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**THE GYPSY POPULATION OF HUNGARY AND  
TRANSYLVANIA FROM THE MID-18<sup>TH</sup> TO THE  
MID-19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

PhD Thesis summary

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### **Objective, methodology, sources**

The aim of the dissertation is to give an overview of the history of the population that is called Gypsy in various sources, a population living in Hungary and Transylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries. I begin by outlining the political framework, then I analyse the Gypsy population, its economic and social position, including some issues around their way of life.

The chronological framework covers the period from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century; nevertheless, in the analysis of regional and local issues and the presentation of different processes, I extend my scope, not discussing the well-known 1893 Gypsy census in detail, but using it as a point of reference.

According to the classification created by Zoltan Barany, professor of political science at the University of Texas, my research covers the period of the Habsburg Empire from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This also defines the spatial framework: the Kingdom of Hungary, part of the Habsburg Empire, as well as Transylvania, excluding the counties of Maramureş, Satu Mare, Bihor, Arad, as well as Bihor.

An important aspect of the dissertation is a historical exploration of the concepts. Following the principle of historicity, I use the group name “Gypsy” according to the parlance of the sources. The question “who is Gypsy?”, which has been recurring in Roma studies for decades, cannot be answered with utmost precision from a historical point of view, but it cannot be avoided either, as my work can be placed in the system of research drawing on it. In the dilemma of cultural group versus marginal group, I do not consider either approach mutually exclusive. The framework of interpretation depends on the size of the population and the scale of the analysis.

The groups classified under the term “Gypsy” did not form a unified, organised people as a whole. Neither from a universal point of view or focusing on the Carpathian Basin can we speak of a specific, homogeneous and closed system of signs, which played a uniform role only in the life of the Gypsies, and whose meanings only Gypsies would have been able to decipher. The Gypsy population of the Carpathian Basin as a whole is not a unified cultural group, but a particular marginal group, whose history in this region has changed from a special condition situation to a lower caste status.

By narrowing the broader theoretical context, I start from the assumption that in the Carpathian Basin in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Gypsies were those who are called Gypsies in the sources. However, answering the question of definition is not a primary concern. The dominant aspect of elaborating my topic is the joint implementation of two types of investigation in three sub-areas: on the national scale, the following of trends, processes and changes, while on a local scale, the exploration of the living situations and activities of Gypsy people, how they appear in their own spaces and environment. The two are linked by the complex method of source analysis and source criticism: what are the conclusions that can be drawn from archival and other sources, and in what historical context can the Gypsy population be placed?

The most important archival sources used for the analytical chapters are the decrees of the Royal Hungarian Locotenential Council and the Transylvanian Gubernium, as well as fiscal censuses, urbaries and special Gypsy censuses. I used litigation documents, letters of request, personal descriptions and circulars to discuss way of life in particular. The most important of the published sources was the Transylvanian fiscal census of 1750 and the documents of the Diet of Hungarian and the Transylvanian Diet.

### **The political framework**

Jean-Pierre Liégeois classifies the Roma policies of European states from the early modern period to the 20<sup>th</sup> century into three types: integration, exclusion and isolation. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungary and Transylvania, integration was dominant, mixed with exclusion. Isolation was also a discussed option, but did not become practice. A general feature of the political efforts was also the desire to abolish exclusion from society. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the political ambivalence that has prevailed up to the present day was already palpable: ideas were formulated that applied to all Gypsies, while the problems they were trying to solve did not apply to all Gypsies.

The main issue throughout the period under review was changing their way of life: resettlement, permanent residence, taxability, acceptable work. Economic and social goals were complemented by a moral dimension, with the intention of changing the values and moral standards of the Gypsy population. No long-term political solutions were achieved. Parliamentary bills were not forwarded to the legislative stage, and government regulations were partly effective but failed in the long term.

From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, we can speak of a systematic policy of enlightened absolutism in Hungary and in Transylvania. The decrees of both the Royal Hungarian

Locotenential Council and the Transylvanian Gubernium concerning the Gypsies can be interpreted in the context of social organisation goals and the expansion of resources. They can be interpreted against the backdrop of the search for a balance between the imperial framework and the estates. Its aim was integration, its means were assimilation, and its key concept was civilisation, which meant turning the Gypsy into useful citizens and assimilating them to their environment, starting with where they lived to how they dressed and how they spoke. Its ideological background is utilitarianism, as well as philanthropy to some extent, together with the influence of the moral philosophy and the pedagogical ideas of the Enlightenment, the confidence in the changeability and convertibility of subjects. To this end, children aged 2-12, and then 4-10, were separated from their families and placed in foster care to change the context of their socialisation and to become adults who are different from their parents. This programme was unsuccessful, and after a decade or two, Gypsy children appeared in the sources as lost, damaged adults who belonged nowhere, drifting into subcultures.

A dual conceptual system was formed in the sources of the period starting with the 16th century and culminating in the 18<sup>th</sup>: the understanding of the Gypsy as *gens/natio* and *conditio/professio*. That is, Gypsies appear in the sources both as a people (nation) and as a social status (occupation). Since the 1780s, we find in government decrees the possibility for the administrative reclassification of Gypsies as non-Gypsies. The *iudex nobilium* (szolgabíró) of the Szendrő district of Borsod county wrote in his report for the Gypsy census that he had removed four Gypsy families in Vámos, who lead a respectable life and had a permanent and orderly dwelling, from among the Gypsies and transferred them to the other inhabitants.

For a realistic interpretation of the decree policy, we must take into account that the classification of Gypsies seems simple only in retrospect, but in reality, it was a problem in the given time period. This is shown by the fact that during the census survey in Transylvania, the General Army Headquarters formulated written advice on how to register the Gypsies in a transcript dated 28 February 1785. They had to be listed in the box where they belonged according to their social classification as peasants, craftsmen, gold washers, etc., and in the comment box they had to be entered as Gypsies. This, however, did not become standard practice. On the one hand, the Gypsies were also registered separately, where the Gypsy classification was the primary one; this was the case in 1781 when the Transylvanian Gypsies were surveyed. On the other hand, the above two criteria often overlapped in the tax censuses of the taxpayer population, and the criteria for classification were not uniform within the same survey, for example in the Transylvanian national tax census of 1750.

In the first half of the long 19<sup>th</sup> century, new insights were formulated within the regular committees of the general assemblies: excessive interference in the life of the Gypsies was not right, and many of the earlier provisions were not feasible. The imbalances were to be seen as structural, arising from economic and demographic disparities. Solutions were formulated, but they did not become practice. There was, for example, the idea of the proportionate territorial distribution of the Gypsy population and their social utilisation as a kind of artisanal additional class, especially in Transylvania.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the absolutist state wished to modernise within an imperial framework, while the judicatures and landlords sought to maintain the status quo that suited their interests (for example, regarding the ways of exploiting the labour of the Gypsies) and to prevent a general, uniform settlement of their situation. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, government policy narrowed down to regulating the issuing of passports. Conflicts of interest persisted, but modernisation was already emerging in county politics and, in Transylvania, briefly during the Diet of 1841-1843. From the Reform Era onwards, the key political concept was the place of the Gypsy population in embourgeoisement, and in the background (to a modest extent, compared to other dilemmas of the time) the conflict between imperial and nation-state modernisation. The issue of social tensions and social care was also becoming more and more prominent. The question that arose at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a new context was the following: can the liberal state solve the situation of the Gypsies without drastic interference in their lives? This was the question discussed by politicians and public officials at the “Gypsy meeting” convened by Prime Minister Kálmán Széll in 1902, and no satisfactory answer was found.

### **The Gypsy population**

Regular censuses of Gypsies took place in Hungary starting with 1758. Of these, we have national registries from the early 1780s. In 1780, Hungary and Croatia had a Gypsy population of 50-60 thousand, less than 1% of the total population. That year, 12348 Gypsy heads of family were counted. The status of heads of household: serf 3.7%, landless peasants 96.3%. Occupational breakdown: blacksmith 47%, musician 11.3%, day labourer 39.6%, beggar 1.9%. The census reveals a settled Gypsy population, belonging in legal status to the categories of the estates, living in a house, in a situation similar to that of the poorest landless peasants.

The Transylvanian national tax census of 1750 registered 1997 Gypsy taxpayers in 2117 settlements, 1.2% of all taxpayers. With a multiplier of 4.5, this means a Gypsy population of

around 9,000. This cannot be interpreted as the total number of Gypsies, because it does not include the so-called fiscal (*fiskális*) Gypsies under the jurisdiction of the Treasury, nor the travellers whose proportion was identified as half of the total number of Transylvanian Gypsies by several former authors of statistical works and country descriptions, especially Lucas Joseph Marienburg in 1813. Among the counties, the largest number of Gypsies lived in Torda and Kis-Küküllő counties, the smallest in Felső-Fehér county. In Szeklerland, the highest number of Gypsies is found in Marosszék (3.9%), the lowest in Csíkszék. In the Saxon Lands, the highest number of Gypsies was counted in Szebenszék, the lowest in Sebesszék. Agricultural land tenure data show a century-long trend, with a negligible proportion of land in Gypsy use. In contrast, 4.3% of craftsmen were Gypsies. Their most common trades were blacksmith, cobbler, bootmaker (*faber ferrarius, sutor, cothurnarius*); there were few musicians among them, a significant number of which was not skilled.

Despite the uncertainties of the statistics, a steady increase in the number of Gypsy taxpayers can be seen in the tax censuses between 1765 and 1785. In 1785, 9474 Gypsy taxpayers were registered, 3.1% of the total of 298,746 taxpayers. However, the demographic movement of the Gypsy population was not as smooth as it appears from the tax censuses. We still have to take into consideration a part of the population that passed through Transylvania and continued travelling towards Hungary; others changed their place of residence for work, went to Moldavia, Wallachia, Banat, Hungary, and then returned, as found in the census officials' reports in 1788.

The only Gypsy census known from Transylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was ordered by the Gubernium in 1781. At that time, the total number of registered Gypsy heads of family was 12,686. There is a significant difference compared to the tax censuses, probably due to high fluctuations and differences in the way the data were collected. The number of fiscal Gypsy heads of family in 1781 was 2913. The two together make 15,599 heads of household, of which 70 are Gypsies. The proportion of Gypsies in the population of Transylvania reached 4-5%. This proportion was still 5% in 1893, and from the end of the 18th century there was no significant change, as the Gypsies from the Romanian principalities moved on from Transylvania to Hungary or were sent to other countries of Europe and America in the large waves of emigration.

According to the 1781 census, 67% of the Gypsy heads of family were sedentary, 33% were nomadic. At the same time, 86% were serfs, 14% were landless peasants. There was no correlation between serfs and settled Gypsies, or between landless peasants and nomads, and being nomadic did not imply being outside society. The distribution of legal status is the



reverse of that in Hungary, with a higher proportion of serfs in Transylvania implying a stronger integration. The heads of families practised nearly fifty different crafts and livelihoods, but blacksmiths, cobblers, musicians and day labourers remained dominant. A striking difference compared to Hungary is the high proportion of shoe manufacturers. Among the Gypsy heads of family in Dumbrăveni (Erzsébetváros) there were 12 blacksmiths, 16 musicians, 2 cobblers, 1 beggar, and 74 day labourers. In several cities, ghetto-like segregations existed since the Middle Ages and early modern times: in Sibiu (Nagyszeben), Braşov (Brassó), Târgu Mures (Marosvásárhely), Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár). The 18th century saw the emergence of such settlements, known as Gypsy towns, which led to the creation of places such as Órkő (Sfântu Gheorghe/Sepsiszentgyörgy) and Budvár (Odorheiu Secuiesc/Székelyudvarhely) during the 19th century, as towns changed.

The combined Gypsy population of Hungary and Transylvania in the early 1780s was estimated at 120,000-130,000, which is 1.4-1.5% of the total population of historic Hungary. Over the next hundred years, the number of Gypsies continued to increase, reaching 214,000 in 1873 and 280,000 in 1893. In absolute numbers, there was an increase in both Hungary and Transylvania, but the specificity of the process is that the proportion of Gypsies in Transylvania was stable, while in Hungary it was increasing. Several factors played a role in this change: population movements, territorial rearrangements and structural changes in the economy and in society.

### **Structure and groups of the Gypsy population**

A general characteristic of the sources discussing the structure and categorisation of Gypsies is the mixing and merging of concepts, while “clear” groupings and categories are not typical. Several aspects appear together and intermingle: legal status, occupation, lifestyle, the nature of dependence from the landlord. Categorisation was less common in Hungary than in Transylvania. In the statute of Bereg County of 1797, three groups of Gypsies were distinguished: 1./ Gypsies who live in houses and travel with their families to other villages in spring and summer, returning to their permanent place of residence for the winter. 2./ Settled Gypsies, who live in houses, making a livelihood by manual labour (not all working in the fields); some may keep horses. 3./ Nomads living in tents. By the 1880s, the now familiar threefold division of the Gypsies, the tinkers (*kolompár*), the scooping Gypsies (*teknős*) and the musicians (*muzsikus*), had been established.

In Transylvania in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Gypsies were generally divided into two categories: the sedentary and the tent-dweller Gypsies. In everyday life, however, diversity,

plurality and a particular proportion of social groups prevailed among the Gypsies, as in Transylvanian society in general.

Here, in 1794, only three categories were distinguished at the Diet: 1./ Fiscal gold-washers, 2./ fiscal taxed Gypsies, 3./ Gypsies attached to the leading landowners and the towns.

In the following decades, there was a significant differentiation, which was also reflected in the categorisation. The draft of the Transylvanian Diet of 1841-1843 for the settlement of the situation of the Gypsies identified eight categories of Gypsies according to legal status, occupation, and way of life: 1./ Sedentary Gypsies living as craftsmen in villages and towns, leading a “*normal lifestyle*”. 2./ A small number of Gypsy serfs, also sedentary, with urban plots, living from agriculture. 3./ Gypsies who do not have a permanent dwelling, but who lead a “*definite lifestyle*” as conventional servants. 4./ Gold-washing Gypsies under the protection of the Treasury. Their contemporary name was the chamber’s gold-washing Gypsy (*a kamara aranyász cigánya*). 5./ Tent-dweller tax-paying fiscal Gypsies. They, too, were under the jurisdiction of the Treasury, and made their living mainly from metalworking. 6./ Temporarily settled Gypsies. They had neither urban plots nor any other land, and lived in huts built by the landlords. They served their landlords “*irregularly*” and received various benefits in return. 7./ Similar to the group before, the landlords protected the ones who undertook occasional and seasonal service, who “constantly changed their place of dwelling”. In exchange for char or a small salary, they spent the winters in shabby huts in the landlord’s woods and moved on in the spring. 8./ Tent-dweller Gypsies, “who, terrified of farming and work in general ... lead a perpetual wandering life”. They worked in sieve making and tinkering.

In the same draft, it is also said that landlords and officials would take in and shelter tent-dweller Gypsies for a small tax, and this created further classifications in everyday life, such as the categories of Gypsies of the *supremus comes*, of the magistrate, of the *vicecomes*.

### **Migration and lifestyle issues**

Between the Balkans and the Carpathian Basin, there were continuous population movements of varying intensity between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, for a variety of reasons. The “migration” of Gypsies is not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a general restructuring of the population. It is based on slow migration in small groups, with the search for markets and livelihoods as the primary indicators. The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries saw a succession of events that triggered a shift of the population. At the same time, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, we

find an increasing number of communities with families who lived in the same place for a longer period of time, or were born there. Based on family names, occupations, various ethnographic features, it is often possible to determine which group these families belonged to according to our modern concepts, but this is not possible for a significant part of the Gypsy population, especially in Transylvania. In Hungary, groups that no longer exist, such as the musician and horse-trading Gypsies in South Transdanubia, can be identified. An important aspect of group development is that the ancestors of the so-called Boyash, who mainly lived from the trade of scooping and spoon-making, and of the Vlax, who were engaged in metalworking activities, are present in the sources with their typical ways of subsistence and personal names in Transylvania and Hungary since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Migration to and within the Carpathian Basin is multi-directional: 1.) In the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, the “Zingari Germani”, or German Gypsies, came from the German provinces, presumably in search of a better livelihood. 2.) From the 1770s, Gypsies fled from Poland to the counties of Upper Hungary, probably because of the insecurity caused by the partitions of Poland. 3.) Through Szatmár County, new groups of Gypsies arrived from the east and south-east, mainly from Transylvania. 4.) From Transylvania and the territories to the south, mainly from Wallachia, possibly through the military districts and the Banat of Temeschwar, which ceased to exist in 1778.

Regional and local case studies provide a nuanced analysis of lifestyle issues. The 1768 Gypsy census in the Jászkun district shows settlement and permanent residence. Children in the Nagykun district were all born locally, their parents were all from other counties within Hungary: from the counties of Szabolcs, Zemplén, Bihar, Heves, Borsod, Közép-Szolnok, Bereg, Abaúj, Békés, Szatmár, Csongrád, Pest, from Debrecen and the Hajdú district. Most adults in the Jász district were also born locally, but there were some families where children were born elsewhere. The non-locals came from the counties of Heves, Békés, Pest, Nógrád and Borsod.

According to the 1837 census of Veszprém County and the 1846 census of the town of Pécs, the majority of Gypsies in the Reform Age were born locally or had been living there for a longer period of time.

Gypsy families from the surrounding villages moved to Târgu Mures (Marosvásárhely) from the end of the 18th century, most of them living there in a highly marginalized situation during the Reform Era. There was a higher fluctuation in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár), but in terms of positions in the urban society, Gypsies were not among the most disadvantaged. In terms of local political governance, the primary criterion of differentiation among those living

in the city was between the citizens who shared the power and the other “non-citizens”. The Gypsies were included in the latter category, as integrated “non-aliens” who did not threaten the urban order, rather than as “aliens” who were considered dangerous to the urban hierarchy. Gypsies were therefore not seen as a permanent problem, nor as outsiders, whereas Jews were.

Gypsies can be found in a wide range of life situations, which can be described by lifestyle variations between the two extremes of independent migration and sedentarism. Values and mentality can also be described as diverse. A particular variant of the way of life was where families moved from village to village offering services (*mendicatio* in Latin sources, *faluzás* in Hungarian). The term *mendicatio* appears in 18th-century sources and refers to a specific combination of livelihood strategies, group organisation and movement variations. As such, it can be traced back to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. I call the groups that travelled by wagon from spring to autumn to different villages and then returned to their place of residence a *mendicant community*. We can by no means claim that all Gypsy communities were like this, nor that they were necessarily independent migrants. *Mendication* (village-to-village migration and service) can be a common denominator, and can be a feature of both sedentary and migrant groups. Lifestyle changes may also have varied in the life of a family. *Mendication* persisted into the industrial age and was still associated with pre-capitalist forms of labour and commodity-selling (Lohnwerk, Preiswerk).

The basic concept of a migrant lifestyle and ethics is based on the fundamental value of acquisition. The acquisition communities, usually multigenerational and largely made up of related families, aimed to acquire the means of subsistence by exploiting the opportunities offered by the environment. Luck played a special, symbolic role in the daily activities of all of them. No matter how deliberately and skilfully they chose the place where they tried to get the goods, there were always unforeseen factors to consider. All of them had a special mindset, a special habitus. In this sense, acting and thinking “like a Gypsy” means first and foremost knowing and skilfully applying the practices that allow one to exploit the environment.

The service provider lifestyle of temporary migration is not unique to other acquiring-migrant communities (peddling Jews, Slovak/Tót tinkers, etc.). It is also not a universal “Gypsy” cultural universal.

In the places where no local solutions were found to the relative overpopulation starting in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (the disproportionate increase in the number of Gypsies engaged in the same activity in the same place) and the constant pressure to change occupations, the

population that was considered Gypsy increased the poor population of the “Gypsy towns” that became characteristic of Transylvania from the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This occurred especially when structural changes in society and the effects of migration came together in a mutually reinforcing way. This process intensified in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was recognised in the local scholarly literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but it began and recurred much earlier. The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the emergence of a world of hovel settlements with a hybrid population, made up of outcasts from the peasant society and Gypsies. “The hovel”, the name of the deprived area, “...is not a specific way of settlement for a race, but the birthplace of the lowest social strata”, László Madarassy wrote in 1905.

In contrast to the downward trend, there is also an upward trend. The same split can be identified within the Gypsy population as in Hungarian society as a whole. The combination of decline and rise influenced who is and who is not a Gypsy. The consequences of this, however, belong to the research of another era.

## **Summary**

I do not interpret the coexistence of the Gypsy population with others in a Gypsy-Hungarian juxtaposition. There is not a dual pattern of coexistence, but several variants. The Gypsy population and the rest of the population of historical Hungary did not form a closed, homogeneous and in all respects opposing entity, neither culturally nor socially. My research and my dissertation confirm Thomas Acton’s view: Interpretations that represent Gypsies as the exclusive object of constant persecution or assimilation are superficial. The historical fate of the Gypsies can be understood as part of the transformation of European social systems. The change in which new solutions are needed and new models of symbiosis are created is decisive.

In each period, the model of coexistence is determined by the complexity of economic, social, political-legal and moral-value conditions. These conditions are interrelated as four sets, each of which interacts with all the others. The unifying framework of the condition groups is the definition of the past of the Gypsies in Hungary as an acculturation process.

The Canadian psychologist John Widdup Barry and his colleagues distinguish between acculturation strategies of integration, assimilation, marginalisation, and separation. If we look at the characteristics of the Gypsy population in a particular period of Hungary’s history, we can see the simultaneous presence of the four levels of acculturation. In the long term, we can follow the change of conditions and the transformation of the way they are connected, which is what I undertook in my dissertation.