Museum of Romani Culture (MRC)

a state subsidized organization, The Czech Republic

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes the sources for establishment, as well as the very beginnings of an internationally unique specialized institution which focuses on the documentation of the culture and history of the Roma as a world ethnic group. It describes the establishment of the Museum of Romani Culture in 1991 as a non-governmental organization, its development as a memorial institute which builds its activities on quality collections. Other subchapters deal with exhibition activities of the Museum, as well as the creation of its permanent exhibition, The Story of the Roma, the birth of which was, however, only possible after the acquisition of the Museum building. The Museum team moved into the building at the end of 2000 when the Museum was already run as a Civic Society Organization. Multi-source financing coming from grants was, however, not able to cover the increasing operational costs of such a large building, necessarily linked with increased headcount costs of the growing Museum team.

It was a great success then when the Museum was placed on the list of state museums in 2005. Afterwards, the Museum activities were fully professionalized; in 2011 the entire permanent exhibition was opened to public. The year 2018 is a year when the scope of the Museum extended after the takeover of the administration and maintenance of two sites connected to the Roma holocaust in Czech Lands: Lety (Písek District) and Hodonín (Kunštát District) where two concentration „Gypsy“ family camps were located during the WWII. Most of the Roma were deported to the Concentration Camp in Auschwitz II-Birkenau then. The Museum plans to open memorials with expositions at both sites in the future.

1. The Beginnings – The Establishment of the Museum
After the Velvet Revolution, almost all of the newly formed Roma subjects – at that time political parties – were asking for the establishment of their own museum. The Museum was established in

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1 The Velvet Revolution took place between 17th November and 29th December, 1989. This non-violent revolution led to the fall of the Communist regime and a transition to the democratic principles in Czechoslovakia.
spring 1991, on the initiative of a small group of Roma intelligentsia in the Moravian city of Brno. A historian, Jana Horváthová\(^2\), was lucky enough to be a part of a group of four people who were building the Museum from scratch. The Museum was established in a very good time of euphoria after the fall of Communism. At that time, the public was curious about the unknown phenomenon of the Roma. The goal of the former Communist state was to assimilate them and the politics of forced assimilation did not favour the memory of Roma history and their culture.\(^3\)

The Museum of Romani Culture (hereinafter referred to as MRC) continues in the legacy of the first Roma organization in the Czechoslovakia – the Union of Gypsies-Roma (1969–73). It came into being at the time of a visible release of the Communist pressure after the Prague Spring of 1968. After the invasion of the Soviet army, followed by a suppression of the democratic process, the Union was dissolved by the newly formed leadership of the Communist Party. The Union planned to establish the MRC and it was even creating Museum collections. After the dissolution, these collections were given to the state, naturally a non-Roma museum (The Moravian Regional Museum, city of Brno). Three out of four founders\(^4\) striving for the establishment of the Museum of Romani Culture used to be members of the Union of Gypsies-Roma.

The Museum of Romani Culture was established in April 1991 as a civic association – a non-governmental organization (NGO). Our efforts to create a state museum, which is subsidised by the state, proved to be at that time unreal. The MRC was from the beginning a specialized - apolitical institution, despite the efforts of a strong political Roma party\(^5\) to keep control over the newly established Museum. The founders of the MRC managed to keep its independence, so necessary for an objective documentary work of a memorial institution that our MRC was always supposed to be.

The MRC was in its first phase – until the end of 2004 – financed from more sources, through different grants. Apart from the Ministry of Culture which supported the Museum as part of the Regional and Minority Culture Department and the Roma Integration program, it was the Open Society Fund or the Civil Society Development Foundation (NROS) that funded the Museum. Thanks

\(^{2}\) PhDr. Jana Horváthová (1967), historian and museologist, until August 9\(^th\), 1991, her family name was Holomková.


\(^{4}\) Mgr. Bartoloměj Daniel, (1924–2001) the first Roma historian in Czechoslovakia, Ing. Karel Holomek (1937), an engineer, a Roma leader and publicist, PhDr. Eva Davidová (1932), CSc., an ethnologist, a Romani Studies expert.

\(^{5}\) The political party Romská občanská iniciativa (Romani Civic Initiative, 1989–2009) counted 60.000 members at the beginning of the nineties.
to our co-operation with the House of Ann Frank in Amsterdam in the field of Holocaust education and research, one of our supporters was also the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

The initial activities of the Museum took place on provisional premises of a rented office that served as a study room and a future depository of Museum collections. The space grew bigger to 2, then 3 and finally 4 offices. One of them served as a small depository. Museum collections were compiled and formed thanks to field trips, but very soon there was a lack of space for their deposition. In 1998, we rented a small family house and established a separate depository. The space for exhibitions was, however, not sufficient.

2. The Museum’s Mission

The MRC mission has remained the same since the establishment of the Museum; to document, as globally as possible, the history and culture of the Roma as a world ethnic group. We are therefore interested in any sub-ethnic group or a sub-group of the Roma origin. The goal is to preserve the original records – witnesses of this culture, and to present these records and our knowledge to the public.

We started with presentation and exhibition activities in the second year of the Museum’s existence. Every time, however, we had to find a suitable place for the exhibition.

3. Exhibitions Held before 2000

Our first exhibition, called Roma in Czechoslovakia, was hosted in 1992 by the biggest Moravian museum, the Moravian Regional Museum. A merger with this institution, due to state cuts, is by the way, currently one of the biggest threats the MRC faces in 2008 and again in 2012/2013. Few other exhibitions followed, but the frequency before 2000 was, due to the lack of exhibition space, low.

1997 was the beginning of the travelling exhibition of Roma artists’ work - E luma romane jakhenca/The World through the Eyes of the Roma. So far, it has been to many countries in the world including the USA, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria and others.

1999 again in the Moravian Regional Museum: Rodas amaro than – Searching for Home; a representative publication, Roma – Tradition and Present, was published.

4. Permanent Museum Building

Apart from exhibitions, employees of the Museum were giving a lot of lectures; they were taking care of damages caused by the persecution during the Second World War; they were giving consultations on the newly published textbooks, organizing concerts and participating in the preparation of Roma festivals.
The state noticed the activities of the small NGO and supported the results of its work – it provided the Museum with a permanent building. It donated around 36 million Czech crowns to finance the reconstruction of one of the damaged derelict houses in the centre of an excluded Roma locality in the city of Brno. It was the municipality of the city that chose the building and the area. The Museum, at the beginning of its existence, could not count with its sympathy. However, even nowadays it is more convenient to receive support and empathy from the state government than from the municipalities. The representatives of the local municipalities are often influenced by conventional stereotypes in a similar way as the public is.

Towards the end of 2000, the Museum moved to its permanent building. The number of employees increased at the new workplace from 5 to 12.

The exhibition activities expanded, a selection from the exhibitions 2001-2004:
2001 The work of the most known Czech Roma artist Rudolf Dzurko (1941–2013)
2002–2003 Romano drom – photographs by the ethnographer Eva Davidová
2003–2004 Travelling in Pictures. Roma in Visual Arts between the 17th and the 20th centuries. Works with Gypsy subject matter by well known authors - collections from the National Gallery of Prague and other prestigious institutions.
2004 Roma Rising/Roma Awakening, portraits of one hundred Roma personalities from the Czech Republic by an American photographer Chad Evans Wyatt.

In 2004, the Museum started to continuously display temporary exhibitions.

5. The Breakthrough Year of 2005
After moving to a five-floor building where maintenance was too expensive, it started to be clear that financing through grants was not sufficient. Negotiations about the possibility to bring the Museum under the care of the state started. For a long time, they seemed to be hopeless. In 2004, thanks to personal meetings of the Museum management with the members of the Social Democratic Government, the idea was politically pushed through.

On 1st January, 2005, the Museum of Romani Culture as a state subsidised organization was established – the institutor was the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic. The Museum fell under specialized memorial institutions, museums and galleries – those with state-wide competence, the most important cultural institutions.

The condition was that the original Museum – NGO - donates all of its possessions, including its collections, to the state. The number of even more professional full-time employees rose to 23. In reality, more people work in the Museum at part-time positions and as volunteers. 7
people are specialized employees – curators of collections. The collection and research activities expanded and the quality of exhibitions rose. For the first time, artists, architects and decorators could participate in the exhibitions that can, and have to be, insured. The quality of deposition of collections also rose, they were now stored in specialized, air-conditioned space.

6. Permanent Exhibition Called the Story of the Roma

Thanks to the financial support of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the first part of the permanent exhibition was opened in 2005 – 2 halls about the post-war period. In 2006, a hall about the Holocaust of the Roma was opened, thanks to the support of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research (ITF)⁶, a member of which the MRC became in 2002.

In 2011, in the framework of the celebration of 20 years of the MRC’s existence, the whole permanent exhibition was open to public. It spreads on 351m² and covers one floor of the building. The Story of the Roma, from their departure from India to the present time, is presented in 6 halls.

7. A Selection from Exhibitions 2005-2018


2006 Rich Soul/Čalo voďi. About Roma literary work, the Museum published a book of the same name.⁷

S´óda pre tute?!/What Are You Wearing?! An exhibition about the dressing styles of different Roma groups in the world.

2007 Crafts of Our Ancestors/Sikhľarďi buťi – somnakuňi buťi

2007 How Human We Are/Manuš andre amende. Christmas in a Roma family

2008 Roma Sculpture 2008. The exhibition was accompanied by the first Roma sculpture symposium, which grew into a biennial event with foreign participation

2009 To Live! Art work of an Austrian Roma artist, Ceija Stojka (1933–2013)

2010 Canvas for Big Black Eyes. Roma in big-format oil paintings by a suggestive Czech artist, Bohumila Doleželová (1922–1993). Her expressionist work is compared to the work of Mexican muralists as David Alfaro Siqueiros and Diego Rivera.

⁶ It was renamed the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) in January, 2013.
Once upon a Time... Kaj sas, kaj na sas, guleja bachatleja. The World of Roma Fairy Tales collected by Milena Hübšchmannová (1933–2005).

Believe it – or Not/Paťan – ma paťan – Roma and media

In 2004, the Museum organized the following exhibitions: Roma and Sports: Roma Without Borders and the exhibition Century of Disasters – Century of Miracles by Rudolf Dzurko, a Roma artist.

In 2005, the Museum prepared the exhibition of wooden sculptures, toys and a working merry-go-around A možná přijede na koze/He May Come on a Goat by Martin Holub, a Roma wood carver.

As for the 2016 exhibitions, it is necessary to mention the exhibition of Roma Jewellery: Treasure of the Roma. Amare somnaka. The Secret of Romani Jewellery. A bilingual Czech-English publication of the same name was published to support the exhibition.

In 2017, the Museum hosted the already 5th year of the International Sculpture Symposium. While all previous years (the first one held in 2008) targeted mainly sculptors, the latest one also included paintings, drawings and new media. Fourteen Roma artists from the V4 countries enriched and enhanced each other by sharing experience coming both from their professional artistic, as well as non-professional areas. Products of the symposium, together with other works from the MRC Visual Arts Collection were introduced in the O komos hino kalo / Vesmír je černý/The Universe Is Black exhibition which took place in the nationally famous Moravian Gallery in Brno.

In 2018, the Museum put together the exhibition Mire sveti / Moje světy / My Worlds based on the photographic work of Andrej Pešta, who was not only a photographer but also a visual artist and a writer. A bilingual publication of the same name was published to support the exhibition.

The Museum produces supporting documentaries to all previously displayed temporary exhibitions, as the Museum employs both, a professional film director and video-documentator, as well as a professional photographer. The film on Andrej Pešta (directed by A. Babjárová) was this year awarded with the Musaion Film main prize – it is a festival of museum produced movies held in Uherský Brod (CZ). A photo by A. Holubovský, the Museum photographer and the Photo Documentation Collection curator, taken during his field research trips also received the main prize in the contest of museum photography this year. This contest is announced by one of the biggest Czech museums, the Moravia Gallery (Brno, CZ).

The MRC offers between 6–10 exhibitions to lend. Travelling exhibitions, exhibits or collections are really important for us.

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8 Doc. PhDr. Milena Hübšchmannová, CSc. (1933–2005), a Roma Studies expert; she initiated Roma Studies in Czechoslovakia. The collection of her manuscripts, field notes and records in the Roma language are deposited in the MRC.

9 The offer of travelling exhibitions to lend is accessible on our English website at: http://www.rommuz.cz/en.
Our annual average number of visitors, including visitors to the exhibitions and events outside the Museum building, is around 30,000.

8. There are approx. 30,000 collection items in 13 collection funds:

✓ Crafts, professions and employment
✓ Types of Roma dwellings
✓ Interior equipment
✓ Textile
✓ Jewellery and valuables
✓ Poster and invitation
✓ Written material (manuscripts, documents)
✓ Visual Arts
✓ Reception of Roma culture in the mainstream culture
✓ Collections of photographs, videos, audio-documentation
✓ Self-documentation of the Museum – the archives

The Museum employs a professional video-documentarist. Apart from field records, it also produces documentary films, especially for the authorial exhibitions in the Museum. We have made a documentary about the Holocaust of the Roma, presentation films about the Museum etc.

9. Storing the Collections – Depositories
The Museum has so far 6 depositories where special conditions are maintained based on the type and material of the deposited collections.

10. Field Research
Collection field trips take place on a regular basis in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Depending on the finances, we even travel abroad. Research and documentation focus most importantly on:

✓ livelihood (crafts, music)
✓ Roma language and literature
✓ Holocaust
✓ artistic expression


11. Library and Reading Room

are accessible to public for free as regards lending on the spot and free access to the Internet. The library collection includes original Roma and Roma Studies literature as well as various Roma world periodicals; in total it was **8,200** volumes at the end of 2017. Since 2010, there has been an e-catalogue and an automatic lending system accessible via the website of the Museum.

We have been monitoring and archiving newspaper articles on the topic of Roma-Gypsies since 1992.

12. Publication of literature, audio and video

Since 1992, a yearbook with Roma Studies topics has been published – a Bulletin\(^\text{12}\). Today it is a large publication of 150 pages.

We publish our own book titles, too. The anthology, **Rich Soul/Čalo vodí**\(^\text{13}\), has been subject to exceptional professional reviews.

Gradually, we publish our collections in the form of catalogues – so far catalogues of the following collections have been published: visual arts, textile and jewellery, crafts, professions and employment; and a catalogue of posters and invitations.\(^\text{14}\)

We have also released a **CD** with traditional Roma music from Czechoslovakia: Gila Ŏila Gilora 2002, a **CD** with the Holocaust subject matter songs – They Are Painful Memories, which complements our homonymous film about the Roma Holocaust, a **DVD** with the Museum documents.\(^\text{15}\) All the items are available in our e-shop on our website at [http://shop.rommuz.cz/](http://shop.rommuz.cz/).

13. Educational Activities

The MRC welcomes both the Roma and non-Roma visitors. The motto of the Museum is as follows: *We are a space where different cultures meet. We preserve examples of Roma cultural history as part of Europe’s heritage. We educate the younger generation to be tolerant and appreciate other cultures.*

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\(^\text{13}\) See footnote number 7.


\(^\text{15}\) See footnotes number 10 and 11.
We are committed to fighting xenophobia and racism. We are paving the way to a new understanding of the roots of Roma identity. All this we do in the name of mutual understanding. For a dialogue of cultures. For us.

A strong impulse to establish the MRC was a fear of an irreversible extinction of the unique Roma culture and an effort to rescue its remnants. By collecting the treasures, we wanted to give the Roma the possibility to learn about their fortune and to find a way to a lost self-confidence.

On the other hand, we want to improve the knowledge of the Roma culture and history for the non-Roma, to present the feared Roma world and to show that the Roma culture does not go against other cultures, but is their integral part - a missing piece in the world mosaic. We want to change the scary stereotypes into historically supported knowledge that builds roads from misunderstandings.

Our focus on education of children and school-age youth is above standard. That is why we employ museum’s educators. There are school excursions coming to the exhibitions and our educators revive them by means of animations and games according to the age of the children. One-thee classes visit the Museum every day. Apart from schools, we also have programmes for a wide segment of visitors.

14. Tutor Classes for Children, Desegregation project, and Leisure Time Club
The MRC is a memorial institution. However, given our knowledge about the causes of current problems of the co-habitation of Roma and non-Roma, we cannot ignore the issue of bad education of the Roma and the failure of Roma children in our educational system. We consider that to be the key point of the integration of the Roma in the Czech Republic.

One of our educators is involved in the organization of tutor classes for children from the excluded locality nearby. There are volunteers who teach and, if finances allow, also paid mentors.

Tutored children get a bonus – leisure time activities – dramatic, artistic and dancing clubs.

We take our children clients to theatres, sightseeing and to summer camps where they are accompanied by a Museum employee. This is how we try to show the children who live in a closed world of the Brno ghetto, so-called Bronx, the ordinary world that these children do not even know.

15. New Opportunities for the Museum
Since its establishment, the MRC focuses on the topic of Roma genocide during the WWII. In the beginning, it mainly involved recording testimonies of survivors of the racial persecution. Since 1995, the Museum has held annual memorial services at the site of the Protectorate so-called Gypsy Camp in Hodonín (Kunštát District) which is the Moravian version of the camp in Bohemian Lety (Písek District), also better known though the media. The Museum also placed a monument there two years
later. The existence of a leisure centre on the premises of a former concentration camp for Roma did not put the Museum at rest.

In 2008 the Museum initiated governmental negotiations to discuss the purchase of the premises of the camp from a private owner. These negotiations finally came to an end at the end of 2009. Explicitly for political reasons, the premises were then put in the charge of the Ministry of Education which entrusted the management of the site to one of its institutions – The Comenius National Pedagogical Museum and Library in Prague. This institution commenced the construction of the Hodonín Memorial, even though originally, based on the Government's Resolution, a Roma Holocaust Memorial was planned for the site. Hand in hand with the approved Roma Integration Strategy (ČR) stretching till 2020, in 2015 negotiations already started to transfer the Memorial under the management of Roma, or more precisely, the MRC. The transfer was performed in January 2018 when the Memorial, consisting of a newly built Information Centre, a replica of an original prisoners' barrack and a renovated guards' barrack were handed over. Intended exhibitions prepared by the previous keeper for all three buildings were not finished. This task, including financing now rests on the MRC's shoulders. It is expected that the premises will hopefully open to public in 2019/2020.

Since 2018, the maintenance and management of the Lety Cultural Monument has been up to the MRC – it is a place of mass graves of the victims of the Protectorate above mentioned so-called Gypsy Camp in Lety. In 1995, due to the interest of the Vaclav Havel's presidential office, a memorial dedicated to the Roma victims by the sculptor Zdeněk Hůla was unveiled there. Last but not least, in April this year, the MRC also took over the premises of a pig-fattening farm in Lety which is situated on the place of the original Protectorate concentration camp. Here, with the support of state funding, finances should be provided to demolish the pigsty and using the EEA and Norway Grants, the memorial itself will be built. The place will include a memorial site, as well as a visitor centre, and the whole Lety site will be interconnected. The previous Social Democratic Government approved Governmental Resolutions concerning both memorials, as well as the suggested tasks. Based on the Resolutions, the MRC was obliged to take over the premises and initiate their maintenance and management.

Other parts of the Resolutions, which on the other hand should provide the MRC with relevant conditions for such activities, including finances, have not so far been fulfilled by the government.
LITERATURE: