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NEW BOOKS REVIEW

BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

ROMAS IN SERBIA*

The Romas have been living on the territory of former and present Yugoslavia for centuries. There has been and still is a certain number of them living in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro; however, they are most vastly settled in Macedonia and Serbia.¹ Thus, regarding the present Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Republic of Serbia and Republic of Montenegro), the largest number of them are in Serbia and this makes them the second largest ethnic minority, with the Albanians as the first one. Due to their propensity for ethnic mimicry, they mostly declares themselves as the Serbs in the Public Census, namely, the official statistics states that there are slightly more than 100,000 of them, while the estimates of the leading demographers show that their number is exceeding 500,000. This is an important minority entity that has not been given sufficient attention so far, unlike, for instance, the Hungarian and Muslim population in Serbia.

Still, it does not imply that the Serbian Romas have not been studied at all. There has been considerable literature about the Romas at our disposal ever since the times of Vuk Karadžić and the birth of the modern Serbian state in the second half of the nineteenth century; besides, there are rich sources left by Tihomir Đorđević in the first decades of the twentieth century followed by synthetic studies of Tatomir Vukanović in the second half of the twentieth century. (We are stressing the most recent, worthwhile, undertaking in this tradition, namely, the book entitled *My Gypsy - Romas in Vojvodina*, KID "Pčesa", Novi Sad, 1997). This literature has primarily relied on the ethnographic approach, though it has very often been concentrated on mere - though exceptionally useful - description of the Romani life and customs. Therefore, it represents the very basis as well as an indispensable guidance for modern scientists exploring the Romani issue, namely, of those who are obliged to advance the given research from the standpoint of other disciplines. Considering their studies, sociology takes a prominent place among the sciences dealing with the issues such as law, political, culturological and linguistic ones. The time has come to make a shift from an exclusively historical and ethnological treatment of the Romas to viewing their actual position in the Serbian society. Thus, the scientists exploring the Romani issue should make the present state of the Romas the very focus of their studies; they should also question their present legal and political status as

* A. Mitrović, G. Zajić, V. Đerić and V. Rakić-Vodinić, *Romas in Serbia*, Centar za antirratnu akciju & Institut za kriminološka i sociološka istraživanja, Belgrade, 1998, p. 128

¹This review has been prepared as part of the project "Sociocultural Adaptation of the Romas in Serbia in the Transition Process - Integration, Assimilation or Segregation?" sponsored by the *Research Support Scheme*.

well as their social-economic and cultural position; all this should aim to make the Romas the citizens with the same rights as others, able to lead a dignified kind of life as expected at the end of the second millennium.

The book we will present in short - *Romas in Serbia* - represents a result of modern Serbian romology, contribution made by prominent sociologists (Aleksandra Mitrović and Gradimir Zajić) and law experts (Vladimir Đerić and Vesna Rakić-Vodinelić) who are well acquainted with the so-called Romani issue. The book consists of three separate studies, namely, the first one, entitled *Social Position of the Roma in Serbia*, prepared by the co-authors, A. Mitrović and G. Zajić, the second one entitled *Protection of the Romani Rights at the International Level* is prepared by V. Đerić and the third is written by V. Rakić-Vodinelić, *Legal Status of the Romas in the FR of Yugoslavia*. Aware of the fact that the proper constitutional-legal regulation is very important for overall existence and realization of the ethnic group rights in every multi-ethnic and multi-religious community, we shall review only the text prepared by Mitrović and Zajić, for many reasons, including the fact that it deals with a sociologically intriguing view of the Serbian Romas.

Let's say at the very beginning that, though the study, on the whole, has a high scientific and stylistic level, still, in some of its parts it reveals some weaknesses. While taking almost the half of the whole book (64 pages out of 128), it sometimes turns into a mere description or a repetition of what has already been said many times in addition to paraphrasing other people's opinions without quoting the sources. (It is obviously a technical error, but it is surprising that the publisher has released the book into print without a list of references; thus, the incomplete publication has done damage to its authors). Another thing that will immediately strike the eye of a more careful reader - and which is often the case with the studies written by co-authors - is the fact that chapters and sections are not uniform in quality and style. Here we are to face a slight paradox, namely, the first part of the study, in which better known things about the Romas are presented and which the author has written about many times before - is expressed in a clear and refined sociological jargon, while the second part - more innovative and original in its ideas and suggestions - is written with numerous repetitions and stock phrases and thus it appears confused and without any sense for a vigorous sociological sentence. The impression that the study about the *Social Position of the Romas in Serbia* leaves is that, for some reason, it was prepared in a hurry.

Otherwise, the co-author of the study, Aleksandra Mitrović, ph. d. from the Institute for Criminological and Sociological Research (Belgrade), who also worked in the Institute for Social Politics for many years, has, among the sociologists, the reputation of being the greatest expert and connoisseur of the Romas; we should also add that she is at present our leading romologist. As a connoisseur of the language and foreign sources, she has had a chance to get acquainted, at many study visits abroad, with Western experience, in addition to being familiar with a critical attitude to the domestic Romani heritage; open for new ideas and ready to collaborate with younger associates, Miss Mitrović is a paradigm of the sociologists who finds the office work too confined and therefore, tends to check up her analyses in practice, "on the site" thus giving concrete help to people. To illustrate, it is enough to mention two instances of her active engagement, namely, for the last twenty years she has been successfully leading a specific experimental project of transforming the way of life in a wretched Romani settlement - Masurica near Surdulica -

and this work has made her famous even outside our borders; at the same time, she is the founder of the Society for Betterment of the Romani Settlements, a very active non-government organization. As a specialist in the sociology of economics and profession of the Romani population, Gradimir Zajić is her romologist companion with no less contribution made in both the above-mentioned projects.

"Ethnogenesis, demographic and cultural characteristics, professions and ways of providing means of subsistence, material position of the household, marriage and family relations, conditions and possibilities for education, status and way of life, residence and ghettoization, social reputation and prejudice toward the Romas, political organizations and Romani self-organization" (p. 123) are the key themes dealt with by our authors; thus, the study consists of the following chapters: "Ethnogenesis of the Romas," "Demographic Characteristics," "Cultural Traits," "Socio-economic Position" ("Professions and Ways of Providing for Means of Subsistence," "Material Position of the Romani Households," "Education"), "Socio-political Engagement" ("Political Organizations," "Self-organization of the Romas"), "Status and Way of Life" ("Social Reputation - Prejudice Toward the Romas"), "Residence and Ghettoization," "Marriage and Family Relations" ("Ethnic Characteristics of the Romani Families," "Contemporary Romani Family") and "Concluding Remarks." What are the basic results and conclusions reached in every chapter?

The Romas, coming from their ancestral country, India, due to their intense migrations, crossed Asia and rushed into Europe; they reached the Balkans together with the Turkish invasion, "while the fact that the Turks remained in the Balkans for five centuries explains the reason why the Romas remained in this region for the longest period of time and in the greatest number" (p. 10). In Serbia there are the following groups living: Turkish, White, Romanian and Hungarian Romas, mostly of Orthodox and Islam confessions. According to the Public Census (1991) there are 138,645 Romas living here; most of them live in the central Serbia, but their greatest concentration is at Kosovo where they make up 2,2% of the overall population. The demographers claim that there are more than 500,000, that they are a young population with a high nativity and mortality rate and that their share in the Serbian state population will increase.

The Romas possess their own specific cultural traits based on the patterns adopted as early as while living in their old homeland; still, the truth is that the history of every Romani community represents part of the environment in which it has found itself, namely: "In their peculiar cultural interaction, the Romas have almost always accepted more than they have given elements of their culture while, however, retaining their peculiarities that kept them compact in the greatest number of the countries in which they live." (p. 23). Their spiritual culture is based on language, music, religion and myths. Preserving their own language that is being standardized just now, they have endured as an ethnos. Music is an "important Gypsy ethnic sign" (T. Đorđević); they are more performers than creators, but "the fact is that music is cherished among the Romas, that the music practice, that is, the instrument-playing skill is transmitted from one generation to another and that this skill has become one of the significant recognizable signs of the Romani ethnicity." (p. 25). Without their own religion, they seldom fail, in Serbia, to mix Islam and Orthodox Christianity with pagan elements. Their lore and stories are rich, while their customs are adopted to local environment. The most important holidays celebrated by most of the Romas are the New Year (Vasuljica) and Saint Đurde's Day

(Đurdevdan).

Regarding Serbia, the Romas have an alarmingly low socio-economic position, lagging far behind that of the majority population and the other ethnic groups. They are not economically active and are mainly unemployed. Their unfavorable age structure (the most numerous Romas are up to the age of 15), their educational structure (with no education or possibly four grades of the elementary school) and their professional structure (with no qualification, mostly sheer physical work force), along with prominent barriers in employment (except for the jobs in the city dumps and alike), all crucially contribute to the fact that the supported persons prevail among the Romas, while the poverty culture seems to be their doom. The gray economy in the Serbian society, as a consequence of the war on the former Yugoslav territory, is a widely spread form of the so-called survival strategy and it is abundantly and successfully applied by the Romas. A small number of them concentrate a large profit, while the majority of the Romas "make meager income that are not, of course, to be disregarded in the ongoing struggle for survival" (p. 37).

Education is an influential channel of social promotion and mobility; however, the Romas apparently do not use it at all: "The Romas are, namely, an ethnic group with the greatest number of illiterate people (34,8% - according to the data from 1981), as well as with the greatest number of those who have failed to complete elementary schooling with respect to the overall Serbian population (78,7%). It should also be stressed that in 1981 only 0,4% (or 181) of the Romas have high or University education. It seems probable that the situation has not changed in the last fifteen years" (p. 43). This brings us to another issue: how do we expect them to continue their schooling when they are deprived of the possibility for bilingual education from pre-school to University age? Despite some noble efforts made to include as many Romany children and youth in formal and informal educational developments, it is clear that in Serbia there will be no far reaching effects unless a comprehensive system of the Romani education and upbringing is founded, namely, the system that would comprise their education and upbringing in the regular school system, additional forms of education and upbringing for their children as well as a specific system of education and upbringing for the Romas. Without pre-school and elementary education along with the learning of the Romani language, we will be witnessing enormous exclusion of the Romani children from the educational system. This will be devastating for the integration of the Romas and the society on the whole: "Even simple calculation about the possible duration of the consequences springing from the children exclusion from the regular schooling shows that in the next period there will be generations that will continue to 'breed' illiterate and thus socially handicapped people unable to integrate into modern trends of the social developments" (p.46).

Regarding the political scenes the Romas behave much in the same way as the Serbs, that is, in accordance with the slogan often quoted in relation to the majority people: "Wherever there are three Serbs, three political parties immediately spring up." They are almost without any political influence, though, regarding their number and the minority rights, they would otherwise be a powerful political factor. (In the present National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia the Romas have only one member, namely, a socialist from Kosovo). Inclined to support the ruling party, ready to put their faith into "leaders" - "political ragamuffins" from their own groups - and always divided regarding their religious and territorial groupings, they managed only last year to form their first genuine

political party. A somewhat better situation is to be found regarding their self-organization into various cultural and artistic societies which also include an association at the state level, namely the Alliance of the Roma Societies. There are also some quite new forms of self-organization: "Thus, for instance, an organization was founded in Kragujevac, aided by sponsors and donators, which has managed to open up a soup kitchen and a kindergarten. On a more complex level, some initiatives are launched in the domain of culture and publishing. A children paper is issued as well as books in the Romani languages" (p. 49).

All this, along with the well-known stereotypes about the Romas, has justified A. Mitrović and G. Zajić's insistence that there are certain mechanism of *discrimination* of this ethnic group in Serbia; they are obvious in *residential (spatial) segregation* manifested in ghetto settlements known to us all, in *economic segregation* (unemployment or employment at the underpaid, infamous or stigmatized jobs), *educational segregation* (illiteracy and lack of bilingualism) and *political segregation* (extreme group weakness).

At the end of our review of this small but exceptionally useful sociological study we can conclude, together with the authors, "that in a multi-national social structure, the formation of permanent ethnic stratification with a distinctive sub-proletarian group composed of ethnic minorities will take place if the structural integration (or 'structural assimilation') is not open to all or at least to some minority groups even in the future perspective, or, rather, if there is no channel of social mobility or promotion through which the competitive ability of the group can be strengthened" (p. 64). The Romas, together with Serbia, unfortunately, well confirm this general theoretical thesis.

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