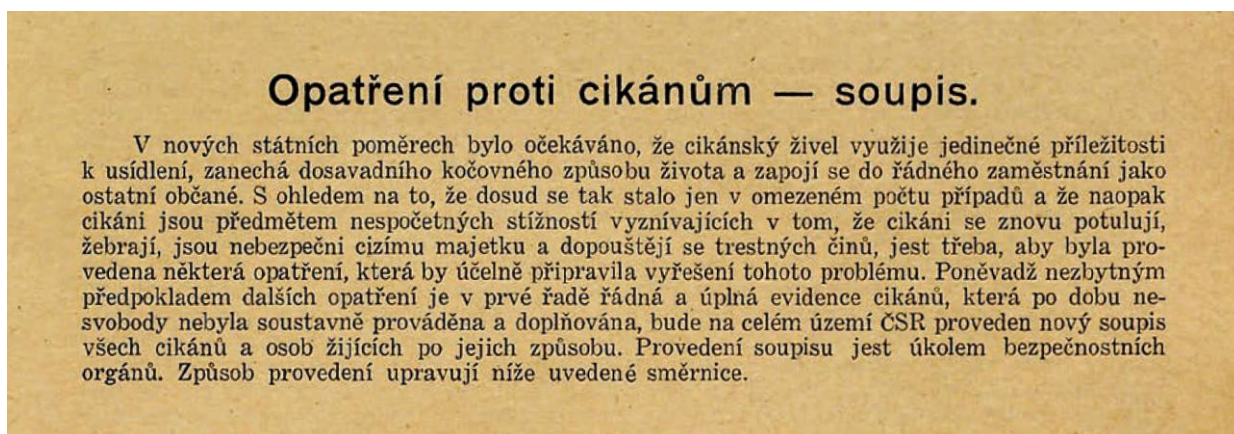
⁹ Ctibor Nečas, *Holocaust českých Romů*, Prostor, Praha (1999), p. 173.

¹⁰ Pape, pp. 108-9

¹¹ Donert, p. 44

After liberation, Czechoslovakia reconstituted itself in 1945 and prohibited racial discrimination, but that did not prevent local and regional authorities from pursuing antigypsyist policies. As early as December 1945, Prague authorities sought to ban “gypsy wandering”.¹² From 1945-7, tens of thousands of Roma, most from Slovakia, headed for the border regions from which ethnic Germans and Hungarians had been violently expelled after the war without due process, but they were just a tiny fraction of the millions of Czechs, Slovaks, Volhynians and others also moving westward after the war.¹³

In 1946, the Communist Party won the elections. In 1947, police resumed the registration and criminalization of “nomadic gypsies”.¹⁴



Introduction to the Czechoslovak Interior Ministry's measure on "Fighting Crime. Measures against Gypsies – Registry" published in 1947 (Source: Archive of the State Security Services).

In February 1948, the communist putsch started 40 years of totalitarian dictatorship. In November 1948, forced labor camps were reopened.¹⁵ By 1949, authorities were advocating what they termed the solution “to the gypsy question”, proposing the incarceration of “wandering and work-shy persons” in forced labor camps, and by December 1949, 9,024 persons were so imprisoned.¹⁶

“Gypsies and persons living the gypsy way” were categorized into three groups. The first

¹² Sokolova, p. 73

¹³ Donert, Celia, *The Rights of the Roma* (Cambridge 2017), pp. 35-7

¹⁴ *Archiv bezpečnostních složek (ABS)*, f. Sekretariát ministra vnitra II. díl (A 6/2), inv. j. 381, Toulavé osoby, cikáni – opatření proti kočování. Boj proti zločinnosti. Opatření proti cikánům – soupis, 20. 7. 1947; cited in Albert, Gwendolyn, “Nucená sterilizace v komunistickém Československu: Státní podpora porušování lidských práv skrze zdravotnictví a sociální služby”, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2025/03 (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů), p. 38

¹⁵ *ABS*, f. Sekretariát ministra vnitra II. díl (A 6/2), inv. j. 381, Toulavé osoby, cikáni – opatření proti kočování. Dopis náměstka ministra vnitra plk. J. Kotala, 16. 12. 1953; cited in Albert, Gwendolyn, “Nucená sterilizace v komunistickém Československu: Státní podpora porušování lidských práv skrze zdravotnictví a sociální služby”, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2025/03 (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů), p. 38.

¹⁶ *ABS*, f. Velitelství Státní bezpečnosti (310), sign. 310-82-3, Řešení cikánské otázky, 15. 11. 1949; cited in Albert, Gwendolyn, “Nucená sterilizace v komunistickém Československu: Státní podpora porušování lidských práv skrze zdravotnictví a sociální služby”, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2025/03 (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů), p. 37

were those who allegedly demonstrated “good will” to settle and cooperate with social workers. The second allegedly had to be forced to undertake full-time work through constant monitoring by local officials. The third were allegedly “wandering and work-shy” persons impervious to transformation who should therefore be forced to be re-educated with their families in “special labor camps”.¹⁷ However, in 1950, the authorities did agree with official objections raised to the idea of such forced labor camps for entire families as being too obviously racist.¹⁸

The Ministry of National Security undertook its operation “TO” (for *toulavé osoby*, the euphemism for persons considered of “gypsy” origin because they lived on the road) from August 1952 to April 1953.¹⁹ In late 1953, authorities investigated the “gypsies” identified by operation “TO” as having allegedly perpetrated “economic crimes”.²⁰ They argued that although “the gypsies have been given...opportunities to permanently settle in the border areas of our historical territory...most gypsies are still not involved in our people’s efforts to build [socialism] and are continuing their parasitic way of life.”²¹

In 1958, Czechoslovakia became the first Soviet satellite to issue a secret decree on “Work among the Gypsy Population”, followed by the “Act on the Permanent Settlement of Nomadic Persons”, targeting what was now officially termed “the mobile part of Czechoslovak society”.²² The rhetoric of the decree was influenced not just by Soviet policy, but also by citizens’ complaints.²³ Security officials warned that ignoring complaints of alleged “gypsy crime” could lead to popular violence and undermine the legitimacy of the state itself.²⁴ Those targeted by this policy were subjected to yet another registration in February 1959.²⁵ The forced geographic redistribution of Roma was given a new impetus thereby.²⁶ Local authorities were empowered to temporarily “settle” those living on the road by simply confiscating their horses and tractors and leaving them in their stationary wagons.²⁷ Roma children were then forcibly removed from their birth families by officials who sincerely believed their allegedly “degenerate” parents were unable to act in their

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Donert, p. 68

²⁰ ABS, f. A 6/2, inv. j. 381, Toulavé osoby, cikáni – opatření proti kočování. Dopis náměstka ministra vnitra plk. J. Kotala, 16. 12. 1953; cited in Albert, Gwendolyn, “Nucená sterilizace v komunistickém Československu: Státní podpora porušování lidských práv skrze zdravotnictví a sociální služby”, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2025/03 (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů), p. 38

²¹ ABS, Toulavé osoby cikánského původu – opatření, 22. 1. 1954; cited in Albert, Gwendolyn, “Nucená sterilizace v komunistickém Československu: Státní podpora porušování lidských práv skrze zdravotnictví a sociální služby”, *Paměť a dějiny*, 2025/03 (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů), p. 38

²² Donert, pp. 123-124; Sokolova, p. 94

²³ Donert, p. 121

²⁴ Donert pp. 123-4

²⁵ Donert, pp. 96-133

²⁶ Sokolova, p. 139

²⁷ Donert, p. 134

children's best interests; the intergenerational transmission of Roma culture and language was severely disrupted and their assimilation was accelerated at this time.²⁸ However, Czech ideologues framed both the decree and its execution as "aid", explicitly rejecting comparisons to the persecution of "gypsies" underway at that same time in Europe's liberal democracies.²⁹

In the 1960s, "Committees for Work among the Gypsy Population", primarily staffed by non-Roma, started targeting those whom they saw as needing their "aid"; in crime statistics, the "gypsies" were the only group with their own separate section.³⁰ Health care providers, public health officials, social workers, and teachers all medicalized and pathologized those targeted for this social exclusion.³¹

Censorship was lifted during the Prague Spring of 1963-1968, and expanded rights to education, health care, housing, and private property were promised.³² The Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968 then started the reactionary "normalization" period, purging thousands of bureaucrats; Soviet troops occupied Czechoslovakia until the democratic transition of 1989.

In the 1970s, agricultural cooperatives built what would become an industrial pig farm for 13,000 animals on the grounds of the former concentration camp site at Lety, and in the 1980s, a storm erased any surface traces of the site in the nearby forest where the camp victims had been buried in unmarked graves.³³ The site of the former concentration camp at Hodonín was similarly disrespected and used as a recreation facility with a swimming pool. Such lack of recognition extended to Jewish victims of the Holocaust at this time as well; in the 1980s, for instance, materials developed for visitors to the former Nazi ghetto of Theresienstadt described those murdered there during the war as "360,000 Czech citizens" without informing readers that the vast majority were also Jews who were murdered for that very reason.³⁴

Civil society began to organize in response to the heavy-handed invasiveness of totalitarian rule. Charter 77, a dissident organization, published its samizdat "Document 23" in 1978 on the situation of the "Gypsies/Roma", warning that Roma women were being

²⁸ Donert, p. 72

²⁹ Donert, p. 128

³⁰ Donert, pp. 154-158

³¹ Donert, p.144

³² Cătălina Vrabie, "The Prague Spring", 21 August 2018, European Network of Remembrance and Solidarity, available at <https://enrs.eu/article/the-prague-spring#:~:text=The%20first%20few%20months%20under,freedom%20in%20finding%20new%20markets>, accessed 11 March 2026

³³ Pape, pp. 113-114

³⁴ Donert, p. 198

coerced into sterilization under dubious circumstances and that “Czechoslovak institutions will soon have to answer charges that they are committing genocide”.³⁵ The history of those human rights abuses has been documented more fully elsewhere and will be briefly described below.³⁶

The 1989 transition to democracy and capitalism reinstated freedoms of assembly, speech, and movement and officially recognized Roma as a national minority. The first free elections since 1946 were held in 1990, and in 1993, the country became the independent states of the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Many people were emboldened to express antigypsyist views more openly than during communism, testing the limits of democracy and posing a challenge to the authorities, who have been reluctant to fully use the powers of the state to curtail such behavior for fear of losing elections.

The new Czech Republic revoked the citizenship of those on its territory who had been born after a certain date in Slovakia; by mid-1994, such persons were stateless. Among those who had to reapply for citizenship were many Roma. In 1997, the Supreme Court ruled citizenship could not be denied on the basis of conviction for petty crime.³⁷

Far-right, neo-Nazi, white supremacists started meeting publicly, intimidating Roma, spreading their ideology, and targeting Roma with violence, maiming and murdering them in public spaces and in their own homes with relative impunity all over the country. The public either celebrated the perpetrators or disputed whether their motivation was racist, demoralizing the Roma, many of whom emigrated.³⁸

In 1993, for instance, 17-year-old Tibor Danihel was one of four Roma minors assaulted by 60 masked skinheads with baseball bats and nunchaku who chased them into the Otava River and prevented them from returning to shore, shouting that they were “Teaching the gypsies to swim”. Mr. Danihel drowned; his death was ruled accidental. After his family sued, it took until 1999 for final verdicts to be pronounced; just three perpetrators received between six and eight years in prison for attempted murder and murder. Mr. Danihel’s mother had to endure being mocked by the defendants in court

³⁵ Charta 77, *Situace Cikánů-Romů v Československu* (1978)

³⁶ Albert, Gwendolyn, *Antigypsyism in the Czech Republic: From Recognition to Transitional Justice?* (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2025), pp. 22-27

³⁷ Sokolova, p. 256; Donert, p. 260. The case involved a plaintiff who had lived in the Czech Republic from the age of three months, had been raised in orphanages, and was sentenced to expulsion after stealing sugar beets of very low value.

³⁸ Jan Charvát, ‘Radicalization of Czech society: a new phenomenon, or the result of long-term developments?’, Heinrich Böll Foundation, 15 February 2025, available at: <https://cz.boell.org/en/2023/01/03/radikalizace-ceske-spolecnosti-novy-fenomen-nebo-vysledek-dlouhodobeho-vyvoje>, accessed 5 March 2026; Rosie Johnston, ‘Czech Roma are travelling – and many choose not to return’, Radio Prague International, 25 April 2008, available at: <https://english.radio.cz/czech-roma-are-travelling-and-many-choose-not-return-8596686>, accessed 5 March 2026.

and did not live to see justice done, passing away in 1998.³⁹

Based on such cases, some countries granted the Roma emigrating from the Czech Republic asylum in the 1990s, a fact that was resented, as the country was in accession talks with the EU and such facts tarnished its reputation. When Canada reinstated visas for all Czech citizens in 1997, Roma emigration was blamed.⁴⁰

Since the democratic transition, both the entertainment industry and news reporters have perpetuated and still perpetuate antigypsyism in their output, portraying Roma not just as criminal, but as congenitally, habitually, inherently so, in part because this view is expressed by politicians.⁴¹ For instance, the chair of the Republican Party said on the floor of the lower house in 1996, among many other things, that "Gypsies should be criminally liable from birth, because being born is practically their greatest crime."⁴² Most of his fellow lawmakers left the chamber in protest on that occasion, but his immunity from prosecution shielded him from law enforcement.

Local authorities have been and still are segregating Roma spatially and symbolically. For instance, in 1999, Ústí nad Labem built a wall to separate non-Roma from Roma, drawing criticism from the EU. In November 1999 it was removed; public funds for improving interethnic coexistence were instead used by the city to buy the non-Roma residents' real estate so they could relocate.⁴³ Today the private owners of apartments for rent throughout the country regularly advertise their availability with ads reading "Roma, do not apply", with impunity.

The first conviction of a perpetrator for the racially-motivated murder of a Roma person (Otto Absolon) was not handed down until 2003, when a neo-Nazi was sentenced to 17 years. Skinheads annually staged protests of his conviction with impunity. Local Roma

³⁹ Pelíšek, A. (2015), 'Zemřel, protože byl Rom. Utopil se v Otavě, kam ho nahnali skinheadi.', iDNES.cz, 11 November 2015, https://www.idnes.cz/ceske-budejovice/zpravy/skinheadi-smrt-tibor-danihel-pisek-1993.A151031_2202336_budejovice-zpravy_mrl, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴⁰ Gwendolyn Albert, 'Anti-Gypsyism and the Extreme Right in the Czech Republic, 2008-2011', in Stewart, Michael, ed. *The Gypsy 'Menace'*, Hurst & Co. (2012), p. 152. Canadian visas were reinstated for the same reason in 2009.

⁴¹ Zdeněk Ryšavý, 'Romani People Face Discrimination and Negative Media Portrayal in Czechia', *Balkan Insight*, 1 November 2023, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/11/01/romani-people-face-discrimination-and-negative-media-portrayal-in-czechia/>, accessed 5 March 2026; ROMEA, 'Commentary: Romani actors should refuse to perpetuate stereotypes in Czech television programs', *Romea.cz*, 25 September 2020, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/commentary-romani-actors-should-refuse-to-perpetuate-stereotypes-in-czech-television-programs>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴² Shorthand Record (Stenoprotokol) of the Parliament of the Czech Republic, 25 July 1996, available at: <https://www.psp.cz/eknih/1996ps/stenprot/003schuz/s003017.htm>, accessed 7 March 2026.

⁴³ Sokolova, pp. 247-9; Alexandra Poolos, 'Czech Republic: A Wall Divides the Country', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 9 October 1999, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/1092446.html>, accessed 5 March 2026; Ray Furlong, 'Czechs pull down Gypsy wall', 24 November 1998, *BBC*, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/534383.stm>, accessed 5 March 2026.

felt compelled to leave the town of Svitavy for their personal safety on those occasions.⁴⁴



The grave of Otta Absolon, one of many Romani people murdered by neo-Nazis in the Czech Republic since 1990.

In 2006, hundreds of Roma tenants were collectively, forcibly evicted by the town of Vsetín, some of whom were manipulated into moving to different administrative regions and assuming mortgages on properties unfit for human habitation; some spent the next 20 years in court, with Vsetín appealing the final judgments against it to the European Court of Human Rights in 2025.⁴⁵

Weekend arson sprees targeting Roma homes country-wide started in the fall of 2008. The largest outbreak of racist violence that decade happened on 17 November 2008, the state holiday marking the transition to democracy. Hundreds of neo-Nazis attempted a pogrom in Litvínov, to which 1,000 riot officers were deployed, eight of whom were injured. Non-Roma residents applauded the neo-Nazis; police found military-grade weapons had been stashed there in advance.⁴⁶

In 2009, four neo-Nazis set the home of a Roma family on fire in Vítkov. Eight people were sleeping there; the youngest sustained third-degree burns over 80% of her body, lost three fingers, and needs lifelong medical care. The perpetrators were sentenced to 20 or 22 years for racially-motivated attempted murder.⁴⁷ In 2024, three of them were granted early release; they have made only token payments toward the compensation

⁴⁴ Sokolova, p. 254. The perpetrator, who has always maintained his innocence, was granted early release after serving 12 years and undertook a failed bid as a candidate for the neo-Nazi Workers' Social Justice Party (DSSS) in elections to the Regional Assemblies in 2016 and another failed bid with the DSSS for mayor of Svitavy in 2018. See 'Rasistická vražda Roma Oty (†29): Před 21 lety ho ubodal neonacista Pechanec. Pak chtěl být starostou.' BLESK.CZ, 20 July 2022, available at <https://www.blesk.cz/clanek/zpravy-krimi/718151/rasisticka-vrazda-roma-oty-29-pred-21-lety-ho-ubodal-neonacista-pechanec-pak-chtel-byt-starostou.html>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴⁵ ČTK and ROMEA, 'Vsetín podá v kauze vystěhování Romů stížnost k evropskému soudu ve Štrasburku, advokátka romských rodin neví v čem by měla být porušena práva města', ROMEA.cz, 19 June 2025, available at <https://romea.cz/domaci/vsetin-poda-v-kauze-vystehovani-romu-stiznost-k-evropskemu-soudu-ve-strasburku-advokatka-romskych-rodin-nevi-v-cem-by-mela-byt-porusena-prava-mesta>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁴⁶ Gwendolyn Albert, 'Anti-Gypsyism and the Extreme Right in the Czech Republic, 2008-2011', in Stewart, Michael, ed. *The Gypsy 'Menace'*, Hurst & Co. (2012), pp. 147-8

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 151-2

they owe the victims.⁴⁸

In 2010, a Roma home in Ostrava was set alight, fortunately without harming anybody. A senator representing the region falsely alleged that the family had perpetrated the arson themselves to seek asylum abroad; she did not apologize until their non-Roma neighbors were convicted and sentenced to four and seven years in prison.⁴⁹

From 2011-2013, in numerous places across the country, neo-Nazi agitators incited hundreds of local non-Roma to storm Roma homes. Counter-protestors were targeted by police for arrest. In incidents of non-Roma murdering Roma, possible racial motivation was not investigated by police.⁵⁰ A 2012 EU FRA report on minorities as crime victims reviewed seven Member States and found that Roma in the Czech Republic were the most targeted for in-person, racially motivated crime, tied only with Somalis in Finland.⁵¹

In 2014, the European Commission launched infringement proceedings against the Czech Republic for failing to stop ethnic discrimination of Roma children in education.⁵² In 2024, it issued a second letter of formal notice, asking the state to document efforts to end the ethnic segregation of Roma in the schools, noting that they remain overrepresented in separate educational arrangements for pupils with behavioral and developmental disorders or disabilities, as well as segregated away from non-Roma pupils in mainstream classes and schools.⁵³

Starting in the 2010s, cyberspace became an unregulated venue for antigypsyist crime. For instance, in 2017, when a school published a photo of a first-grade class with mostly Arab and Roma children, death threats were made against them online; the main perpetrator was eventually given a 16-month suspended sentence.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ ČTK and Gwendolyn Albert, 'Czech court to rule on early release for another perpetrator of 2009 racially motivated arson on 18 September', Romea.cz, 30 August 2024, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-court-to-rule-on-early-release-for-another-perpetrator-of-2009-racially-motivated-arson-on-18-september>, accessed 5 March 2026

⁴⁹ Aleš Honus, *Právo*, 25. března 2010, „Janáčková se omluvila Romovi z Bedřišky za své výroky a políbila ho“, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/domaci-janackova-se-omluvila-romovi-z-bedrisky-za-sve-vyroky-a-polibila-ho-30283>, přístop 21. března 2026

⁵⁰ Albert, Gwendolyn, *Antigypsyism in the Czech Republic: From Recognition to Transitional Justice?* (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2025), pp. 35-8

⁵¹ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. 2012. EUMIDIS Data in Focus 6: Minorities as Victims of Crime.

⁵² Amnesty International, 25 September 2014, "EU action against Czech Republic for discrimination in schools is a victory for rights, justice, and Roma", available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/09/eu-action-against-czech-republic-discrimination-schools-victory-rights-justice-and-roma/>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵³ ČTK, ROMEA, Gwendolyn Albert, 'European Commission warns Czechia: End the discrimination of Romani children in the schools', Romea.cz, 3 October 2024, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/world/european-commission-warns-czechia-end-the-discrimination-of-romani-children-in-the-schools>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵⁴ ČTK, Zdeněk Ryšavý, 'Czech Supreme Court upholds sentence for hate posted about non-white first-graders: Not a joke, but the promotion of Nazism', Romea.cz, 15 October 2021, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-supreme-court-upholds-sentence-for-hate-posted-about-non-white-first-graders-not-a-joke-but-the-promotion-of-nazism>, accessed 5 March 2026.

A legislator with the “Freedom and Direct Democracy” (SPD) movement was charged with making remarks denying the WWII-era genocide of the Roma in 2017 and eventually got a six-month suspended prison sentence after his immunity from prosecution expired.⁵⁵ The SPD chair also made deceptive remarks about the Lety concentration camp in January 2018 with impunity.⁵⁶ In March 2018, the Lety site was desecrated with a severed pig’s head.⁵⁷ In May 2018, insulting signs were placed at the site, photographed, and the images distributed online; two men were charged in November with denying genocide, but pled the charges down to disorderly conduct and got suspended prison sentences of seven and five months.⁵⁸

In February 2024, a memorial opened to 11 boys born in a WWII-era concentration camp for Roma and Sinti in Liberec, where more than 130 Roma were imprisoned from 1941-3 before being sent to their deaths in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, or Ravensbrück.⁵⁹ In April 2025 it was discovered that the memorial had been vandalized and the names defaced, probably with an axe.⁶⁰ The perpetrator was never discovered. In October 2025, two benches were added to the memorial, one of which was dedicated to the Romani partisan Josef Serinek (see following section); in March 2026 it was discovered that somebody had vandalized the sign about him on that bench with the word “gypsy”.⁶¹

Legal and policy measures are obviously failing to eliminate antigypsyist discrimination,

⁵⁵ Daniela Lazarová, “Prague Court of Appeal upholds a six-month suspended sentence for Holocaust denial”, Radio Prague International, 12 June 2022, available at <https://english.radio.cz/prague-court-appeal-upholds-six-month-suspended-sentence-holocaust-denial-8768989>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵⁶ Jana Baudyšová, ‘Czech MP apologizes for ‘imprecision’, then urges people to read historian who calls the Romani Holocaust a ‘myth’, Romea.cz, 4 February 2018, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-mp-apologizes-for-imprecision-then-urges-people-to-read-historian-who-calls-the-romani-holocaust-a-myth>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵⁷ František Bikár, ‘Czech Police apprehend youth who desecrated Romani genocide memorial with pig’s head’, Romea.cz, 8 May 2018, available at <https://romea.cz/en/news/czech/czech-police-apprehend-youth-who-desecrated-romani-genocide-memorial-with-pig-s-head>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵⁸ ČTK, Zdeněk Ryšavý, ‘Czech Constitutional Court rejects complaint from man responsible for desecrating memorial to the Holocaust and its Romani victims at Lety’, Romea.cz, 6 April 2022, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-constitutional-court-rejects-complaint-from-man-responsible-for-desecrating-memorial-to-the-holocaust-and-its-romani>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁵⁹ ČTK, Zdeněk Ryšavý and Gwendolyn Albert, ‘Liberec, Czech Republic: Memorial to the children born in the local concentration camp for Roma and Sinti during WWII who died in Auschwitz’, Romea.cz, 4 March 2024, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/liberec-czech-republic-memorial-to-the-children-born-in-the-local-concentration-camp-for-roma-and-sinti-during-wwii-who-died-in-auschwitz>, accessed 5 March 2026. Following the deportations, the camp was repurposed to imprison French prisoners of war. During the Nazi occupation, 108 camps of different kinds were located in Liberec.

⁶⁰ ROMEA and Gwendolyn Albert, ‘Czech Police seek witnesses to attack on the Holocaust memorial to 11 Romani children born in Liberec concentration camp’, Romea.cz, 27 April 2025, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-police-seek-witnesses-to-attack-on-the-holocaust-memorial-to-11-romani-children-born-in-liberec-concentration-camp>, accessed 5 March 2026.

⁶¹ Zdeněk Ryšavý and Gwendolyn Albert, “Liberec, Czech Republic: Memorial bench to Romani partisan Josef Serinek vandalized with antigypsyist graffiti and scratches”, Romea.cz, 2 March 2026, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/liberec-czech-republic-memorial-bench-to-romani-partisan-josef-serinek-vandalized-with-antigypsyist-graffiti-and-scratches>, accessed 5 March 2026.

hate crime, and violence targeting Roma in the Czech Republic. Perhaps not unsurprisingly, no Roma representatives have been elected to the national legislature in the last 25 years. As recently as 2020, a high-circulation magazine even published an article by a non-Roma convict in which he described having to interact with Roma inmates as the “worst” aspect of prison and recycled well-worn, dehumanizing, antigypsyist tropes, such as the claim that Roma allegedly do not understand either the future or the past as concepts and are only able to focus on their own “physiological” needs.⁶²

Given the prevalence of such received wisdom, politicians at all levels of government fear no repercussions from reiterating it. Antigypsyist rhetoric has been a consistent aspect of all elections since 1990 across the political spectrum, with candidates scapegoating Roma, using the ethnicity-free designation “inadaptables” for them, and promising voters to drive them from their territories. Most recently, in the 2024 elections to the European Parliament, the Regional Assemblies, and one-third of the Senate, the SPD movement published more than one racist campaign ad; one featured an AI-generated graphic of two stereotypically Roma boys with the slogans: “They say we should go to school, but our folks couldn’t care less...” and “Welfare just for families whose children attend school!” In February 2025, the Czech lower house stripped the SPD chair of immunity so he could be prosecuted for inciting hatred, but his re-election later that year restored it. Prosecutors will therefore have to wait for him to leave office to pursue the charges; he is currently Speaker of the Chamber of Deputies.

Roma youth involved with the Mongaguá football club, a Roma-run project that protects children from being preyed on by the illicit drug trade, were subjected to racist abuse by drunken, adult, non-Roma football fans of FC Baník Ostrava on a train to Prague in November 2025. The police investigation of the incident was suspended in early 2026 when the perpetrators could not be identified.

It is clear that there is no broad consensus in Czech society at present to recognize antigypsyism as a harmful part of social life. It is necessary to generate such a consensus in order to safeguard the human rights of Roma, including to their culture and self-determination.

⁶² ‘Zápisky českého vězně: Jak žít ve vězení společně s jinými etnickými skupinami’, REFLEX, 8 September 2020, available at <https://www.reflex.cz/clanek/zajimavosti/102784/zapisky-ceskeho-vezne-jak-zit-ve-vezeni-spolecne-s-jinymi-etnickymi-skupinami.html#:~:text=V%20tuzemsk%C3%BDch%20v%C4%9Bznic%C3%ADch%20zauj%C3%ADmaj%C3%AD%20Romov%C3%A9,ofici%C3%A1ln%C4%9B%20veden%C3%A9%20jako%20%E2%80%9Estandardn%C3%AD%E2%80%9C>, accessed 5 March 2026.

Roma Resistance, Past and Present

The fact that Roma have continued to make the Czech lands their home irrespective of centuries of mistreatment, maintaining their culture and language all this time despite enormous pressure to assimilate, is their greatest act of resistance. Recent scholarship such as Markéta Hajská's *The Stojka family: Spatial mobility and territorial anchoredness of Lovara Vlast Roms in the former Czechoslovakia* (Karolinum 2024) sheds light on how this particular Roma subgroup overcame obstacles to making their livings and securing their homes and status in early 20th century Czechoslovakia.

Roma resilience and resistance ranges from the desperate acts required to survive the Holocaust to a civil rights movement in the present that is sophisticated. Postwar generations of Roma have rebuilt their political identity through mobilization that has been either sanctioned and sponsored by the state, or undertaken underground when necessary.

Like their fellow Czechoslovaks, Roma resisted Nazi occupation, both as enlisted soldiers and as partisans. The figure about whom the most is known is Josef Serinek (1900-1964), thanks to the three-volume biography of him by historian and Charter 77 signatory Jan Tesař, *Česká cikánská rapsodie* [Bohemian Gypsy Rhapsody].⁶³ Tesař recorded Serinek's reminiscences in 1963-4, which makes them some of the earliest-recorded sources of Roma provenance on the history of the Roma in the Czech lands in the early 20th century and their genocide during WWII.⁶⁴ After surviving the 1927 restrictions on Roma freedom of movement and participating in interwar Roma self-organization, Serinek was imprisoned in the concentration camp in Lety, from which he escaped and became a leader of a partisan unit; cultural production based on his story will be discussed in the final section of this report.

While very few Roma from the Czech lands survived WWII, those who did brought back with them the Romani-language song "Aušvičate hi kher baro" [There Is a Big Building in Auschwitz], which has since become the best-known, most-performed song about their genocide under the Nazis.⁶⁵ Using the melody of the Roma folk song "Oda kalo čirikloro" [Blackbird], the song was collectively created by Roma prisoners of Auschwitz-Birkenau and orally transmitted with many lyrical variations, including a verse declaring the singer's intention to murder his or her captors. After the war, it was recorded in Moravia, Poland, and Slovakia. Its best-known postwar version was performed by Auschwitz-Birke-

⁶³ Jan Tesař and Josef Serinek, *Česká cikánská rapsodie*, (Triáda, 2016) vols. 1-3.

⁶⁴ Sadílková, Helena, "Hozená rukavice", *Soudobé Dějiny* vol. XXV nos. 3 and 4 (2018), pp. 510-22.

⁶⁵ Schuster, Michal, "Aušvičate hi kher baro", in: *Encyclopedia of the Nazi Genocide of the Sinti and Roma in Europe*. Edited by Karola Fings, Research Center for Antigypsyism at the University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg, 5 March 2024, available at <https://encyclopaedia-gsr.eu/lemma/ausvicate-hi-kher-baro-en-1-0/>, accessed 6 March 2026.

nau survivor Růžena Danielová (1904-1988) of South Moravia. Today it is performed during commemorative ceremonies of the Holocaust and its Roma and Sinti victims.

After the communist putsch of 1948, like other members of the public with the capacity to do so, individual Roma did not hesitate to complain openly, repeatedly, and in writing to the authorities about their living conditions in the Czech lands, sometimes writing on behalf of others, sometimes just on their own behalf.⁶⁶ They were behaving as citizens who were aware of their particular positions with respect to the legal framework of the state, responding to the challenges they faced.⁶⁷ Such complaints were made in 1952, for instance, when police not only registered Roma individuals, but also inventoried their immovable and moveable property as part of operation "TO" (see above), with those affected challenging the lawfulness of their treatment.⁶⁸ They were by no means exceptional in complaining so vocally, as popular anger over the 1953 currency reform even took the form of days-long, nationwide demonstrations by people who had just lost everything.⁶⁹

In addition to reporting discrimination, Roma called for the state to save their language.⁷⁰ Some also reported that their requests to be assigned to use their pedagogical or scientific training to work with their fellow Roma were being ignored.⁷¹ Many of the first post-war Roma migrants from Slovakia to the Czech lands were from "high-status" villages and became some of the first co-operative laborers; they were "highly motivated", "constantly watching for better opportunities", and capable of making "tremendous sacrifices to attain their goals."⁷² Adolescent Romani males even adopted the "rebellious teenager" mode of dress and hairstyle that was part of the emerging socialist urban youth culture of those days.⁷³

The two postwar decades of Roma effort to negotiate with the authorities first saw fruition during the Prague Spring of social change in the 1960s.⁷⁴ After the Warsaw Pact invasion of 1968, a major experiment transpired when the regime allowed Roma intellectuals to officially establish their long-sought Unions of Gypsies-Roma in 1969, although the state insisted on separate Czech and Slovak branches,⁷⁵ each of which published its own periodical (the Czech edition was *Romano l'il*).⁷⁶ The main actors in the

⁶⁶ Donert, pp. 60-1; Roma in Slovakia petitioned authorities to extend power lines into their settlements so they could access electricity, Donert, p.105.

⁶⁷ Sadílová, Helena, Slačka, Dušan, and Závodská, Milada, *Aby bylo i s námi počítáno: Společensko-politická angažovanost Romů a snahy o založení romské organizace v poválečném Československu* (2018)

⁶⁸ Donert, pp. 68-9

⁶⁹ Donert, p. 79

⁷⁰ Donert, p. 77

⁷¹ Donert, p. 80

⁷² Donert, p. 157

⁷³ Donert, p. 130-1

⁷⁴ Sadilkova, Slačka, and Závodská (2018), p. 80-1

⁷⁵ Donert, p. 186

⁷⁶ Sokolova, pp.133, 135

Czech branch, based in Moravia, were Antonín Daniel, Rudolf Daniel, Anna Danielová, Miroslav Holomek, and Tomáš Holomek, who was the first Rom to earn a law degree, an army officer, and the first-ever legislator of Roma origin in Czechoslovakia.⁷⁷ Zigmund Vágai, a longtime party functionary of Roma origin, chaired the North Moravian Regional Preparatory Committee and became secretary of the Czech Union for organizational and political issues.⁷⁸

The regime saw the Unions as strictly cultural, in the sense of “civilizational”.⁷⁹ They were members of the National Front during the reactionary “normalization” period, and the Roma leading them understood how to perform alignment with official policy, as they were ideologically “the offspring of Gottwald”, the hardline Stalinist leader of the party until 1953.⁸⁰ Internationally, the Unions were used in propaganda substantiating the claim that communism was “the fairer” system; domestically, many non-Roma were shocked to see Roma who had attained educations giving speeches, organizing, and publishing.⁸¹

The Unions wanted “cultural revival” for the Roma. Anton Facuna, a former partisan of Roma origin in Slovakia, had first proposed a single Union in 1957, arguing to the regime that many Roma were unaware that “the working class has come to power and...they should educate themselves...for the people’s democracy.”⁸² He had also tried and failed to get Roma recognized in the new constitutional law on nationalities, adopted in 1968 just one month after the invasion.⁸³ He then retreated not just from that effort, but from the request for Romani to become an official language.⁸⁴

Other Roma leaders, however, took up the cause; when Miroslav Holomek drafted the program for the Czech branch of the Union, he noted that recognition as a nationality had been refused to the Roma so far out of “fear of the rights which would have to be granted” to them.⁸⁵ He argued that acknowledging their difference as a cultural group with their own language would instead raise everybody’s “awareness of equality” and that they must “transform themselves...into active subjects.”⁸⁶

⁷⁷ Sadilkova, Slačka, and Závodská (2018), p. 84. The Czech branch received significant aid and encouragement from the non-Romani linguist Milena Hübschmannová (1933-2005), based in Prague, with matters such as seeking an audience with the President; see Sadilkova, Slačka, and Závodská (2018), p. 199; Zdeněk Ryšavý, Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution: 800 000 people in Prague chanted "Long live the Roma", 16 November 2021 Romea.cz, available at <https://romea.cz/en/world/czechoslovakia-apos-s-1989-velvet-revolution-800-000-people-in-prague-chanted-long-live-the-roma>, accessed 7 March 2026.

⁷⁸ Sadilkova, Slačka, and Závodská (2018), p. 202.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 144

⁸⁰ Donert, p. 181

⁸¹ Sokolova, pp. 152, 161, 164.

⁸² Donert, p. 135

⁸³ Donert, p. 185

⁸⁴ Donert, p. 186-7

⁸⁵ Donert, p. 187

⁸⁶ Ibid

The Unions focused on nationhood and respect for ethnic identity as the key to integrating into society; within their communities, activists anxiously debated the impact of improved living standards and mixed marriages on Roma culture, customs, and language.⁸⁷ The question of whether individuals should identify as Roma to census-takers arose at that time and is one that has yet to be fully resolved.

The Czech Union made aid to Roma who were seeking redress for their wartime suffering part of its platform. Those who secured certification as having been political prisoners of the Nazis could qualify for disability pensions or early retirement in the 1970s; however, few claims succeeded, as the discriminatory aspect of their persecution was not recognized, usually.⁸⁸

In 1971, Czechoslovak Roma who were members of the Unions were even permitted to attend the first World Romani Congress in England. On that occasion, the Roma anthem and flag were adopted, as was use of the term Roma instead of “G/gypsy”; a sub-commission was also set up to investigate crimes perpetrated against the Roma during the Second World War.⁸⁹

In 1970, the Unions were authorized to run co-operatives to employ Roma; in the Czech lands, the project was called Névodrom [New Road].⁹⁰ Its activities were publicized and Roma women and men came forward to get involved.⁹¹ After accusations that Union managers were living “above standards”, an audit was ordered and the leaderships fought for their reputations.⁹² The audit recommended closing the co-operatives for alleged financial mismanagement; reportedly, the accounting technique used ignored assets generated by the Unions themselves, and the Liquidation Commission eventually found the Unions were solvent, but it also found they had “not respected the socialist legal order” and therefore shut the experiment down in 1973.⁹³

In 1977, the banned Charter 77 movement tried to defend those whose civil and human rights were being violated by the regime; one of its first samizdat publications addressed the Roma situation, with much of its material provided by Prague-based social workers.⁹⁴ Roma were also involved in the dissident movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Even before signing Charter 77, Roma activist Ľudovít Didi (1931-2013) had been expelled from a

⁸⁷ Donert, p. 195

⁸⁸ Sokolova, p. 146; Donert, pp. 199-201.

⁸⁹ Entry on World Romani Congress, Wikipedia, available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Romani_Congress, accessed 6 March 2026.

⁹⁰ Donert, p. 189

⁹¹ Donert, p. 191

⁹² Facuna was removed as chair of the Slovak Roma Union at this time; see Donert, p. 211.

⁹³ Sokolova, 170-2

⁹⁴ Donert, p. 223, 230

Czech university for his political views; after becoming a children's educator in Slovakia, he was fired in 1974 for the same reason and his family was surveilled by the secret police. He and his wife Mária signed the Charter in 1980. After 1989 he was rehabilitated and became director of a children's home. In 1992 he was awarded an Ing. degree from the university that had expelled him. In 2007, the Czech National Memory Institute listed him as a "participant in the anti-communist struggle." He was posthumously given state honors by Slovakia in 2023.⁹⁵

Other Roma figures who were dissidents included the archivist and historian Bartoloměj Daniel and Karel Holomek, both of whom co-founded the Museum of Romani Culture after 1989 (see below).⁹⁶ As a member of the Czech Union of Gypsies-Roma, Daniel worked on its Social-Scientific Commission and its Language Sub-Committee and was a member of the editorial board of *Romano lil* from its inception in 1970 to its closure in 1973.⁹⁷ Karel Holomek had been expelled from military college and the party in 1981 for his political views, and his summer house in Moravia was a rendezvous point for Czech dissidents; when the Movement for Civic Freedom started in 1988, he joined it.⁹⁸

Based on Charter 77's information, in 1978, Radio Free Europe reported that Czechoslovakia was discriminating against "Gypsies", who suffered harassment when traveling for work and were only 30% literate; that their children were frequently institutionalized; and that women from the group were being forcibly sterilized.⁹⁹ The international impact of such activism on behalf of the Roma raised the profile of the issue, which in 1980 came under the purview of the Counter-Espionage Directorate for Protection of the Economy.¹⁰⁰

In the late 1980s, Roma tried to revive the Union as a country-wide organization; in June 1988, Tibor Baláž and Vlado Oláh met with the Central Committee of the party and were told in no uncertain terms to abandon the idea, but in November 1988 a larger meeting of about 20 Roma representatives met with a Central Committee official again in Prague; by this point the regime had even started using the term "Roma" (*Romové*) in its reports.¹⁰¹

95 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C4%BDudov%C3%ADt_Didi

96 Diskuzní večer Romové a disent, 16. 11. 2022, Centrum Romů a Sintů v Praze/Muzeum romské kultúry, recording archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVqik4X8YpU>, accessed 7 March 2026.

97 Sadilkova, Slačka, and Závodská (2018), p. 204.

98 Zdeněk Ryšavý, Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution: 800 000 people in Prague chanted "Long live the Roma", 16 November 2021 Romea.cz, available at <https://romea.cz/en/world/czechoslovakia-apos-s-1989-velvet-revolution-800-000-people-in-prague-chanted-long-live-the-roma>, accessed 7 March 2026

99 Donert, p. 225-6

100 Donert, p. 240

101 Donert, p. 244-5; Zdeněk Ryšavý, Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution: 800 000 people in Prague chanted "Long live the Roma", 16 November 2021 Romea.cz, available at <https://romea.cz/en/world/czechoslovakia-apos-s-1989-velvet-revolution-800-000-people-in-prague-chanted-long-live-the-roma>, accessed 7 March 2026

Charter 77 signatory Petr Placák has reminisced about the relationship between the dissident movement of the late 1970s and Roma, saying that what brought them together was their mistreatment by the regime and the fact that they had grown up in the same “foreign” and “hostile” milieu, given their awareness that “the country is occupied, domestic communist collaborators rule it” and the fact that the first “hostile” institution one encountered was the education system. He said that “communities who did not conform to the regime were naturally considered ours [i.e., part of the dissident movement], so the Roma had to be there”, drawing a parallel between Czechoslovakia’s treatment of Roma and the treatment of indigenous people in North America and Norway. Placák also noted that while non-Roma dissidents opposed the regime or were excluded from society through their own choices not to conform to it, Roma were born into exclusion just by virtue of their ethnicity – in other words, it was easier for non-Roma to perform conformity than it was for Roma during the normalization period.¹⁰²

The events of 17 November 1989 in Prague sparked the transition to democracy; Roma activists began meeting daily there as of 20 November, forming the Roma Civic Initiative (Romská občanská iniciativa - ROI), signing up to the demands issued by Civic Forum (OF), and releasing their own statements condemning the Communist Party for its approach to the Roma and demanding that Roma nationality be recognized in the next Constitution.¹⁰³ On 24 November 1989, ROI co-founder Emil Ščuka became a member of the Concept Committee of the OF, and on 25 November, he and ROI co-founder Jan Rusenko joined the opposition leaders who spoke to a crowd of hundreds of thousands in Prague, an event that was televised; a Roma flag was flown and the crowd even chanted “Long live the Roma” when they appeared.¹⁰⁴

Sixty-four lawmakers on the Czech National Council then resigned and their seats were co-opted by OF members, who called on ROI to propose their representative; they appointed Karel Holomek.¹⁰⁵ ROI held its constitutional convention in March 1990 in Prague, where 438 delegates elected a Central Committee of 30 Roma from the Czech lands and 22 from Slovakia that then elected Ščuka leader.¹⁰⁶ When the first free elections were held in June 1990, ROI members in the Czech lands ran as OF candidates, while in Slovakia they ran on the Public against Violence ticket. ROI members won several seats, one in the Federal Assembly (the Czech pro-Roma activist Klára Samková for Prague), and six in the Czech National Council: Dezider Balog (West Bohemia), Zdeněk Guži (East Bohemia), Ondřej Giňa (Central Bohemia), Karel Holomek (South Moravia), and Milan Tatár

102 Diskuzní večer Romové a disent, 16. 11. 2022, Centrum Romů a Sintů v Praze/Muzeum romské kultúry, recording archived at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eVqik4X8YpU>, accessed 7 March 2026, my translation.

103 Zdeněk Ryšavý, Czechoslovakia's 1989 Velvet Revolution: 800 000 people in Prague chanted "Long live the Roma", 16 November 2021 Romea.cz, available at <https://romea.cz/en/world/czechoslovakia-apos-s-1989-velvet-revolution-800-000-people-in-prague-chanted-long-live-the-roma>, accessed 7 March 2026

104 Ibid.

105 Ibid

106 Ibid; ROI also joined the International Romani Union at this time.

(North Bohemia). Roma lawmaker Ladislav Body was also elected for the Communist Party.¹⁰⁷

Those results were the best for national-level political participation and representation by Roma ever achieved in the Czech lands and have yet to be repeated; today there are no nationally elected Roma in either house of Parliament. When local elections were held in November 1990, ROI ran on its own in both parts of the country, winning three local seats in the Czech lands with 0.11 % of the vote.¹⁰⁸ In 1991, the federal government finally recognized the Roma as a national minority through Resolution No. 619/1991.¹⁰⁹

When Czechoslovakia's division was on the horizon in 1991, the Federal Council of the ROI called for the federation to be preserved.¹¹⁰ Dozens of other cultural organizations, interest groups, and political organizations were springing up in almost all Romani communities, but the Roma movement as a political venture collapsed due to infighting. By 1992, the ROI had just 300 dues-paying members and was no longer a player.¹¹¹

After the Czech Republic became an independent country in 1993, its executive branch instituted an advisory body on Roma issues in 1997 that has been extensively discussed elsewhere; in 2024, Roma politician Lucie Fuková also became the country's first-ever Commissioner on Roma Minority Affairs.¹¹² One staffer of that advisory body, however, has gone on to have an outsized impact on the Roma movement not just in the Czech Republic, but all over Europe. Gabriela Hrabaňová is a prominent Roma activist currently serving as the Executive Director of the European Roma Grassroots Organisations (ERGO) Network, an umbrella organization of 25 Roma-run and pro-Roma NGOs across Europe.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid; the ROI in Slovakia seated Gejza Adam in the Federal Assembly and Anna Koptová in the Slovak National Council. Two non-ROI Roma candidates from Slovakia, Vincent Danihel and Karol Seman, were seated in the Federal Assembly for the Democratic Left Party.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Eva Sobotka, "Crusts from the table: policy formation towards Roma in the Czech Republic and Slovakia", 15 August 2001, Roma Rights Journal (European Roma Rights Centre), available at <https://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/crusts-from-the-table-policy-formation-towards-roma-in-the-czech-republic-and-slovakia#:~:text=In%20the%20period%20between%201990,Czech%20and%20Slovak%20Federal%20Republic>, accessed 7 March 2026.

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Ibid

¹¹² Albert, Gwendolyn, Antigypsyism in the Czech Republic: From Recognition to Transitional Justice? (Centre for European Policy Studies, 2025), pp. 68-74.



Gabriela Hrabáňová (PHOTO: ERGO Network)

In that role, she critically monitors the EU funds for Roma and has advocated at EU level for Roma involvement in setting inclusion policy. After becoming the first member of her family to graduate from secondary school, she studied politics and sociology in English at Anglo-American University in Prague, then founded the Athinganoi civic association, which worked to improve the representation of Roma professionals and university students. In the early 2000s, she was an expert member of the Council for Roma Minority Affairs, then became its director at the Office of the Czech Government from 2007 to 2011, where she drafted and evaluated national strategies and facilitated communication between Roma civil society and the executive. During the Czech Republic's first-ever Presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2009, she promoted adoption of the "Ten Common Basic Principles for Roma Inclusion", which became foundational for EU Member State policies on Roma. She also organized the first meeting of the European Platform for Roma Inclusion to improve cooperation between international Roma civil society, EU institutions, and Member State governments. At ERGO, she led advocacy for the reforms embodied by the EU Roma Strategic Framework (2020-2030), which prioritizes combating antigypsyism and promoting equality and participation, successfully campaigning for meaningful participation by Roma in the design of policy targeting them, as such participation is a basic component of democratic legitimacy.

Many Roma civil society organizations have thrived in the Czech Republic since 1989. The establishment of the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno began at the grassroots and now has the status of a state-funded institution. The concept started in 1969 with the

Czech branch of the officially-permitted Union of Gypsies-Roma (see above), the members of which started collecting for a museum, only for their plans to be canceled by the regime in 1973. The collections were deposited in the Moravian Museum of Brno for almost two decades until the Museum of Romani Culture was able to take them over again after 1989. The Society for the Establishment of the Museum of Romani Culture was registered in 1991 by Bartoloměj Daniel, ethnographer Eva Davidová, Karel Holomek, and Jana Horváthová, director of the museum today, as an NGO. It was financially unstable and without a permanent, physical home to display its work until the year 2000, when it moved into its current location in Brno, a building reconstructed with a state subsidy. In 2005, it was re-established by the Culture Ministry as a state-sponsored organization, which guaranteed it public funding. Today the museum is considered a unique institution documenting the culture and history of Romani people not just in the Czech lands, but internationally. Its centerpiece is its permanent exhibition, “The Story of the Roma”, which chronicles the origins of the community in ancient India, their migration to Europe, their medieval persecution, the Holocaust (covered through a dedicated room featuring audiovisual recordings of survivors’ songs), and material on postwar and contemporary life.

Today the collections of the museum number more than 28,000 and include examples of art by Roma artists, some of which the museum itself commissioned; audio recordings of events, music, and oral histories; examples of clothing and jewelry not just worn by Roma, but designed and produced by them; examples of crafts and professions previously performed by Roma, such as metalworking and woodworking; reconstructions of Roma dwellings and interior furnishings, such as a Roma wagon; invitations to and posters for events organized by and featuring Roma; photographs, including those taken by Roma of their own world; video recordings; writing; and last but not least, a collection on how non-Roma society portrays Roma that features many examples of antigypsyism. The museum publishes a journal with peer-reviewed content (the *Bulletin*) as well as catalogues from its temporary exhibitions and holds cultural and other events on its premises, which include a café and library, participating in annual, nationwide events such as Museum Nights. Since 2018, it has also administered the Hodonín and Lety memorials to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Moravia and Bohemia, respectively.¹¹³

In 1998, Holocaust survivors of Roma origin and their relatives established the Committee for the Redress of the Roma Holocaust (VPORH), a civic association dedicated to achieving recognition of the genocide of the Roma during WWII, preserving the memory of the victims, and securing redress. Led by Čeněk Růžička (1946-2022), it has been crucial to shifting the political discourse on how the Protectorate treated the Roma and what role non-Roma Czechs played (although not without backlash, as described above). Its

¹¹³ Ibid pp. 59-65.

most significant achievement has been its campaign to remove the industrial pig farm from the site of the former concentration camp in Lety, advocating successfully for it to become a dignified place of reverence instead of serving economic purposes. The association organizes annual commemoration ceremonies at Lety every May and installed a memorial plaque and monument in the municipal cemetery in nearby Mirovice, where many Lety victims, especially children, were buried in unmarked graves in 1942-3. It has also produced traveling exhibits which have been presented in the Czech Parliament and the European Parliament and has worked with other organizations combating Holocaust denial, compiling databases of Roma and Sinti victims, and documenting this history. The association has been crucial in forcing the Czech state to take responsibility for its part in this genocide by ensuring proper, respectful remembrance of its victims. VPORH also actively combats present-day hate speech, racism, and xenophobia, including advocating for forced sterilization victims to be redressed. It helps to produce the annual commemorations in Prague marking the deportation of the Sinti and Roma to Auschwitz II-Birkenau in collaboration with the Municipal Department of Prague 6 at the memorial site there.

The late 1990s also saw the start of what would eventually become *D. H. and others vs. the Czech Republic*, the watershed judgment from the European Court of Human Rights that found the Czech state had failed to protect Roma from being discriminated through their systemic segregation in the schools. The case was brought by 18 Roma children from Ostrava who alleged that their assignment to “special schools” was based on racial discrimination, presenting research to show they were 27 times more likely than non-Roma to be placed in such schools, which featured significantly reduced curriculum that limited their future educational and employment options as adults. In 2007, the Grand Chamber ruled the practice was indirect discrimination, violating the ban on discrimination with regard to the right to education under the European Convention on Human Rights. The case is a prime example of international civil society undertaking strategic litigation to spark social change and involved the European Roma Rights Centre, which represented the plaintiffs together with local human rights lawyers. Roma civil society was part of the extensive field research and compilation of the data proving the systemic nature of the segregation and continues to monitor progress on execution of the judgment, which remains open before the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe as a still-unresolved matter.

The installation of a ceramic wall on Matiční Street in Ústí nad Labem to separate the housing occupied by non-Roma from the housing occupied by Roma, mentioned in the previous section, galvanized Roma organizing in 1999. Roma and their allies from all over the country spontaneously traveled to the scene to nonviolently protest, physically occupying the construction site, and successfully demanding the wall’s removal.

The ROMEA organization was founded in 2002 to analyze how the Czech media perpetuates antigypsyism, producing media outputs of its own to counterbalance such coverage. Through its online news server, Romea.cz, which also publishes in English, it features journalism and opinions authored by Roma and reports on issues such as Roma segregation. Since 2016, ROMEA has also run a scholarship program for Roma students in secondary and tertiary education. Its Memory of the Roma project features a digital database of testimonies from Roma and Sinti about key events of the 20th century, particularly the Holocaust. Its monthly print magazine, *Romano vodi* [Roma Soul], features in-depth articles on culture, interviews with prominent Roma, and new research from the social sciences. Its online audiovisual channel on YouTube, ROMEA TV, was the first in the Czech Republic, producing interviews, podcasts and other content. As antigypsyism in cyberspace has becoming an increasing problem, ROMEA has organized volunteers to report such content to social media providers and engaged communities in discussions of how to recognize disinformation and improve their media literacy, as the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's war on Ukraine have revealed that many Roma who use the Internet in Czech are prone to falling for conspiracy theories or hoaxes.

Between 2006 and 2012, the *Zvůle práva* association, founded by Roma activist Edita Stejskalová, gave legal aid to Roma and strategically litigated cases of their ethnic discrimination and violations of their human rights, especially regarding access to education, housing, and the harmful impact of predatory lending practices. The organization put a spotlight on antigypsyism in the judicial system and protested when the town of Vsetín forcibly evicted hundreds of Roma (see above). It reported its findings to United Nations human rights treaty oversight bodies and contributed input on policy to the Czech Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs.

In 2013, Roma community members Magdalena Karvayová and Miroslav Klempar founded *Awen Amenca* in Ostrava, a nonprofit focused on desegregating the schools through Roma community organizing and empowering Roma parents of schoolchildren to become community leaders. The organization has aided Roma parents with successfully enrolling approximately 1,500 children into high-quality, mainstream schools which do not segregate. Their advocacy eventually closed a segregated school in Ostrava that had existed since 1965 and shut segregated classes in other schools there, too. In 2017, they organized an outdoor rally in Ostrava on the 10th anniversary of *D. H. and Others* that was attended by more than 2,000 Roma parents of schoolchildren from across the country. That year they helped establish the Association of Roma Parents, volunteers who also campaign for Roma to enroll in mainstream schools and support them in navigating the school system. *Awen Amenca* also achieved a groundbreaking District Court judgment ruling that a principal unlawfully discriminated against nine Roma who were denied enrollment. The group has worked in 12 cities across the country, including Brno, advising municipalities on how to adjust catchment areas and enrollment practices to

prevent segregation. Karvayová was given the Alice G. Masaryk Human Rights Award by the US Embassy in 2018 for this work.

That same award was given to Elena Gorolová in 2021, the Roma survivor of forced sterilization who advocated for and ultimately achieved the institution of a compensation scheme that is still underway as of this writing. Her work has been extensively discussed elsewhere.¹¹⁴ Also based in Ostrava, she was long assisted by the Roma community organization Vzájemné soužití and then by the Romodrom organization, which mainly provides social services.

In response to the escalation of attempted pogroms on Roma neighborhoods between 2011 and 2013, Roma civil society and their non-Roma allies actively mobilized, physically showing up to stand in solidarity with the targeted Roma. Activists, including Roma, physically blockaded the planned routes of the extremist marches, with a broad coalition coordinating such counter-protests countrywide.¹¹⁵ In May 2011, 2,000 counter-protesters prevented 400 neo-Nazi marchers in Brno from accessing the Roma part of town, a tactic that was repeated in České Budějovice, Ostrava, and Plzeň. The Konexe association, founded by Roma activist Jozef Miker, trained counter-protesters in non-violent action, helped organize counter-protests, and offered emergency support to targeted communities, including negotiating with police. Large-scale “Roma Pride” marches were also held for several of these years, most notably in Prague in October 2013, as shows of defiance and unity against antigypsyist hatred and violence. By 2012, the counter-protesters’ tactics shifted more to festivals of tolerance or roundtables involving local politicians in mitigating conflicts. During the annual commemorative ceremonies at Lety, Roma activists also linked the present-day violence to their historical persecution, drawing especially on the symbol of the Auschwitz II-Birkenau Uprising in the “Gypsy Family Camp” in 1944, when Roma and Sinti prisoners successfully prevented the Nazis from undertaking their wholesale destruction and gained several more months before that eventually transpired on 2 August 1944. Ever since, 16 May has become the date associated with that history and used to hold resistance-related events, notwithstanding more recent scholarship locating this event as more likely to have happened in April of 1944.

When Roma community member Stanislav Tomáš died in police custody in Teplice in 2021, local Roma and others from around the country took to the streets to protest, both there and in Prague.¹¹⁶ His death was ultimately protested by Roma in other European

¹¹⁴ Ibid, pp. 22-7

¹¹⁵ Silja Schultheis, Heinrich Boell Stiftung, 15 November 2013, “Anti-Roma Sentiment on the Rise in the Czech Republic”, available at <https://cz.boell.org/en/2014/03/24/anti-roma-sentiment-rise-czech-republic-democracy#:~:text=A%20basic%20prerequisite%20for%20this,and%20Czech%20Radio%2C%20among%20others>, accessed 21 March 2026

¹¹⁶ ROMEA, Romea.cz, 10 August 2023, “Roma rights activists take police killing of Stanislav Tomáš to European court”, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/roma-rights-activists-take-police-killing-of-stanislav-tomas-to-european-court>, accessed 21 March 2026

countries as well. His family is still waiting for the European Court of Human Rights to rule on whether his rights were violated.



This funeral ribbon reading "Roma Lives Matter" in Czech was left at the spontaneous memorial on the site where Stanislav Tomáš passed away in Teplice, Czech Republic. Photographed 21 June 2021 by František Bikár, published by Romea.cz.

Today the Roma movement for emancipation in the Czech Republic is in some ways better equipped and funded than it has ever been, but the minority's lack of political representation at the national level is frustrating to those who recall the start of the 1990s and the high hopes held at that time. Roma hold diverse political views, and at less than 3% of the population, Roma community members are unlikely to be seated in either seat of Parliament soon.

Cultural History of Roma communities in the Czech Lands

The cultural history of Roma communities in the Czech lands has been and still is defined by tension between the antigypsyism of the larger society and the evolving cultural identity of the Roma, who are not a homogenous group.¹¹⁷ For that reason, while Roma cultural production can be a way to assert rights and remember history, it can also become a field of contention within and between Roma communities, who may be anxious not to be associated with what they perceive as stigmatizing behavior by other Roma, either in the eyes of the larger society or in the eyes of a particular Roma group.¹¹⁸ Issues such as equality between genders and their expected roles or recognizing the existence of sexual minorities will be more or less controversial depending upon the Roma subgroup and the conservatism or liberality of those wielding influence in it.¹¹⁹ With regard to music production specifically, one of the most comprehensive sources to date is “The song folklore of the Roma in the Slovak and Czech Republics: Ethnosemantic and ethnohistorical approach”, by Mgr. Zbyněk Andrš, Ph.D (KHER 2016).

Today the descendants of the Roma who were indigenous to the Czech lands prior to WWII find themselves a minority within the Roma minority here.¹²⁰ Most Roma in the Czech Republic today descend from Roma who were once indigenous to Slovakia and migrated to the Czech lands after 1945; continuous Slovak migration to the Czech lands up to the present, and not just of Roma, meant that until very recently, Slovak speakers vied with Roma for the position of the country’s largest minority.¹²¹ Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the granting of temporary protection to many who fled mean Ukrainians now occupy the position of largest minority.¹²² As many Roma refuse to declare Roma nationality during the census for fear that the information will be used against them, as indeed the repeated registrations of their communities were from the 1920s through the 1950s (see above), the actual number of the population of Roma remains a matter of guesswork at best.¹²³

¹¹⁷ Renata Weinerová, Anti-gypsyism in the Czech Republic: Czechs’ perception of Roma in cultural stereotypes, *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 59(1): 211-221, June 2014

¹¹⁸ Claude Cahn, The Unseen Powers: Perception, Stigma and Roma Rights, *Roma Rights Journal* (European Roma Rights Centre), 20 November 2007, available at <https://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/the-unseen-powers-perception-stigma-and-roma-rights>, accessed 8 March 2026.

¹¹⁹ For more on this pluralism, see the Council of Europe’s Roma and Travellers team, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/roma-and-travellers/gender-equality>, accessed 8 March 2026.

¹²⁰ Minority Rights Group, Roma in the Czech Republic, available at <https://minorityrights.org/communities/roma-5/>, accessed 8 March 2026.

¹²¹ Romani people in the Czech Republic, Wikipedia entry, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Romani_people_in_the_Czech_Republic, accessed 8 March 2026.

¹²² For more on the discriminatory treatment of Roma Ukrainians in the Czech Republic in the aftermath of Russia’s 2022 invasion, see Albert (2025).

¹²³ Claude Cahn, The Unseen Powers: Perception, Stigma and Roma Rights, *Roma Rights Journal* (European Roma Rights Centre), 20 November 2007, available at <https://www.errc.org/roma-rights-journal/the-unseen-powers-perception-stigma-and-roma-rights>, accessed 8 March 2026; although almost 20 years old, the basic premises of this article still apply.

As described in the preceding sections, the communist regime forcibly settled Roma who had lived on the road for generations in extended families and attempted to impose housing arrangements on them based on nuclear family units.¹²⁴ Many Roma children were then removed from their parents and raised institutionally, disrupting the transmission of cultural customs and the Romani language. Those Roma who had relied for generations on providing mobile services such as blacksmithing, horse trading, and live music production had all but no choice to join the proletariat and provide manual labor to heavy industry, including in hazardous mining operations. After the transition to democracy and capitalism, Roma exclusion from education, employment, and housing, as well as ultra-right violence targeting them, prompted their emigration. Those who remain have deployed strategies such as changing their too-obviously Roma surnames to avoid stigma and “pass” as non-Roma.

The Czech capital of Prague has always had a contentious relationship with its Roma residents. The major fires of 1541, for instance, were collectively blamed on them and resulted in their official expulsion.¹²⁵ During the Holocaust, Roma were interned in the quarter of Ruzyně prior to their deportations to Auschwitz II-Birkenau. In the postwar era, Roma were mostly allowed to live in the working-class neighborhoods of Karlín, Smíchov, and Žižkov, leading to their social exclusion. After the devastating floods of 2002, the rebuilding accelerated gentrification, especially in Karlín, and many Roma were displaced from the city altogether. However, the capital is also home to many of the Roma civil society organizations working to combat antigypsyism. Public broadcaster Czech Radio has run Roma-related programming from Prague for decades, and both the Prague Center for Romani Histories and the Romani Studies Seminar, which publishes the *Romano džaniben* journal, are both housed at Charles University's Faculty of Arts in the capital. 8 April, International Roma Day, has been marked here with increasingly elaborate musical and theatrical productions recently, including local authorities flying the Roma flag.

The annual, week-long Khamoro World Roma Festival in Prague is currently the largest, most prestigious professional festival of Roma arts and culture in the world.¹²⁶ Established in 1999 by Džemil and Jelena Silajdžić through their Slovo21 NGO, it showcases performances of music and other art forms by Roma professionals from all over Europe (and sometimes beyond) in multiple venues throughout the city. The couple started the festival after they experienced a sound engineer in Prague refusing to provide his services because the band involved was Roma. Unlike the many smaller festivals run by

¹²⁴ “Summary”, Office of Documentation and Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (ÚDV), a unit of the Police of the Czech Republic (2004), available at <https://policie.gov.cz/soubor/sesit-12-pdf.aspx>, accessed 8 March 2026.

¹²⁵ Milada Horáková, “Romani in the Czech and Slovak Republic”, VÚPSV 2002, available at <https://katalog.vupsv.cz/Fulltext/romani.pdf>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹²⁶ See the official website of the festival, <https://www.khamoro.cz/en/about>, accessed 11 March 2026

Roma communities all over the world, Khamoro showcases high-level, professional performers. It has hosted more than 260 ensembles from 33 countries, including the Kočani Orkestar of North Macedonia and Mahala Rai Banda of Romania. Today the festival includes international conferences on art, literature, and the position of Roma in society, as well as local school outreach programs. The Festival regularly schedules one afternoon where all the performers parade in costume through the historic center of Prague, stopping to perform numbers along the way and attracting spectators to the upcoming performances; by now this has become a major media spectacle. Both non-Roma and Roma youth are encouraged to participate behind the scenes to learn about event management and production. The program showcases performers of Roma origin through a variety of genres, such as classical music inspired by motifs of Roma provenance, “Gypsy Jazz”, and hip hop. The nonprofit approach extends to guaranteeing a certain number of tickets which are given for free to Roma NGOs all over the country to encourage attendance by Roma who otherwise would not be able to afford the price of admission.

The Roma Spirit awards are also held in Prague and televised live by public broadcaster Czech Television. This is the Czech version of what has become an international initiative honoring individuals and organizations for actively contributing to the inclusion of the Roma. Developed first in Slovakia,¹²⁷ where it has run annually without interruption, the first Czech edition was launched in 2009 by then-Human Rights Minister Michael Kocáb. Former President Václav Havel gave his auspices to the inaugural event, as did EU Commissioner Vladimír Špidla. The awards are presented on the occasion of International Human Rights Day (10 December). Between 2009 and 2015, more than 800 nominations were submitted by the public for individuals, media outlets, and organizations in various categories, including “Deed of the Year”. Both Eva Davidová and Karel Holomek received this honor for their lifetime achievements.

The Czech Roma Spirit event stopped after the 2016 ceremony due to financial instability and tensions among its producers.¹²⁸ The 2016 edition had become an occasion to protest the police handling of the death of Roma community member Miroslav Demeter in Žatec that October, which involved allegations that civilians had been allowed to assault him without police intervening and that police had committed brutality against him; the outcome of the criminal justice system’s handling of the incident was perceived by many Roma as a miscarriage of justice, resulting in demonstrations bordering on unrest. De-

¹²⁷ The project first began as Gypsy Spirt, then updated the name to Roma Spirit.

¹²⁸ Kristina Dienstbierová, Romea.cz, “Czech Republic will not hold a Roma Spirit award ceremony this year due to lack of financing and criticism by some Roma community members”, 21 October 2017, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-republic-will-not-hold-a-roma-spirit-award-ceremony-this-year-due-to-lack-of-financing-and-criticism-by-some-romani>, accessed 11 March 2026

meter had allegedly been behaving erratically and harassing female customers in a pizzeria when he was severely beaten by male customers using martial arts techniques, with one witness alleging he saw them kick Demeter in the neck. Local police failed to protect Demeter and allegedly participated in the beating during their detention of him; he died shortly thereafter. An autopsy found his death was due to drug-related organ failure and the case was shelved in 2017 despite video evidence of the assault on him. Hundreds of Roma gathered to honor Demeter and protest what they saw as institutional racism, resulting in tensions when right-wing extremists showed up at the site where his death had transpired.¹²⁹



About 500 people in Žatec, Czech Republic gathered on Thursday, 27 October 2016 to honor the memory of the Romani man who died the previous week after a conflict in a local pizzeria. (PHOTO: Petr Zewlakk Vrabec, published by Romea.cz)

In response, several nominees and potential recipients of the Roma Spirit Award, including the musician Gejza Horváth and activist Emil Ščuka, publicly refused to participate in the December ceremony to protest the state's handling of the incident; while the event was not disrupted in any way, its credibility was seriously undermined. When the first Trump administration took office, US Embassy funding for Roma Spirit was cancelled and two other sponsors withdrew in 2017. By then, Czech Television had also become less welcoming to programming related to Romani people, making the gala difficult to sustain without a professional, reliable media partner. Kocáb, by then no longer a minister, but a philanthropist whose foundation was a co-organizer of it, decided not to sponsor it further. In 2025, Roma Spirit was revived by a Roma-led organization, Romodrom, which produced its seventh Czech edition for which a record 173 nominations were submitted.

¹²⁹ See Albert (2025), p. 38

It will hopefully resume its position among the major Roma-related events in Prague for some time to come.

In the Central Bohemian Region more generally, Roma have been present for centuries, living on the road and plying their trades between Prague and other industrial and rural hubs.¹³⁰ Records mention a Roma presence here as early as 1399, when they are first believed to have arrived via the Balkans. In the postwar era, Roma from Slovakia migrated to Kladno, Kolín, and Příbram as industrial labor, towns which then became significant centers of Roma community life. The works of the renowned Roma artist Rudolf Dzurko (see below), who repurposed the waste from glass production into works of art, exemplify the Roma creative response to the conditions of proletarianization.

The South Moravian Region is uniquely significant in the cultural history of the Roma.¹³¹ Its capital, Brno, is the historical center of the Roma intelligentsia and upward mobility in the Czech lands. From the 17th century, the Holomek family settled in Nesovice and Strážnice, then on the Brno outskirts in the 19th century, especially in Černovice. In the postwar period, Slovak Roma relocated to Brno as industrial labor, transforming it into the center of the Roma political movement during communism, as described above. The Czech Union of Gypsies-Roma was headquartered in Brno, as is the Museum of Romani Culture today, located in a neighborhood known pejoratively as the “Brno Bronx”. The impoverished area around Bratislavská Street is a center of Roma life, hosting many annual cultural events. The Roma media production company TUKE.TV is based in Brno as well, as is the biweekly *Romano hangos* newspaper.

In the Moravian-Silesian Region, Roma cultural history is almost exclusively intertwined with the industrial revolution, which involved their forced proletarianization in the metallurgy and mining industries.¹³² In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ostrava-Karviná coal basin drew Roma labor from across the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with Roma settling on the outskirts of Bohumín and Ostrava. In the postwar period, the communists actively recruited Roma from Eastern Slovakia to work in the coal mines and in the steel mills of Ostrava-Vítkovice, creating one of the highest concentrations of Roma in Czechoslovakia. Ostrava became the center of Roma urban culture, integrating into the proletariat while maintaining their own language and musical traditions. Roma here were disproportionately impacted by the closure of heavy industry after 1989; high unemployment led to the rise of Roma ghettos in the Ostrava-Hrušov and Ostrava-Přívoz municipal

¹³⁰ See the guide to the permanent exhibition The Story of the Roma at the Museum of Romani Culture, available at <https://www.rommuz.cz/file/other/skoly-a-deti/Materialy-ke-stazeni/Pruvoce%20EN%20online.pdf>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹³¹ Entry on the Roma civil rights movement in the Czech lands, RomArchive, available at <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/roma-czech-lands/>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹³² Helena Sadílková, “Chapter 11: The Postwar Migration of Romani Families from Slovakia to the Bohemian Lands: A Complex Legacy of War and Genocide in Czechoslovakia.” In *Jewish and Romani Families in the Holocaust and Its Aftermath*, edited by Eliyana R. Adler and Kateřina Čapková, pp. 190–218. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020

departments. In addition to being the main site of Roma activism against segregated schools and forced sterilization (see above), the region remains famous for its Roma musicians, especially in the genres of jazz and traditional Roma folk music.

In the Ústecký Region of northern Bohemia, industrial migration, postwar resettlement, and the ongoing struggle against segregation have shaped Roma cultural history.¹³³ When ethnic Germans were expelled from the region after WWII, the communists incentivized Roma from Eastern Slovakia to move here as manual labor in chemical plants, coal mining, and glassworks. In Chomutov, Most, and the regional capital of Ústí nad Labem, Roma were part of the backbone of heavy industry during socialism, co-creating the specific urban culture that arose in the context of factory life and state-provided housing. In the late 1970s, the regime built the Chánov housing estate in Most as a “model” of socialist living arrangements, but instead, it became a symbol of the forced assimilation of Roma and their geographic isolation, as “white flight” rendered this a segregated space. The architecture of its prefabricated buildings and its abandonment by the state after 1989 led to it becoming one of the most notorious Roma ghettos in Central Europe, synonymous in the minds of many Czechs and Slovaks with antigypsyist tropes. Elsewhere in the region, the installation of a ceramic wall to keep non-Roma from having to see local Roma in Ústí nad Labem in the 1990s became an international scandal (see above). Most of the antigypsyist attempted pogroms of 2011-2013 took place in this region, as did the 2016 death of Miroslav Demeter (see above) and the 2021 death in police custody of Stanislav Tomáš, which means the region is known for grassroots, informal Roma mobilization; the Konexe organization, based here, counters antigypsyism with celebrations of Roma cultural pride.

In the South Bohemian Region, Roma cultural history has been influenced by the fact that this area was a transit point for travel between Austria and Bavaria, as well as around the Czech lands.¹³⁴ By the 18th century, Roma living on the road had become a fixture of the landscape, providing the services of blacksmithing, horse trading, and live music performances. Remote rural villages especially relied on the mobile services of Roma artisans. The Lety concentration camp was located here during the Protectorate. In the post-war period, Slovak Roma relocated here as labor in industrial cities such as České Budějovice, Strakonice, and Tábor. Roma transitioned into providing manual labor in forestry as well as heavy industry here. There is still a strong tradition of Roma producing live music performances of traditional Roma folk music, with community festivals held in

¹³³ For the most recent research on educational segregation here specifically, see Open Society European Policy Institute and Open Society Justice Initiative, *The Persistence of Segregation of Roma Students in the Czech Republic Submission to the European Commission*, 13 June 2022, available at <https://www.justiceinitiative.org/uploads/082c893e-836b-412b-a0f7-92e2160f23ef/The-Persistence-of-Segregation-of-Roma-Students-in-the-Czech-Republic.pdf>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹³⁴ Josef Grulich, “Migration of the South Bohemian Population Before and After the Thirty Years War”, 2014, in James R. Palmitessa (ed.), *Between Lipany and White Mountain. Essays in Late Medieval and Early Modern Bohemian History in Modern Czech Scholarship*, Leiden-Boston.

Český Krumlov and Větrník. Local Roma are also strongly Catholic here and participate in annual regional pilgrimages.

In the Olomouc Region of Moravia, Roma cultural history is defined by its deep roots in the rural economy of the Haná area, where they were more integrated than in the border areas.¹³⁵ Roma provided mobile blacksmithing and horse trading services and did seasonal agricultural labor, traveling between the Haná plains and the Jeseníky mountains. Roma had permanently settled on the outskirts of towns such as Kojetín and Prostějov long before the forced sedentarization efforts of the 20th century. A small number of indigenous Moravian Roma families survived the Holocaust here, providing a cultural continuity that was all but completely lost in Bohemia, for instance. After WWII, Roma from Slovakia relocated to perform manual labor in Olomouc, where food processing and textiles were the main industries, and also worked in the heavy machine industry in Přerov. After 1989, Přerov became known for its spatial segregation of the Roma concentrated in the privately-held residential hotels around the train station, which are poorly maintained. In 1995, neo-Nazis murdered a Romani man, Tibor Berki, in Žďár nad Sázavou, and many antigypsyist public demonstrations and attempted pogroms have been held in Přerov, to which local Roma have responded with their own activism.¹³⁶ The regional capital, Olomouc, is home to Palacký University, an important center of Romani Studies, documenting the language of the local Roma and recording their oral histories. The annual Romani Gili festival in Olomouc celebrates Roma traditional dance and the Moravian style of traditional Roma music.

The Plzeň Region of western Bohemia was crucial to Roma for centuries due to its proximity to Bavaria and the thriving trade routes passing through it.¹³⁷ Roma families became integrated into the rural economy by providing mobile services as blacksmiths, blade grinders, horse traders, kettle smiths, and musicians. They operated outside the guilds of settled craftspeople in urban centers and competed with them. In the postwar period, the registration and forced settlement of Roma after the 1958 ban on itinerancy was a defining moment here. Roma were forcibly sedentarized in the industrial outskirts of the regional capital, Plzeň, in nearby manufacturing towns, or near mines. Disruption of extended families was the result. Many Roma from Slovakia had relocated here after the war to provide manual labor to the Škoda Works, the main producer of automobiles and arms. Roma neighborhoods then formed where Roma customs blended with the local proletarian urban culture, especially in Rokycany. Today the region is a center of

¹³⁵ Eva Davidová, *Romano drom – Cesty Romů: 1945–1990: Změny v postavení a způsobu života Romů v Čechách, na Moravě a na Slovensku*, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 1995

¹³⁶ Human Rights Watch, "Roma in the Czech Republic: Foreigners in Their Own Land", June 1996, Vol. 8, No. 11 (D), available at <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/Czech.htm>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹³⁷ Eva Davidová, *Romano drom – Cesty Romů: 1945–1990: Změny v postavení a způsobu života Romů v Čechách, na Moravě a na Slovensku*, Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci, 1995, pp. 11-12

Roma music, featuring local festivals with Roma performers of different genres also coming from Slovakia to perform there. The University of West Bohemia in Plzeň is another institution documenting this local history; its archeology department also performed crucial excavations at the Lety concentration camp site in neighboring South Bohemia.¹³⁸

In the Zlín Region of Moravia, Roma cultural history involves extensive early settlement, especially on the border with Slovakia.¹³⁹ In 1698, for instance, aristocrats near Uherský Brod officially exempted the Daniel family from antigypsyist bans in order to take advantage of their blacksmithing services. Roma were settled near Valašské Meziříčí as well by the 18th century, providing blacksmithing services to farmers in the area known as Wallachia. Their specific Moravian Romani dialect and the unique Moravian Roma musical style described above have been preserved here. A small but significant number of local Roma survived the Holocaust, preserving local traditions and becoming important sources of oral history after the war. At that time, Roma from Eastern Slovakia also moved into the cities of Vsetín and the regional capital, Zlín, headquarters of the Baťa brand of shoe manufacturing and the rubber industry, as the shift from Roma providing mobile services in rural areas to their proletarianization transpired. Roma culture here is heavily influenced today by local Wallachian culture, where the cimbalom (hammered dulcimer) and violin are central to traditional music production.

In what is today the Hradec Králové Region of eastern Bohemia, Roma travelled the trade routes between Central Bohemia and what historically was the border of Prussia and is now the border with Poland.¹⁴⁰ They provided horse-trading services and seasonal agricultural labor around the Elbe (Labe) River and lived on the road until their forced sedentarization in the mid-20th century. The regional capital of Hradec Králové and cities such as Náchod and Trutnov attracted Roma from Slovakia in the postwar period as manual labor in the heavy machinery, rubber, and textile industries. Starting in the 1960s, Roma were moved into prefabricated housing blocks, disrupting their customary extended-family lifestyle and incentivizing their adoption of an identity as “socialist workers” for whom it was better not to pass their Romani language on to their descendants. The best-known band from this region is Terne Čhave (“The Young Guys” in Romani), active since 1988, who play a blend of traditional Roma folk music with Latin rhythms and rock’n’roll (a style called “Rom’n’roll” in Czech). After a hiatus in the 1990s

¹³⁸ Website of the Lety u Písku Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia, entry on Archeological Survey, available at: <https://www.rommuz.cz/en/lety-u-pisku/history/archaeological-survey/#:~:text=Since%20August%202019%2C%20an%20archaeological,Results%20of%20the%20survey>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹³⁹ See the guide to the permanent exhibition The Story of the Roma at the Museum of Romani Culture, available at <https://www.rommuz.cz/file/other/skoly-a-deti/Materialy-ke-stazeni/Pruvoce%20EN%20online.pdf>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁴⁰ Council of Europe Factsheets on Romani history, sheet on Central Europe, available at: <https://rm.coe.int/central-europe-factsheets-on-romani-history/16808b19c7#:~:text=for%20the%20Czech%20lands%20it,then%20closely%20Hungary-related%20Croatia>, accessed 11 March 2026

due to the impact of the rising skinhead movement, the band regrouped in the year 2000 and has succeeded both domestically and at world music festivals abroad.¹⁴¹



Terne Čhave (PHOTO : Dušan Svíba)

In the Pardubice Region of Bohemia, considered the gateway to Moravia, the cultural history of the Roma began with mobile artisans and traders serving the agricultural heartland around the Elbe (Labe) River, providing horse trading and pot repair services to market fairs in the region.¹⁴² Roma started settling in Chrudim in the late 19th century, living on the outskirts and working as agricultural day laborers. After the Second World War, the region was repopulated by Roma from Slovakia in Česká Třebová and the regional capital, Pardubice, both crucial hubs of industry and transport. Male Roma were employed in machinery plants in Chrudim and Vysoké Mýto and in the big Explosia/Synthesia chemical plants in Semtín, transforming into the generation of proletarian Roma who became more integrated into the urban working class during communism. The 1958 ban on itinerancy severely affected those Roma who still lived on the road in this region, forcing them into state-allocated housing in Pardubice and Svitavy and disrupting their extended family lifestyle. In Pardubice today, the Roma live in several specific neighborhoods; while not as excluded as the Roma living further north, they do face challenges with debt-related social exclusion and discrimination when seeking housing. Roma-led

¹⁴¹ Entry for Terne Čhave on Czechmusic.net, available at <https://www.czechmusic.net/band.php?id=700-Terne-Chave>, accessed 21 March 2026

¹⁴² The historical importance of the horse trade to Pardubice specifically is described here in this entry on the official website of the city: <https://pardubice.eu/en/history-of-pardubice>, accessed 11 March 2026

initiatives work on bringing Roma children into mainstream education to counter their past relegation into the “special schools”. The Vlach Roma subgroup here strictly follows their own cultural laws and speak a distinct Romani dialect. The first Czech Government Commissioner for Roma Minority Affairs, Lucie Fuková, hails from Pardubice.

In the Vysočina Region, Roma cultural history has been influenced by the geography of the highlands and the role of this space as another gateway between Bohemia and Moravia.¹⁴³ The rugged terrain means industrialization is sparse here compared to territory further north, and itinerant trades were performed by Roma here much longer than elsewhere. These “mountain Roma” offered mobile, seasonal services, cutting firewood, repairing cookware, and weaving baskets for sale. Roma settled on the outskirts of Jihlava and Pelhřimov, serving as local blacksmiths to the peasantry. The Hodonín concentration camp was located on the border of this region and of South Moravia during the Protectorate, and it was in this region that Josef Serinek joined the partisans (see below). In the postwar period, Roma from Slovakia moved into Havlíčkův Brod to work in textile factories and to the regional capital, Jihlava, to work in the Motorpal motor works. The 1958 ban on itinerancy significantly affected Roma here, forcibly settling them in urban housing and disrupting their extended family lifestyle. The center of Roma life in the region today is Jihlava for civic activism and cultural events, especially ones targeting Roma youth. Traditional Moravian folk music is blended here with contemporary “Rompop”. Unlike the big ghettos further north, the Roma are more dispersed in this region and there are fewer of them.

The cultural history of the Roma in the Liberec Region in northern Bohemia was greatly affected by the Nazi occupation, as described in the sections above.¹⁴⁴ In the postwar period, the state recruited Roma from Slovakia as manual labor in local industry here. These Roma settled in the regional capital, Liberec, in Jablonec nad Nisou, and in Nový Bor, working in glass and jewelry manufacturing, undergoing proletarianization, and adapting their traditions to the architecture and lifestyle of the mountain towns. The 1958 ban on itinerancy forcibly settled the Roma who were still living that way in the Jizera Mountains. Starting in the 1970s, Roma were relocated away from the historic centers of towns and into housing estates of prefabricated buildings such as Kunratická in Liberec. The cost to the Roma of access to more modern amenities in such housing was their social and spatial marginalization, which persists to this day. The region is a significant center of Roma music, both brass-based traditional folk music and contemporary

¹⁴³ See the official website of the Vysočina Region, available at: <https://www.vysocina.eu/en/the-vysocina-region>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁴⁴ Livia Gershon, Smithsonian Magazine, “Remnants of Concentration Camp Used to Imprison Roma Found in Czech Republic”, 13 November 2020, available at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/czech-archaeologists-find-remains-concentration-camp-roma-180976294/#:~:text=All%20of%20the%20130%2Dplus,housing%20at%20nearby%20Kr%C3%A1l%C5%AFv%20H%C3%A1j>, accessed 11 March 2026

“Rompop”. Jablonec nad Nisou was once famous for influential Roma musicians performing traditional Eastern Slovak Roma music with modern instruments. In the towns of Hrádek nad Nisou and most infamously, Tanvald,¹⁴⁵ Roma are socially excluded, but local Roma activism promotes Roma identity through festivals involving Roma youth.

The cultural history of the Roma in the Karlovy Vary Region is defined by the strong presence of the Vlax Roma subgroup.¹⁴⁶ After WWII, Roma from Eastern Slovakia headed here, recruited to mine brown coal in the Sokolov coal basin and to work in heavy industry in Cheb and the capital, Karlovy Vary. Roma became highly concentrated in Chodov, Jáchymov, and Sokolov. The Vlax Roma here have maintained a more insular social structure, including running their own traditional courts (*Kris*), where elders settle community disputes. The Vlax Romani dialect has been better preserved here than elsewhere. In the spa towns of Františkové Lázně, Karlovy Vary, and Mariánské Lázně, Roma work behind the scenes in services and tourism, even though they are essentially excluded from residing in the centers of these towns. Karlovy Vary also has a longstanding tradition of restaurants hiring Roma musicians, with ensembles and especially violinists performing both Roma traditional music with international “evergreens” and jazz standards. The decline of the mining industry after 1989 led to Roma becoming socially excluded in Rotava and Sokolov, where Roma activism responds to interethnic social tension.

Lastly, the history of the Sinti¹⁴⁷ in the Czech Republic has followed a separate trajectory from the wider Roma population. They started settling in the Czech lands in the 15th century and developed a culture uniquely influenced by German customs and the German language. They were renowned as artisans, circus performers, and traveling musicians. Many settled in Bohemia in the 19th century, performing as entertainers in Liberec and Prague and running small businesses. After being decimated during the Holocaust, the few who survived frequently preferred to assimilate or hide their Sinti identity. The communist regime did not recognize them, lumping them together with Roma under the “gypsy” label. Since 1989, their history has been differentiated from that of the Roma, and Sinti activists emphasize their specific Bohemian-German heritage. Sinti culture is most visible in the “gypsy jazz” and “gypsy swing” style of music, performed exclusively on guitar, with live performances regularly given in Prague still today.

¹⁴⁵ The fatal shooting of one Romani man and wounding of another by a non-Romani man in 2012 and the failure to properly prosecute the crime, which was ruled to have been self-defense, was covered by the documentary “Life and Death in Tanvald” (2013). See ČTK (2012), “Zastřelení Roma v Tanvaldu bylo podle státního zástupce nutnou sebeobranou”, Romea.cz, 18 June 2012; Balážová, J. (2013), “Život a Smrt v Tanvaldu získal cenu filmového festivalu Finále”, Romea.cz, 29 April 2013; Ryšavý, Z. (2013), “Patrik Tatar dostal dva roky vězení za výtržnictví kvůli incidentu při kterém byl zastřelen jeho bratr”, Romea.cz, 20 November 2013

¹⁴⁶ Marcol, Michael. *The Anti-Roma Protests in the Czech Republic: Radicalization Driver of the Romani Community?* Diploma Thesis. Charles University, Faculty of Social Sciences, Institute of Political Studies, Department of International Relations, 2022, p. 13, available at <https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/177521>, accessed 11 March 2026.

¹⁴⁷ Sinti are a Roma subgroup connected to the German-speaking parts of Europe.

Arts and Romani Resistance

In addition to other aims, artists of Roma origin in the Czech Republic have challenged and denaturalized the longstanding antigypsyist misrepresentations of their communities in the larger society. The discrimination experienced by these artists personally is processed by them to produce new images of the Roma, who are the subjects of their own stories, disrupting the fixed nature of harmful antigypsyist stereotypes. Assimilation policies and pressures which problematize Roma as a stain on society are therefore refuted through their literature, music, theater productions, and the visual arts.

In the 1950s, some influential non-Roma researchers of the Romani language who advised the authorities were adamant that literary Romani was non-existent and that its development and standardization should not be pursued, not even for the goal of indoctrinating Roma.¹⁴⁸ In response, linguist Milena Hübschmannová (1933-2005), founder of Romani Studies at Charles University, supported Roma authors to resist assimilation by writing in Romani. Since 2012, the independent, nonprofit KHER press, founded by students from her program, has exclusively promoted Roma literature, striving to move it into the mainstream. Documenting the Holocaust, the resistance movement, the stories of forcibly sterilized Roma women, and other historical events is a significant focus of their work. Initially KHER released e-books only, but has moved to producing high-quality, printed books in bilingual Czech and Romani editions since 2018. The authors give readings, including during the annual Khamoro Festival and Prague Book Fair, to promote their works, which include children's books, contemporary fiction, and memoirs. Their catalogue includes Tera Fabiánová, Ilona Ferková, and translations of Roma authors from outside the Czech lands, such as the Finnish Kale artist and author Kiba Lumberg.

The Roma storytelling tradition of *paramisi* involves the transmission of fables, fairy tales, legends, and parables which serve both to entertain and to establish moral norms.¹⁴⁹ Historically, they were told in the evenings as part of formal gatherings; when performed outside the home to larger groups of all ages, the storytellers were typically male, while inside the home, it was usually women who told them to children. Drawing on the imagination of the individual narrator and on tradition, they tell of interpersonal relations, the spiritual world, and values. Audio recordings of hundreds of such oral transmissions were recorded by Hübschmannová and other researchers and published in collections. Roma authors such as Dezider Banga, Jan Berky-Luborecký, and Elena Lacková adapted *paramisi* into books for both adults and children. Attempts are underway to have them included in the school curriculum as a means to bring Roma culture and philosophy to

¹⁴⁸ Donert, p.150

¹⁴⁹ Factsheet on Romani Oral Literature, Council of Europe, available at <https://rm.coe.int/factsheets-on-romani-literature-1-0-oral-literature/1680aac50d>, accessed 11 March 2026.

future generations.

Patrik Banga, the most prominent Roma writer in the Czech Republic today, is also a journalist and musician.¹⁵⁰ He is best known for his 2022 award-winning debut, written in Czech, *The Real Way Out*,¹⁵¹ a memoir of his personal success that chronicles Czech and Roma society in the 1990s, describing his childhood in Prague's Žižkov neighborhood, his experiences of antigypsyism, police brutality, and social exclusion, and how he became a journalist. He is the first Roma recipient of the Magnesia Litera Award for Debut of the Year (2023). He has also published a book-length interview with the blind Roma musician Mário Bihári and contributed short stories, including for children, to anthologies. Reviewers describe his writing as authentic, honest, and unflinching, with his memoir constituting a unique record of a part of Prague that no longer exists. Stylistically, he is described as accessible, frequently addressing the reader directly and using slang. His themes include the clash between his desire to integrate and traditional Roma culture, his search for individuality in a segregated system, and his struggle not to be pigeonholed by others. He is published by KHER and Nakladatelství Host; *The Real Way Out* [*Skutečná cesta ven*] has been translated into Arabic, English, German, and Italian so far.



¹⁵⁰ Entry on Patrik Banga, Dana Blatná Literary Agency,

<https://www.dbagency.cz/index.php?pg=authors&id=68#:~:text=Patrik%20Banga%20is%20a%20journalist,Way%20Out%20/%20Skute%C4%8Dn%C3%A1%20cesta%20ven>, accessed 11 March 2026.

¹⁵¹ The title of this memoir references the 2014 feature film called *The Way Out* (*Cesta ven*), which cast a Romani woman who had never trained as an actress, Klaudia Dudová, in the role of a Roma mother struggling against antigypsyism. The film won Best Film and six other Czech Lion awards and was screened at Cannes. A subplot of the film involving a Roma prostitute planning a robbery of a client was seen as too sensationalistic.

Patrik Banga at a book signing, 2025 (PHOTO: Jolana Havelková)

There is not room here to do justice to Roma song lyrics as a format for resistance in the Czech lands. The example of Roma prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau creating, preserving, and transmitting lyrics about their suffering is mentioned above, and one more emblematic example must be mentioned here, the 1987 song “Šunen Roma so pes kerel, kajso hiros ma domuken” by the band Čercheň from Rokycany.¹⁵² Musically their works feature Latin rhythms, three-part harmony, and amplified guitars. Katka Miková and Štefan Miko authored many of their protest songs. Recorded at a time when protesting the practices of the state was dangerous, the song calls on Roma women to resist sterilization, as can be inferred from the mention of the amount of money being offered as an incentive for that specific surgery at the time:

*Šunen, Roma, so pes kerel / Listen, Roma, what's going on,
kajso hiros ma domuken / let's not take this anymore,
yoy, ma domuken ajsi bida, / ah, do not allow this horror,
te lel Romňen tel o čura. / of Roma women under the knife.*

*Duj ezera rozkeraha / Two thousand [crowns] is quickly spent
aver Roma on užona / but no more Roma will be born,
yoy, ma domuken tumen oda, / ah, do not allow such a horror
kaj le čhaven te murdaren. / as the murder of children.*

*Na kamen, kaj te ulúvas, / If they stop Roma from being born,
frima Roma adaj ena, / then fewer Roma will be here,
yoy, ma šunen tumen le rajen, / ah, don't listen to those gentlemen
mi jel tumen the deš čhave. / I have ten children if you can!¹⁵³*

Roma author Ilona Ferková also hails from Rokycany, and her first published work was her short story collection *Mosarda peske o živipen anglo love* [She Ruined Her Life for Money], where the title story was also about the forced sterilization of Roma women.¹⁵⁴ In 2025, KHER released another collection of stories on this topic by multiple authors, *Podphandle mašličkenca – Podvázané mašličkami*.

In visual arts, the renowned, self-taught Roma artist Rudolf Dzurko (1941-2013) is known

¹⁵² Viková, L. 2019. Šunen Roma, so pes kerel, kajso hiros ma domuken / A tribute to the Čercheň group from Rokycany. *Romano džaniben* 26 (2): 231–238.

¹⁵³ Ibid, my translation into English from the Czech translation of the Romani original.

¹⁵⁴ Ilona Ferková, *Mosarda peske o živipen anglo love*, (Romaňi čhib, 1992), see Radiožurnál, O roma vakeren, „Spisovatelka Ilona Ferková si dlouho neuměla představit, že se dá psát romsky“, 3 June 2017, available at <https://radio-zurnal.rozhlas.cz/spisovatelka-ilona-ferkova-si-dlouho-neumela-predstavit-ze-se-da-psat-romsky-8106597#:~:text=Spisovatelka%20Ilona%20Ferkov%C3%A1%20si%20dlouho,se%20d%C3%A1%20ps%C3%A1t%20romsky%20%7C%20Radio%20C5%BEurn%C3%A1>, accessed 11 March 2026.

for his brightly-colored, crushed glass paintings, using a patented, unique technique that brought him to prominence in Czech art.¹⁵⁵ Dzurko worked in factories where glass was produced and recycled the glass waste into works reminiscent of mosaics by gluing crumbs of colored glass to glass panels. He also sculpted in sandstone and wood. The Roma experience was his subject matter, such as historical events, including the Roma relationship to India, musicians, and music-making. He criticized the communist regime's treatment of the Roma, most explicitly in his painting "The Devil (Communists) Took the Gypsy's Violin". His motifs include representations of death (skeletons and skulls), the female figure, journeys/roads, and trees, symbolizing memory. In his 2002 monograph "I Do Not Make Art", he said he simply created his works for the joy of it. His works are held in the Czech National Gallery, the Museum of Romani Culture, and the North Bohemian Gallery of Fine Arts. He has been exhibited regionally in the Vlastimil Rada Municipal Gallery in Železný Brod (Liberec Region).

There are too many Roma musicians from the Czech Republic to cover here with anything like the detail they deserve, so a few examples of musicians past and present will have to suffice. Radek Banga (aka Gipsy) is a prominent activist, author, rapper, and singer/songwriter who has worked as a musician and performer since the age of 13, most notably in hip-hop and pop.¹⁵⁶ As frontman of the influential band Gipsy.cz, he blended hip-hop with Roma traditional music in his hit "Romano Hip-Hop". He served as ambassador of the EU Year of Equal Opportunities for All in 2007. Gipsy.cz was the first group from the Czech Republic ever to play at the renowned Glastonbury music festival in the UK in 2007 and represented the country in the 2009 Eurovision Song Contest. Banga, who has also written hits for Czech pop singers such as Karel Gott and Hana Zagorová, went solo in 2021. He has long drawn on his personal experiences of surviving domestic violence and poverty to inspire others. His autobiography, released in 2021, called *(Ne)pošli to dál* [Don't Pass It On], portrayed both his path to success and his trauma. He has run a motivational program for more than a decade where he speaks with both non-Roma and Roma schoolchildren about avoiding drugs, overcoming obstacles, and preventing bullying. When the Czech Nightingale popular music awards honored the neo-Nazi Ortel band in 2016, he protested from the audience during the televised broadcast and was subsequently subjected to antigypsyist harassment, including death threats, online; in 2017 he was given the František Kriegel Award for civil courage.¹⁵⁷ His public appearances and work have not always been well-received by the Roma community itself lately; family

¹⁵⁵ Severočeská galerie výtvarného umění v Litoměřicích, "Rudolf Dzurko: Jako celej život", 19 November 2025, available at <https://www.galerie-ltm.cz/2025/11/19/rudolf-dzurko-jako-celej-zivot/?v=9c049173fad5>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁵⁶ Aspen Institute Central Europe, entry on Radek Banga, available at <https://www.aspeninstitutece.org/people-profile/radek-banga/>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁵⁷ František Bikár, Romea.cz, "Czech civil society prize goes to Romani musician Radek Banga for protesting music award to neo-Nazi band", 12 April 2017, available at <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/czech-civil-society-prize-goes-to-romani-musician-radek-banga-for-protesting-music-award-to-neo-nazi-band>, accessed 11 March 2026

members publicly objected to his characterizations of their home life in his autobiography, and he was also criticized by civil society members of the Czech Government Council for Roma Minority Affairs for clumsily-worded generalizations about Roma that he made in a televised interview.

Jan Bendig is a Roma singer who first became famous in 2009 as a finalist in the initial season of the televised competition *Česko Slovenská SuperStar*, where he placed fourth. He has established himself as a solo vocalist of material in Czech, English, and Romani and has done both singing and voice acting work for the dubbed Czech versions of Disney films. His style blends pop with R&B and Roma traditional elements and he has headlined stadium shows in Prague to promote his albums. He is a consistent presence in film, social media, and television, creating and starring in a Czech online series called *Ďábelské cikánky* (Devilish Gypsy Women) as the character Olivia that has received mixed reviews in the Roma community. He was involved in a scandal in 2023 during the Czech Nightingale popular music awards, when he was apparently attacked on the red carpet by somebody who threw a bag of flour over him. Initially his fellow celebrities and fans rallied to his support, but in 2024 the Prague Police reported that the evidence showed the incident was a pre-arranged stunt and there was nothing to prosecute. Bendig denies staging the attack.¹⁵⁸ The scandal has severely damaged his reputation.

Věra Bílá (1954-2019) was an internationally acclaimed Roma singer whom critics compared to the Black American jazz singer Ella Fitzgerald for her emotionally powerful, virtuosic performances.¹⁵⁹ She began as a local performer, became an international star, then underwent a tragic decline into heartbreak and poverty. Born in Rokycany into a musical family, she began singing at 12 with her father's band. She released the album *Rom Pop* in 1995 with her own band, Kale, performing a blend of pop and Roma traditional folk music, touring Europe and North America and performing at London's Barbican Centre and the Hollywood Bowl. Her work was internationally released with BMG, but she struggled with financial instability and a gambling addiction. In 2013, her adopted son and husband died in rapid succession, events from which she never recovered. Mere days before she was to start a comeback tour in 2019, she suffered a fatal heart attack at the age of 64. She remains an icon of Roma culture.

The Fečo family is a prominent Roma musical dynasty with a multigenerational influence

¹⁵⁸ Vedran Kovačvić, TV Nova, "Policie: Jan Bendig si incident s moukou naplánoval. Zpěvák to dál popírá", 25 February 2024, available at: <https://tv.nova.cz/porad/cesky-slavik/clanek/542983-lziva-dohra-utoku-na-slavicich-jan-bendig-byl-na-incidentu-s-moukou-domluveny-uvadi-policie><https://tv.nova.cz/porad/cesky-slavik/clanek/542983-lziva-dohra-utoku-na-slavicich-jan-bendig-byl-na-incidentu-s-moukou-domluveny-uvadi-policie>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁵⁹ Tomas McEnroe, Radio Prague International, "Czech singer Věra Bílá, dubbed the Ella Fitzgerald of Gypsy music, dies days before her comeback tour", 13 March 2019, available at <https://english.radio.cz/czech-singer-vera-bila-dubbed-ella-fitzgerald-gypsy-music-dies-days-her-comeback-8136261>, accessed 11 March 2026

on Roma cultural output in the Czech lands.¹⁶⁰ Jozef “Jožka” Fečo (1940-2013) was a legendary bandleader, composer, and violinist who founded influential ensembles such as the guitar band *Roma štar* and the larger ensemble *Romale, aven, imar dživas*. His work combined classical influences with Roma traditional folk music. His wife, Olga Fečová (1942-2022) was a major figure in the emancipation movement, an author and assistant educator who worked with impoverished Roma children through her choir, *Čhavorikaňi luma*. Anička Fečová (1954-2014), Jožka’s sister, was the lead singer of *Roma štar* who ultimately worked with Roma youth in Berlin, Germany. Jožka’s grandson Josef is a leading cimbalom (hammered dulcimer) player and jazz bassist, a conservatory graduate who leads the band Josef Fečo & the Gypsy Family. Jan Fečo plays saxophone, while Martin Fečo plays drums and guitar, continuing the family legacy by blending funk, modern jazz, and Romani traditional music. They are celebrated for both innovating musically and preserving the Roma tradition; today a virtual gallery documents their output.

Gejza Horváth is a renowned Roma activist, author, commentator, composer, musician, and songwriter who has significantly shaped the Roma cultural landscape in the Czech lands.¹⁶¹ He began performing at the age of 12 and went pro in 1980, touring internationally as a multi-instrumentalist and singer. Several of his hit songs, all sung in Romani, are now considered Roma standards, best known through the band he founded, *Romano rat*. In the year 2000, he became the editor and a founding member of *Romano hangos*, a biweekly newspaper to which he contributes commentaries. 2006, he published a critically-acclaimed collection of short stories, *Trispras*, about Roma life and traditions. For more than 10 years he has led music workshops for Roma youth in Brno through the *IQ Roma servis* organization. He was awarded a lifetime achievement award by the Museum of Romani Culture in 2017. In 2022, he premiered the video of his song “Romaňi Dukh” [Romani Pain], filmed at the Lety Cultural Heritage Monument on the site of the former concentration camp.¹⁶²

Ida Kelarová is a world-renowned choir conductor, musician, and singer bridging traditional Romani music and contemporary expression who has received state honors from the Senate (in 2022) and the President of the Republic (in 2023).¹⁶³ Her emotional, powerful, raw style of singing from the heart prioritizes authenticity and sees the human voice as a tool for healing. Her sound blends jazz, Moravian folk-pop, and traditional Romani songs, especially in her work with her band Jazz Famelija, which integrates Latin rhythms into the music. Reviewers have compared her to the Black American blues and

¹⁶⁰ See the virtual museum *Olga Fečová’s Museum: The Familial Soundscapes of a Romani Band Leader*, available at <https://muzeumolgyfecove.cz/en/>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁶¹ Entry on Gejza Horváth, *RomArchive*, available at <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/p/gejza-horvath/#:~:text=Horv%C3%A1th%20developed%20his%20musical%20career%20while%20employed,the%20owner%20of%20a%20musical%20instrument%20shop>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁶² Gejza Horváth, *Romaňi Dukh*, Museum of Roma Culture, available with English subtitles at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p0hWc3yci00>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁶³ Ida Kelarová, official website available at <https://kelarova.com/cs/oceneni/>, accessed 11 March 2026

torch singer Billie Holiday. She leads the children's choir Čhavoreng in collaboration with the Czech Philharmonic, a project that has experienced significant antigypsyist pushback, most notably in 2016 when their music camp in the Šluknov foothills (Ústecký Region) was assaulted by a local resident shouting racist slurs and firing a gun into the air. When Kelarová called police, they responded slowly and initially refused to characterize the incident as crime.¹⁶⁴ It was not the first time the choir had faced a hateful, hostile atmosphere in the Czech Republic, but this incident is frequently cited as a prime example of antigypsyism as a systemic issue and how Roma youth are not protected by authorities here (see also the incident with Roma youth footballers described above).

The "artist" (activist and artist), conceptual and performance artist, curator, and documentary filmmaker Tamara Moyzes, born in Slovakia, is based in Prague, where her work confronts antigypsyism, racism in general, and social exclusion, employing public interventions and satire to resist Roma marginalization.¹⁶⁵ Her video "Miss Roma" (2007) is inspired by her personal experiences being denied entry to restaurants or shops and culminates in the protagonist being "whitewashed" with makeup, a critique of the pressure to assimilate to beauty standards based on whiteness. Her project "TV Terror / Roma Television" (2007) satirized how antigypsyist rhetoric from politicians is celebrated by the public. Her video "Mamko moje / Folk song" (2007), co-authored with Shlomi Yaffe, features Roma students singing a traditional song with antigypsyist content, highlighting the internalization of social stigma against Roma. She has curated and presented work in exhibitions targeting Romani children's segregation in the schools, such as "The Ministry of Education Warns Segregation Is Harmful to Your Health" (2011), which was exhibited by the outdoor Artwall Gallery in Prague. In 2012, she set up the Romane Kale Panthera (Roma Black Panthers) group, which organizes events and performances of activism and political art to protest antigypsyism, including on the subjects of the pig farm at the site of the former concentration camp in Lety and the death in police custody of Stanislav Tomáš in 2021. In 2015, her "Roma Body Politics II" project discussed bodily autonomy, forced sterilization, and reproductive rights. Her "Romanistan" (2017) installation used video to explore the concept of a potential Roma state as theorized in the 1930s. In 2018, she founded Artist Lab, a gallery intended as a space for artistic collaborations in response to political issues highlighting minority voices. She views art as a form of protest, using her lived experience to parody and unmask social conditions and confront the truth about cultural segregation.

ARA ART is a Roma association established in 2012 in Prague that specializes in

¹⁶⁴ Adéla Gálová and Lenka Jandáková, Romea.cz, "Ida Kelarová on warning shots fired near Roma children at music camp: The Czech Police refused to help us", 29 August 2016, available at: <https://romea.cz/en/czech-republic/ida-kelarova-on-warning-shots-fired-near-roma-children-at-music-camp-the-czech-police-refused-to-help-us>, accessed 11 March 2026

¹⁶⁵ Entry for Tamara Moyzes, *RomArchive*, available at <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/collection/p/tamara-moyzes/>, accessed 11 March 2026

“artivism”.¹⁶⁶ Its director, David Tišer, works to raise the profile of Roma cultural output while tackling intersectional discrimination, operating the only professional Roma theater ensemble in the Czech Republic today.



David Tišer (PHOTO: Martin Babic)

Their productions use original scripts to tell authentic Roma stories. ARA ART is the main organization in Europe addressing the intersection of LGBTQ+ and Roma identities, founding the International Roma LGBTQ+ Platform and initiating the Prague Declaration in 2015 to articulate their needs. ARA ART provides advice and support to queer Roma and their families in the Czech Republic. Annually, the group also organizes International Roma Day events in Prague featuring exhibitions and gala musical productions. In 2017, it launched Arafest in Plzeň, a multi-genre festival showcasing contemporary Roma dance, film, and music. Its leadership academy trains Roma youth and nonprofits in civil engagement, communications, and project management, while its Academy of Artivism connects Roma to other minority groups such as Jewish and Vietnamese people and to issues such as environmentalism to use art as a tool for social change. The group also monitors hate speech, facilitates legal aid to hate speech victims, and raises awareness of this as a social problem. ARA ART also organizes public, open-air commemorations of the Holocaust of the Roma on 2 August annually in Prague.

The most recent work of art to draw on the history of the Roma and attract significant interest among the general public is the theatrical production *Černý partyzán* [The Black

¹⁶⁶ ARA ART, official website, available at <https://www.araart.cz/en/o-nas>, accessed 11 March 2026

Partisan], which premiered in March 2025 at Divadlo Minor in Prague and is still in the repertory there as of this writing.¹⁶⁷ The play is billed as a “Western from the Vysočina highlands” telling the story of Josef Serinek through both the harrowing and the heroic parts of his life, from his imprisonment in Lety to his daring escape and his falling in with the resistance in Vysočina, where he led a partisan unit of escaped Soviet POWs. The production discusses how his heroism was then forgotten for decades. Roma community member Richard Samko, a famous journalist with public broadcaster Czech Television, made his theatrical debut in the title role. The production includes musical numbers and puppetry to make the complex story accessible, including to children; the script is wholly based on the authoritative biography of Serinek. Sometimes audiences are invited to stay for discussions with Zdeněk Serinek, grandson of Josef, or with other Roma witnesses to the Holocaust and its effect on the following generations in the Roma and Sinti communities. Critical reception of the production has been overwhelmingly positive and tickets to it are sold out for months in advance.

¹⁶⁷ Official website of Divadlo Minor, *The Black Partisan*, available at <https://www.minor.cz/en/repertoire/the-black-partisan>, accessed 11 March 2026

Conclusion

This research reveals how Roma in the Czech-speaking part of Europe have triumphed over the odds and continued to thrive here despite the best efforts of both totalitarian systems and neoliberalism to literally erase them. While access to national elected office still remains elusive for Roma politicians, Roma civil society and cultural production draws from Roma history to insist on Roma self-representation, both in the arts and in cultural heritage work such as Holocaust remembrance. Today Roma creativity has expanded beyond musicianship to include literature, theatrical performance, and media production. Even when Roma artists themselves have come under literal assault, they have pushed back and found support from non-Roma allies to continue their work.

With important institutions established such as the KHER press; the Museum of Romani Culture, which manages the Hodonín u Kunštátu Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Moravia and the Lety u Písku Memorial to the Holocaust of the Roma and Sinti in Bohemia; the Memory of the Roma database of oral histories; and news server Romea.cz, the Czech Republic is probably better-prepared than it ever has been to combat antigypsyism and render it socially unacceptable. Whether these positive developments will yield fruit is in the hands of Czech society.

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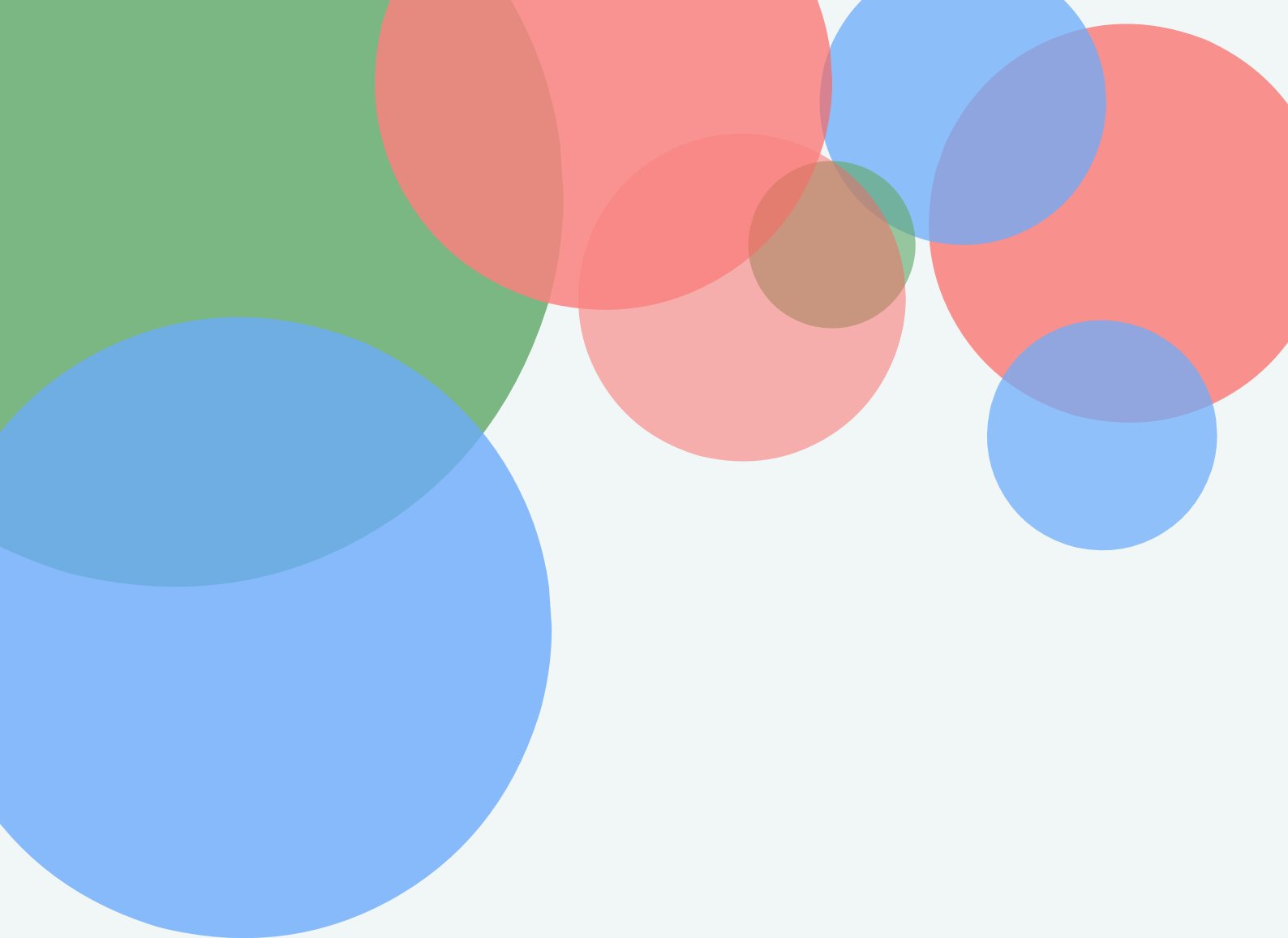
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