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Urban Roma in the New Economic Environment

ABSTRACT: The author accompanies a group of successful Roma entrepreneurs and traders in Budapest, examining relations within the Roma community as well as between Roma and non-Roma in the context of business and trading activities. He concludes that the methods of communication and the survival strategies of the Roma are conditioned by traditions and dependence on the majority population. He identifies some general characteristics of the Roma's behavior, such as a high degree of mobility and a capacity for adapting to a variety of situations, strong kinship ties, an information network that binds Roma families with very different living standards, and examples of conspicuous consumption (e.g., jewelry, large cars, feasting). Much of this wealth is concentrated in a few hands. The author asks the question "Does the increase in riches of a few challenge the traditional egalitarian structure of Roma society?"

This essay, which is based on observations made from 1994 to 1998, examines the cultural habits and social structure of Vlach Roma living in Budapest.

I was looking to answer the question, how does the life of a group, whose habit system largely differs from that of the majority, change in the context of a large city, whose own environment is undergoing significant changes at the time of observation? In this environment the members of the group live scattered, at greater distances from one another, in areas densely inhabited by others with differing habits, resulting in constant contact or even conflict with the non-Roma population.

Despite the way they were settled, the studied group can be called a functioning community based on the following criteria:

- current information regarding the events of one another's lives,
- common experience of ritual occasions,
- practice of similar activities among gender groups,
- definitive role of familial ties, endogamy,
- like value system regarding the relationship to the environment and the community.¹

The two studied areas, economic activity and use of urban space, show the community from the same vantage point, i.e., these areas allow for the observation of the most contact between the Roma and non-Roma worlds. The question is: what survival mechanisms are developed in this unique environment, and of the several possibilities offered by the culture of a globalizing large city, which elements are adopted, and which are rejected?

My observations were mostly limited to a specific group – I observed mainly those families which had successfully taken advantage of the social-economic changes of the last decade. The heads of the families were successful businessmen with considerable material backgrounds, which were comparable to those of the city's upper-middle class. I feel it is important to emphasize this because these people had considerably more opportunities to become familiar with, or even try out, elements of lifestyles, which differed from their own. The possible adoption of known urban habits – dress, decorating the home, spending free time, raising children, etc. – did not pose a financial problem.

With the help of these families I was able to make detailed observations of the lives of Budapest Vlach Roma. We spent a great deal of time together during both work and community events. They were aware of the fact that I was a university student, and that I was interested in their habits – it was at these times that I was referred to as a 'sociologist'. My interest in economic activity spawned some confusion and distrust in me, and for this reason I rarely taped my interviews and I avoided taking written notes – thus my comments are based on direct observation.

*The Development of Relationships –
As Connected to the Methods of Utilizing Urban Space*

Budapest's most striking characteristic is its high degree of heterogeneity. Many kinds of people live in differentiated ways beside one another. Every community develops for its members a certain unique view of the city, and the arising mental maps allow individuals to reduce and utilize the otherwise endless spaces and potential social contacts.² As a result the city falls into two separate levels in the eyes of its users: the institutionalized and the folkloric. The institutionalized level includes the whole of cultural practices demanded by the dominant groups of the city's society, various parts of which must be learned and, in certain situations practiced, by all groups.³ Everyone sends their children to school, votes in a similar manner, the sick go to the same hospitals, everyone knows what the norms of behavior are in court, or what to do when using public transport. The folkloristic level contains those models which every group characteristically creates for itself, and which are separate, or separable, from the institutionalized level of urban society as a whole, but from the folkloristic levels of other groups as well. The cultural practice of the folkloristic level provides a sense of security for the members of the group establishing the practice, as it provides an acceptable means of assisting the individual in solving everyday problems.⁴

The use of the city by Budapest Roma is definitively influenced by the need for knowledge related to economic activity, and further by the fact that relatives are scattered and that moves (in and among districts) are common. As a result, it can be stated that, based on their unique vantage point, their basic and unique knowledge of the city is not restricted to the vicinity of their homes, but extends to some distant places as well.

The settlement of Budapest Roma is characterized by scattering throughout the city. The traditionally known Roma quarters which existed in the 1950s and 1960s (Zugló, Pesterzsébet) are now largely gone, mostly as a result of the socialist-era council-flat program and the 1965 large-scale land-use program, which was a result of a 1961 Party decree.⁵ Although since the 1970s there has been an observable process of ghettoization in various parts of the city, which affects mostly the poorest strata, settlement leading to family separation is a more general phenomenon.⁶ According to

surveys the rate of Roma families which live in areas dominated by other Roma families is low – it is 6.5%. This is only a small fraction of the proportion in other parts of the country.⁷ The Roma population is largest in districts VII, VIII, IX, and XX. It is important to note that there are some districts where there are hardly any Roma inhabitants, e.g., districts I, II, V, XI, and XII, which are essentially the downtown and the elite districts in Buda. These districts are unpopular among Roma for more reasons than just their expensive nature.

The more well-to-do prefer the suburban quarters of the Pest side, from where the more densely populated downtown is easy to access. The most prominent area is the suburban-styled part of Zugló: many families consider it a life goal to move there, and living there is a prestige-carrying factor in the eyes of the community.

Other favored areas for building or buying homes are Pesterzsébet and the area close to the center of Kőbánya, as well as the similar area in Rákosszentmihály. Here properties are less expensive, but the downtown is still at a close enough distance. In periods when business is slow (less successful), some families sell their houses and move out to less frequented and cheaper parts of the city, but this is rare, and at the first opportunity they will move back to the above-mentioned quarters.

The development of contact networks and the use of city space is closely related to the economic activities of the men, as well as the keeping of daily contacts with relatives. A definitive element of economic activity for most is movement and a high degree of mobility, which is an indispensable condition for the collection, supervision, and utilization of large masses of information. A basic work tool is the car. Even the poor Roma use public transport only as a last resort, and they hardly know which routes go where, where they can buy tickets, or what the cost of the fare is. If they have no other choice, they will take a taxi, even if they have little money at the time. The car is a factor which increases prestige, hence the model is chosen with great care, and efforts are made to keep the car clean both inside and out. The car might be taken to the carwash several times per week. Beyond increasing prestige, the car gives a great sense of security, and can even be seen as an extension of the home in this respect. Along with shutting out the outside environment and unacceptable or alien forms of behavior, the car establishes a micro-area which, at any point in the city, is

characterized by familiar, personal contacts and the community norms and dominant identity they define. Those spaces which are crossed between the point of departure and the point of arrival remain alien and uninteresting; only those places where there is something concrete to do are acknowledged. This is one way in which the number of contacts which are alien and uninteresting to the Roma world are reduced. Thus, the urban space structure is divided into well-known places – where one can move around comfortably, knows the usual behavioral patterns, and has personal contacts – and unknown places, where all of the above is missing. The number and variety of places known by individuals largely depends on the substance and volume of economic activity. Those well-to-do men who trade goods of large value generally move comfortably in much larger areas. Those who trade real estate behave and negotiate in a secure manner whether in lawyer's offices, banks, or fine restaurants. Those who are able to learn and use these skills can find grand opportunities, as they become able to communicate in a social field which is closed to others, and can take advantage of the benefits of such.

Another factor defining the use of urban space and the development of contact networks is the practice of keeping in touch with relatives, which can be closely related to economic activity. The strata of Budapest Vlach Roma I studied were characterized by the separate and scattered settlement of families. There were some places where differing generations lived together, but the separate residence of nuclear families was more common.

Frequent change of residence was observable in many families. This was usually the case for financial reasons, when families would move to worse or better places. In any case, it can be said that no matter how formally settled the lifestyles may be considered, the area of residence still does not play an important role in identity.⁸ Those families in which the financial situation is improving look to move to better places, into higher quality flats or houses. The process of establishing a home is in all cases maximally quick: renovation or construction is moved along quickly to completion even when this means a very large financial burden. This often leads to overspending, which means shortly after moving in, the property must be sold.

The families of like generations do not make efforts to live together or near one another, but it is important to mention that distances within the

city do not seem great enough to them to keep them from maintaining intense contacts. The daily meetings of men are ensured through the use of cars, telephones, and mobile phones, and thus family members have fresh information on the events of one another's lives.

The financial condition of the extended family is often characterized by polarization, and over time the condition of given families can change rather quickly. This was characteristic of the 1990s. In this way, close or distant relatives are to be found in all types and levels of residential areas of the city, from the single-room flats of inner-city blocks to the family houses of exclusive suburbs. They can move securely in parts of the city which are dangerous zones on the map for most other city dwellers. Examples include the Havana complex (district XIX), a large part of district VIII, the Pongrác út complex (district X) and the part of Ferencváros between Haller utca and Vaskapu utca (district IX). They know the areas, and they know the useful behavioral patterns. As one of the characteristics of the areas listed above is the running of private sphere matters in public spaces, daily contacts can be maintained by briefly driving around the area. At such times a quick hello and a few sentences exchanged with an acquaintance appearing on the street is enough, and through this the connection is newly activated and fresh information concerning business, friends, and relatives can be collected.

The orientation of Roma who spend most of the day driving through the city is assisted not only by street names, but by other points of reference as well. The most important are those hospitality establishments where a part of the day is spent. Their role was even greater before the popularization of the mobile phone: they were places from which to make phone calls, and where the server would pass on messages. It was rare that non-Roma would enter such establishments, but there were no atrocities at such times. These places were generally in the central areas of the city, from where most other points were quick and easy to access. The men spent much of the day drinking coffee, talking, or playing on machines in these places. They exchanged information, weighed the potential of various business opportunities, and when a good opportunity opened up, they drove away in their cars and returned once they had finished their business. Wherever a place for a meeting was to be designated, they would describe the point using the names of bars and cafés, or arcades, as opposed to street names. Other points of reference included the names of various markets

(Bosnyák Square, Keleti Station, Teleki Square, Garai Square, etc.) or pawnshops and jewelry stores.

To summarize, it can be stated that the space utilization of the studied group was characterized by a high level of mobility, and by the ability to move among divergent space- and social-structures. This was related to the nature of economic activities and the form of settlement of extended families. The ‘imagined’ city as such was rather group-specific, and minimally understandable or usable to outsiders.⁹

Some Characteristics of Economic Activity

It is a generally accepted view that the choice and form of various Roma groups’ economic activities are to a large degree defined by the surrounding majority society’s structure, where activities include each of providing services, buying and selling, begging, collecting, and stealing.¹⁰ This is what leads to the high level of flexibility, which is often referred to as a definitive characteristic.¹¹ The Roma economic strategy adapts quickly and effectively to changes in society; the same thing occurs when the Roma community changes the framework of its life, by moving to a new type of settlement or a new country. Among other things, this ability to adapt was studied by Michael Stewart, when he studied lifestyle development of a Vlach Roma community living in an inflexible (in terms of economy and labor policy) socialist Hungary, which was based on compulsory work.¹² This is an issue dealt with by Leonardo Piasere as well, who analyzed the survival methods of those Slovenian Roma who often crossed the western Yugoslav border into Italy, taking advantage of the economic characteristics of both sides of the border.¹³

From the 1980s a new term has been used to understand the wandering-Roma cultures, this being the category of “peripatetic communities” which stresses the dependence of these communities on the client society in both political and economic ways. Given the cultural characteristics of the Budapest Vlach Roma, it seems worthwhile to examine to what degree this term can be used regarding formally settled communities.¹⁴

Stewart examined the adaptation strategies of Vlach Roma in the then-socialist Hungary of the 1980s. His work was done in a village environ-

ment, with the exception of some “successful Roma” who managed to enter the city market through selling brooms or used cars.¹⁵ From the end of the 1980s the transformation to the market economy has brought significant and rapid changes in Hungarian society. The changes have produced winners and losers, especially in terms of livelihood. The years of uncertainty which accompanied the transformation meant that many were unable to find their place within the new parameters. Many legal foggy patches and difficult-to-interpret laws were passed, and many social institutions no longer offered protection. These tendencies slowly made their effects felt in Budapest, where, in a relatively small area, a great number of people and families became acquainted with the feeling of insecurity. Here, for a wide stratum, the early years of social reform meant using up the savings and properties accrued under the previous system. At the same time – partly as a result of the above – it became possible to redistribute some materials and material goods, and to develop significant new-styled personal wealth. With relatively little capital, taking advantage of the uncertainty of the transition, high profits could be attained throughout the economy, but especially in the gray- and black-markets. Orientation and information became especially important, in order that nearly daily changes could be followed. Flexibility, the ability to recognize situations, and the ability to adapt, were huge advantages. This period – although it is not quite over – is coming to a close.

Thus, through the 1990s, Hungary’s economy changed, and with it Hungarian society changed as well. In this changing environment Hungarian Roma had to find those economic opportunities which could cover their financial needs. They needed to find and make use of opportunities in a way in which the forms and responsibilities of activities would not stand in sharp contrast to their habits. It can be said that the changes favored the group which I studied: many activities, which earlier were carried out illegally and at the risk of running in with the law of the day, were legalized. The regime change legalized the view of the economy based on market relations, and liberalized trade and the offering of services in the private sector.

I try to approach the economic activities of the Budapest Vlach Roma from two aspects. First I would like to try and show which activity forms were developed and/or continued as a response to the changes in the econ-

omy as a whole. What does the oft-mentioned flexibility and ability to adapt mean in a concrete place and in a concrete historical period? Second, we may ask whether social-structural changes occurred as a result of the appearance of economic opportunities, the plurality of activities, and the resulting differentiation in wealth within the community; and if they did occur, how did they make themselves felt in the division of roles and the distribution of goods? Did the traditional, egalitarian relations of the Roma men remain, does the segmentary model continue to function, or, like in other communities, are changes observable?¹⁶ Most of their contacts with the society surrounding them are through economic activity, whose value system has changed. Successful businessmen can become acquainted with more and more lifestyles, and there are no material obstacles to being attracted to them or even adopting them. A few financially successful families have the opportunity to adopt consumer habits to which only a small and limited portion of the majority population has access, and this may strengthen stratification within the community.

Trade is not a new-style Roma vocation. Various groups were described centuries ago as trying to make money through independent means, with men, for example, trading in horses and small objects.¹⁷ In Hungary – even in the time of the state socialist model – they tried to avoid wage labor, or at least escape it at the first available opportunity. Many of them had fictitious official workplaces at collective farms or factories, where they never showed up, and could thus freely make use of their time.

Trade was a definitive activity of the studied stratum. The heads of families were businessmen, and referred to themselves as such. They deal gold, precious stones, watches, antiques, works of art, cars, scrap metal, clothing, and real estate: anything with quick turnover and acceptable profit. Stewart tried to describe Roma business-dealings with Ricardo's exchange of goods formula: the trader buys goods for cash, and then sells the goods for more cash, that is to say, makes money from money without adding to the quality of the goods.¹⁸ This was characteristic of the business practices of the Budapest Roma as well: little energy needs to be put into improving the quality of the goods, and should it be done, the improvement is minimal and short-term. It was common to 'dress-up' the good to be sold in a way that made it seem more valuable for only one or two hours.

This may have meant wallpapering wet walls in a flat or shining a corroded car, which in both cases would cover up the serious faults. If a flat was being sold in a house where several Roma lived, and where non-Roma would have been reluctant to move in, it would happen that the businessman would order everyone to go inside their flats (from the gallery) for the time at which the buyer would arrive, in order that a higher price be demanded for the flat. But beyond improving surfaces, it was very rare to invest energy in improvements requiring more time, even though there was awareness that this could mean not acquiring lucrative profits. At times they begin construction, but if they get a good offer before completion, they will sell. According to their philosophy, “what’s in the pocket is secure” and “quick money must be respected.”

It was characteristic of the studied group that women took part less and less in economic activity, and instead, domestic and child-rearing duties become of primary importance for them. This does not mean that women earning money was in contrast to community norms. Sometimes husband and wife travel the city together, or the woman will handle the work which is tied to a space – for example at the door of a pawnshop, while the husband roams the street. If the man and woman are seeking opportunities together, they will often play on the view held by non-Roma according to which Roma women are of loose moral fiber. If the potential business partner is male, then the woman will approach him on the street or in the wine-bar, and regardless of his age and appearance, will call him “sweet young man”, will pull up close to him, put her arm around him, invite him to buy her a drink, or even pay herself, should the situation demand it. At these times the husband will watch the events from afar, but act as if he is not noticing his wife’s ‘flirtatious’ behavior with the potential customer. In this way, by the time the question of whether there is any jewelry or any antiques for sale, or whether he wants to sell his flat and buy a smaller one, is put forth, the business partner’s sense of trust has significantly increased, as he feels he is an irresistible man.

Despite these examples, the men dominated such work. The foundations of their work were mobility, quick and rich information flow, and a high level of openness to any type of quick and potentially profitable business. Not once were they unable to recognize a good opportunity, and in such situations they were able to improvise.

Large areas were covered by travel every day, making the car an indispensable tool for work. Travel usually took place within Budapest, but trips to the countryside were not rare, and neither were trips to foreign countries – mostly neighboring countries – when news of promising businesses there arrived. In such cases information came from acquaintances, relatives, or friends living in the given areas.

The car was not just a means of transportation, but was also a prestige-increasing factor. It was a way for Roma businessmen to gain recognition and draw bewilderment from their surroundings, as well as to illustrate the success of their business dealings. Further, it was an important means of hiding their ethnic identity – they were trying to belie the negative stereotypes of the majority of other Roma.¹⁹ They tried to present a picture of themselves which was more reflective of the identity of the city's majority, but this was limited to a portion of the non-Roma population with which they maintained business relations.²⁰ It is difficult for them to conduct business, as a large part of the population consider them part of the perceived thieving, violent, and cheating Roma ethnic group. To make themselves acceptable as serious business partners, they had to pay serious attention to how they presented themselves. The kind of car with which they arrived at the scene of doing business was not a trivial matter, and for this reason money was not an obstacle. The most favored makes were Mercedes and BMW, and within these the larger, gas-engine models were preferred, which suggested strength and economic power. Attention was paid to ensuring that the interior of the car was most impressive. Large cars of a good make gave self-confidence, and helped the Roma to act decisively when in contact with the non-Roma environment, guaranteeing the seriousness of the car user, strengthening his position and trustworthiness at various business transactions.

The factors mentioned above also affect the mode of dress. The widely held stereotype of the Roma appearance is that of one who is dirty, unwashed, and wearing raggedy and unkempt clothing. This cannot be the case, however, for serious businessmen. Thus, the men paid more attention to having a clean and immaculate appearance than did their non-Roma business counterparts.

The wearing and love of jewelry is characteristic of both sexes and all ages, and this is a Roma trait which had been observed some time ago.²¹

Gold is most favored and is the favorite symbol of wealth, even compared to other, seemingly more rational options. It is a means of payment, especially for transactions within the group, and many Roma own scales which are accurate enough to establish the weight of the gold.

The men leave home at a relatively early hour, around 7-8 a.m. If they do not have a specific business meeting planned, then their first trip is to their regular bar or coffee bar. These are usually found by the city's major intersections, markets, or railway stations, where there are many people about, and from where most points in the city can be accessed quickly. In the regular haunts, they try and obtain fresh information, and plan the execution of some promising deals, through personal meetings or phone calls. There are numerous means of obtaining information: it can come from the many relatives living within and without the city, or through the established and developed network of daily contacts. The numerous relatives, friends, and acquaintances might have daily encounters with people who may represent good business opportunities. This might be a flat owner who is unable to pay his/her growing utility bills, a person who does not know the value of his/her recent inheritance (e.g., antiques), or someone who is in financial trouble and quickly wants to sell his/her car. Truly advantageous business deals can be done with those who are in a position of constraint, be this due to one's own mistake or a change in social environment – i.e., the break-up of a family, alcoholism, financial burdens, debt, unemployment – or with those who are unable to adapt to changing conditions.

When someone hears of such an opportunity, he will personally, or through the telephone, get in touch with his relatives or friends who are known to have enough cash or capital to handle to the potential business transaction. He will provide details regarding the potential 'clever' dealings, describing the amount of money needed for the transaction, the fee for providing information on the deal, and the plans for the meeting of the potential business partners. This fee is called the "mita" or "sight-money", and when accepting it the informer must guarantee that the transaction will take place according to the spoken conditions, that the seller will not withdraw, and that no complications will arise.

It is important to make a good impression on informers, given that having a large car, elegant clothing, and good jewelry will give the informer the impression that the businessman has ample capital, and thus, when an

opportunity arises, he, and not others, will be sought out. It can be said of the business appearance and behavior of the men that they try to give the impression of the successful businessman, often beyond the point of reflecting reality. Naturally they are good businessmen, but not necessarily in the way that this term is usually thought of. They lack long-term strategies, which may be due to their adaptability and flexibility. They have no bank accounts, as they use only cash as an acceptable means of payment. They do not buy shares, and are wary of long-term credit and leasing contracts. Most of them do not pay tax or social security. In the years of the transformation many economic factors escaped the attention of the authorities, but avoiding these now comes with a higher risk. As a result of the change of economic relations, the desire to be regular tax payers and to have accountable incomes is increasing.

It is not characteristic for the men to have long-term associations with one another to undertake economic activity. Associations are usually incidental, and last for the duration of one or two business deals. It is often said that money can be made only with money, and this is observable in practice. For this reason the request for a loan – should one not have enough capital for a good business transaction – can be a point of conflict. In such cases the only acceptable route is to incorporate the lender as a business partner, and to split or share the profit according to the level of the investment. Exclusive professional specialization is rare: an exception is the handful of families dealing antiques at the Ecseri market, whose stands stood there even in the times of the socialist system. Everyone does have his main profile, however, and this is known among the members of the community and among those they are in direct contact with. People know who deals mostly with real estate, or antiques, or jewelry, and who has the most experience in given areas. This, however, does not mean anyone is fenced out from ‘reaching in’ to a given business area when there is a chance to make quick money – knowledge of various areas of trade is rather wide.

The above-mentioned flexibility, high level of information, and ability to orient one’s self in the markets of different kinds of goods makes possible a common form of transaction, the barter. This is an opportunity which is a great advantage for the Roma trader, especially when the offer to barter originates from the customer. It is not a great accomplishment to buy something which is offered at a low price. But the number of those inter-

ested in the transaction decreases when the customer asks for not only cash, but a barter object as well. For example, one might want to sell his flat, but wants a smaller one in exchange. Or one might want to replace his car with a cheaper one, given that he needs some cash but still needs to get around. Sometimes a person will ask an unrealistic price for the object of the transaction, and at these times the trader will try and take another approach. He may offer some cash, and pay the rest by offering a car, watch, piece of jewelry, VCR, stereo, or anything the customer will accept, and which the trader can present as an object of high value.

They are able to respond quickly to changes. If scrap metal is not doing well, they can switch to antiques. If the press is beginning to write about the “flat (real estate) Mafia” they can quickly switch to selling cars. This is easy for them to do because they do not use registered companies, agencies, or expensive employees: executing a quick and risk-free change in profile for a short or long period of time is relatively easy.

In the group of Budapest Roma traders I studied, income usually came from the profits of transactions with non-Roma. This of course does not mean that they do not trade with one another: such dealings are usually problem-free and please both partners. They know one another’s habits well: the border between the ethical and non-ethical is the same for both sides. If a Roma family which has encountered tough times offers to sell its jewelry to a Roma trader, it is aware that the trader is making a business agreement as opposed to taking the goods in the name of charity. It is natural for both parties to assume that the price in such a case will be below market value, as the trader still needs to find the final buyer, which will require time, must spend money on gas for the car and mobile phone costs, and needs to make a living. Once someone has sold something and received the agreed amount of cash, he/she cannot ask how much profit the trader made on the deal.

For similar reasons they are happy to do business with the members of other minorities living in Budapest, like the Chinese, Arabs, or Turks, for whom trade is an everyday practice, and who are clearly aware of the advantages of the (potentially less, but) “quick” cash of the moment.

Despite its large circle of potential clients for the traders, it is difficult to establish any kind of relationship with the majority population. The Roma businessmen must deal with the stereotypes found in public opin-

ion, which makes many in their environment careful and distant when maintaining relationships. In several instances a transaction was cut before closure because the non-Roma customer was scared, or was talked out of the deal with the Roma by neighbors or relatives. Non-Roma buyers or sellers must be convinced over some period of time that the potential business deal will be problem-free, that the money will be paid, that the goods will be delivered, etc. Those traders who are able to relegate to the background the marks of their ethnicity or, alternately, take advantage of those characteristics, are the ones who have been truly successful over the years. They try to execute this invisibility strategy through the above-mentioned style of dress, but this goal is also served by using fancy business cards, which often are marked with the title “manager,” or by using an overly-fancy style of speaking.²² An extreme but relatively common form of this tactic is for the Roma trader to bring along a non-Roma [*span*] on various occasions. Such a contact can be a real advantage, as this can bring about access to some customers who, because of their prejudices, would otherwise not be willing to do business.

Further, the good trader must know how the customer thinks, and must be clear regarding the fact that non-Roma think of business somewhat differently. Many, particularly from the older generation, condemn such “making money without work.”²³ They try and convince such customers that they are practiced businessmen, but that in this case they mean to purchase for themselves, or that they want to use the object of negotiation for a future trade, and in this way don’t want to make a profit on the deal, but are only trying to adjust to their current material situation.

When dealing with business transactions with non-Roma, one can often observe the tactic which is the opposite of those described above, where the trader emphasizes his ethnic characteristics, often to the point of exaggeration. These characteristics are chosen and adjusted according to the stereotypes held by the majority, and the traders play out the negative roles which are deemed the most characteristic based on either real observation or imagination. Such negative elements include: forcefulness, loud speech, threatening, swearing, and scaring tactics. These traits are stressed in a degree and form which is not characteristic of their daily behavior.

It can be said that exceptional business successes over the years are attained by those who, when dealing with the wider environment, are able

or willing to emphasize or de-emphasize the marks of their ethnic identities when this is to their advantage. Those who know the value system and the view of Roma held by the minority are in the best position to do this. They need to know the everyday practices of the non-Roma world, even when, in many cases, they do not adjust to them. This is the only way they can take advantage of the economic opportunities offered by a city of two million inhabitants. This means a larger and wider stratum accepts them as partners within the non-Roma society. It is a great advantage to be able to move comfortably among the layers of society which are slipping downward, as this is an opportunity to buy anything from gold chains to property under market prices. Or, relationships can be established with the representatives of the gray- or black-markets, from which goods can be obtained. Further, it is a big advantage to be able to sell goods at market price without the help of middlemen. To do this, one must be able to inspire trust and to conduct business negotiations with those from other layers of society who have buying power. The business activity of a successful Budapest Roma trader can be understood as the ability to establish the flow of goods among strata which would otherwise not (or, only rarely) be in touch with one another. This ability to establish contacts and relationships springs from the tactic of being able to control the intensity of ethnic identity marks according to given scenarios.

The urban living space, maintaining intense relationships with the wide environment, and resulting chances of economic success all contribute to the development of long-term positions of authority within the Budapest Vlach Roma community, and affect inner relation structures. A successful trader will make new contacts in the city every day, is increasingly oriented in the business world with its regulations, formal conditions, and official matters, and is thus better able to skillfully and effectively make use of opportunities and resources available to him. He may have a lawyer who helps with complicated matters; he has acquaintances in official agencies, the local government, and perhaps even the police; he has control over adequate material resources, with which he can activate his network of contacts when necessary.

The demonstration of success is also directed back to his own community, and often the exaggerations which ensue are part of the momentary "bluff strategy".²⁴ This is one of the important means of attaining and keep-

ing an exceptional position within the community, and of course this brings with itself a great deal of expenses. The superficiality of the home, hospitality, dress and car use all serve this purpose.

The members of the community more and more often look to such successful people for help with their matters and problems, and ask them for all kinds of assistance. But the enlisting of successful people is an increasingly common solution for solving conflicts within the community. This means that personal authority based on prestige and economic might have been introduced within the traditionally male-egalitarian Roma community. This may impair communal authority, and may lead to the questioning of, or opposition to, communal judgments (which are traditionally expressed by the “court”, the *Roma Kriz*). The level of influence of personal authority is increasing, as the portion of acquired goods meant for redistribution in the community has become “symbolic capital” collected in the hands of the successful man, and it can easily be transferred to economic capital.²⁵ Successful men are sought not only to solve problems, but in the hope of helping potentially good business deals by handling the complicated or dangerous or high cash-value transactions, or helping in times of – often physical – conflict.²⁶

This type of authority is closely related to the given individual’s material resources, and its development was brought forth by the unique economic opportunities of the 1990s. It has brought a change in the life of the Roma community by introducing a new kind of vertical structure. This change is still at its beginnings: positions of authority are not tied to families or institutions, but only to specific individuals thanks to their level of economic success. The practice of this kind of authority in community matters is opposed by the majority, including many of the successful. Practice, however, shows that such theoretical opposition is not enough to stop the process.²⁷

NOTES

¹ Cf. Patrick Williams, “The invisibility of the Kalderas of Paris: some aspects of the economic activity and settlement pattern of the Kalderash Rom of the Paris suburbs,” in Salo, Matt T. (ed.), *Urban Gypsies: Special issue of Urban Anthropology*, 1982 (11), p. 318.

- ² Péter Niedermüller, "A város: kultúra, mítosz, imagináció," *Mozgó Világ*, 1994 (5), p. 13.; Martin Laba, "Városi Folklor – viselkedésmódbeli megközelítés," in Annamária Lammel and Péter Niedermüller (eds.), *Folklor, kultúra, életmód* (Budapest: 1986), p. 36.
- ³ Niedermüller, p. 15.
- ⁴ Niedermüller, p. 16.
- ⁵ Gábor Havas and István Kemény, "A magyarországi romákról," *Szociológiai Szemle*, 1995 (3), p. 12.
- ⁶ Péter Ambrus, *A Dzsembuj* (Budapest: 1988), Katalin Berey, "A cigánytelepek felhasználása és újratermelődése," in Utasi Ágnes and Mészáros Ágnes (eds.), *Cigányélet* (Budapest: 1991), p. 42.; János Ladányi, "Szegregáció és gettószodás Budapesten," in Nagy Gábor Tamás (ed.), *Félünk* (Budapest: 1993), pp. 25-8.
- ⁷ Havas and Kemény, p. 15.
- ⁸ Gábor Wilhelm, "Kultúra, társadalom, etnicitás az oláh cigányoknál." in Barna Gábor (ed.), *Cigány néprajzi tanulmányok 1.* (Salgótarján: 1993), p. 30.
- ⁹ Niedermüller, p. 6.
- ¹⁰ Patrick Williams, "Paris–New York. L'organisation de deux communautés tsiganes," *L'Homme*, 1985/25:3, p. 127.; Michael Sinclair Stewart, *Daltestvérek* (Budapest: 1994), p. 132.; Leonardo Piasere, *A cigánológusok szerelmei (Válogatott tanulmányok)* (Budapest: 1997), p. 58.
- ¹¹ Piasere, p. 29.
- ¹² Stewart, chapter VII.
- ¹³ Piasere, p. 122.
- ¹⁴ Cf. Sir Angus Fraser, *A cigányok* (Budapest: 1996), p. 202.; Judit Törzsök, "Két észak-nyugat-indiai peripatetikus nép: a lohárok és a bandzsarak," *Cigányfűró*, 1995 (1), p. 3.
- ¹⁵ Stewart, p. 131.
- ¹⁶ Stewart, p. 120.; Wilhelm p. 30.
- ¹⁷ Fraser, p. 196.
- ¹⁸ Stewart, p. 200.
- ¹⁹ Williams, 1982, p. 326.
- ²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, "Az identitás és a reprezentáció," *Szociológiai Figyelő*, 1985 (4), p. 18.
- ²¹ Fraser, p. 114.
- ²² Williams, 1982, p. 325.
- ²³ Stewart showed this difference in viewpoints by contrasting the farmer who earned his wealth through hard work and the lucky Roma horse-trader. Stewart, p. 200.
- ²⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *A társadalmi egyenlőtlenségek újratermelődése* (Budapest: 1978), p. 394.

²⁵ Bourdieu, 1978, p. 390.

²⁶ Cf. Marcel Mauss, "Ajándékok és viszonzásuk," in Paul Bohannon and Mark Glazer (eds.), *Mérföldkövek a kulturális antropológiában* (Budapest: 1997), p. 370.

²⁷ Other pieces used for this study include: Károly Kocsis and Zoltán Kovács, "A magyarországi cigánynépesség társadalomföldrajza," in Ágnes Utasi and Ágnes Mészáros (eds.), *Cigánylét* (Budapest: 1991); János Ladányi, "A lakásrendszer változásai és a cigánynépesség térbeni elhelyezkedésének átalakulása Budapesten," *Válóság*, 1989 (8); Judith Okely, "Szimbolikus határok," *Café Babel*, 1991 (1); Csaba Prónai, *Cigánykutató és kulturális antropológia (Rövid vázlat.)* (Budapest: Kaposvár, 1995).