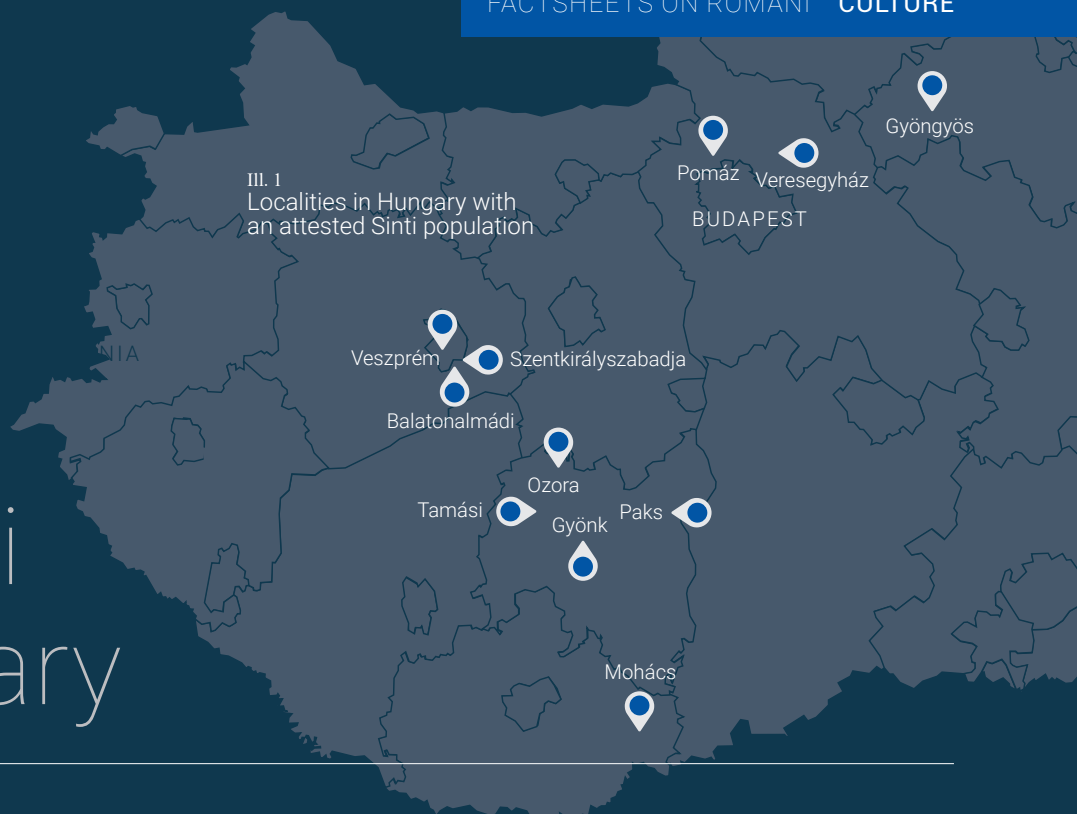


3.13

The Sinti in Hungary

Martin A. Balo



The Sinti, albeit constituting a small proportion of Romani people in Hungary, stand out as a peculiar subgroup among the more numerous and more dominant Romungro and Vlax groups and they definitely deserve more attention than they have received. Over the past decades, they have come to play a pivotal role in the itinerant entertainment trade, and while they are open to all kinds of people by virtue of their profession, they have maintained a strong sense of community.

FROM GERMANY TO HUNGARY

As an elderly Sinteca (German Gypsy woman) put it: *My grandmother, the mother of my father came from Germany... She did not speak Hungarian very well because she was a Sinto (sic).*

Compared to other Romani groups, the Sinti are relative late-comers to Hungary: they first arrived in Tolna county at the turn of the 20th century from Western Europe, working as itinerant craftsmen, looking for new territories where their skills were in demand. Some sources note the presence of Gypsy harpists in Hungary as early as the second half of the 19th century, a profession typical of the Sinti people, which they practised well into the 2000s. Later, other Sinti groups fleeing Nazi persecution headed for Hungary, where they were given shelter by Prince Paul Esterházy. The majority of them settled after the Second World War and now they live scattered across the country in such diverse places as Pomáz, Ozora and its area (Tamási, Gyönk), Paks, Gyöngyös and the Balaton Uplands.

Their precise number is difficult to tell, as the censuses taken by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office (KSH) and the surveys conducted by István Kemény and his colleagues provide no data that would specifically refer to either their ethnicity or their language. Some estimates put their number at a few hundred, others presume that there are a few thousand of them, but

they definitely appear to be the smallest Romani group in Hungary. Their dialect, the Sinti variety of Romani, characterised by German loanwords and other dialect-specific morphological and phonological peculiarities, has been abandoned by the majority of the younger generations in Hungary, with only a small number of elderly speakers remaining.

Based on their most common occupations, they are frequently called *köszörűs* 'grinder' (*šleffari* in Romani), *hajóhintás* 'swing boat operator' (Romani *čauklari*) or more commonly *ringlispíles* 'merry-go-round operator' and *hárzás* 'harpist' (*harfisto* in Romani) in Hungarian, often in the form *köszörűs cigány* 'grinder Gypsy' or *ringlispíles cigány* 'merry-go-round operating Gypsy'. Perhaps partly due to the use of the ethnonym *köszörűs* and its Romani equivalent, which can also refer to another Romani group living in the south-west of Hungary, the Vend Romani people, there is some confusion about these two groups. The two groups are certainly different, with different origins and linguistic backgrounds, the Sinti speaking a Northwestern variety of Romani and the dialect spoken by the Vend Roma belonging to the Central Romani branch, but they are occasionally confounded in the relevant literature. While Kamill Erdős, the famous ethnographer and linguist, researcher of the Romani people in Hungary, mentions a Romani group under the names *köszörűs* and *ringlispíles*, he also adds that they call themselves *német* 'German' or *vend* 'Vend', and that their language is similar to the Central Romani dialects spoken in the area of Budapest and in Transdanubia. As the num-

III. 2

A Hungarian Sinti harpist and harp maker, János Gertner, demonstrates the capabilities of his handmade harp in his yard

(photos © Katalin Kovalesik)



bers of the Vend Romani people are small and they may also be called *német cigány* ‘German Gypsy’ or *köszörűs cigány* ‘grinder Gypsy’, we cannot be certain which group Erdős was actually referring to, but we cannot exclude the possibility that he merged the two, and this was later cited and repeated. The matter is further complicated by the fact that certain Vend Romani speakers happen to call themselves Sinti, considering their language and themselves the same as the actual Sinti people, or perceiving the Sinti as part of their own group.

TRAVELLING FUNFAIRS AND FREEDOM

It is a beautiful profession for those who like it. I love it.

Although this was said by a dodgem operator, it is also true for grinders. Itinerant grinders are becoming more and more rare but they still exist here and there. They move around by bicycle, carrying their electric whetstone knife sharpener on the rack and advertising themselves by shouting like hawkers. Perhaps even more peculiar, however, is the profession the Sinti have become even better-known for recently: showmen operating amusement rides at travelling funfairs. The descendants of the first itinerant Sinti tried to find areas in the country where they could find customers without interfering with each other. They decided to move in different directions but keeping a distance that would enable them to maintain inter-group marriage. Some of the newcomers had already operated merry-go-rounds and shooting games. The profession, virtually considered an ethnic one, is handed down through generations, from father (or mother, for after the death of the father, the mother often takes over the business) to son.

Our great-grandparents went on, and the genes were passed down, and we did the same. This is a tradition. My child will do this, and his child, too... They are used to it, so they will continue.

They learnt the trade from their parents. They had to learn all sorts of jobs: wood carving to make the figures of a merry-go-round; repairing machinery because a ride cannot possibly stop during a one- or two-day fair; driving the articulated lorry in which they transport the rides, stands and games; and of course operating the rides, selling tickets, being kind and polite to customers. Before the Second World War, only nuclear families lived together. When a child got married, they went their own way. If they were lucky, their parents could provide them with an amusement ride and a caravan to bank on. Nowadays, grandparents take more part in family life by looking after grandchildren.

What I really like about it is freedom. We got used to being in a different place from week to week... I live for my profession.

It is common practice for the independent owners of the rides and games within a travelling funfair to have family ties or to be otherwise related; they form a community. Being a showman and an operator of amusement rides is a way of life that determines everything. This form of entertainment is the outdoor sort, offered from late spring to early autumn. And during that time, they are always on the move. Their schedule closely follows the yearly calendar of festive days; they have to keep in mind the feast days of all the patron saints of the neighbouring towns and villages, and they should only go to places where they can be sure people will enjoy this kind of entertainment. It is not an easy task, and it also involves a good deal of coordination. For instance, if two or more operators of the same kind of ride arrive at a place at the same time, they will join forces, only set up one and share the profits. But this is only worth it if demand is high enough. They usually know where the others are heading as they tend to beat the well-trodden paths inherited from their fathers and grandfathers; as far as the Sinti from Ozora and Tamási are concerned, they usually go to Somogy, Tolna, Baranya and Fejér counties. Most of them have their permanent places of residence where they live during the winter months, but there are those who had to sell their houses because they had so many debts.

III. 4

A busy day at a travelling funfair in Dég

(photo © Anna Lator)



Those who are middle-aged now did not go to school, they kept moving about with their parents and they were born on the road.

They kept going from village to village, they had already had a beautiful caravan. I am illiterate, I cannot read or write. Lucky I recognise money.

These days, children usually go to the same school but reunite with their parents every weekend and help them. They usually arrive at the venue early in the week and take a few days to set up the rides. The sooner they arrive, the bigger their chance is to get a good place and the more time they have to arouse the interest of the locals. They also have to be able to get on well with them and make themselves likeable as the locals are the potential guests. And if they do not make any noise during the night, if they do not litter the place, they will be welcome the following year again. The guests see them as service providers, they do not judge them by their ethnicity. If the service they provide is satisfactory, they are accepted. The rides have to be attractive, with colourful lighting and paint, and safe. Their profession therefore constitutes an even more significant part of their identity than their ethnic background.

With the advent of electronic entertainment, computers, video games and the Internet, travelling funfairs have recently been on the decline. However, they were immensely popular in the 1990s and kept improving; while traditional rides and games like merry-go-rounds, swing boats and shooting games remained, technologically more developed and fancier versions replaced the older models and new rides like switchbacks, dodgems, twists, UFOs, breakdances, octopuses were installed: bought or built based on plans imported from abroad. Many of the amusement ride operators had to quit and now they make a living by scavenging: collecting reusable or recyclable waste in Austria and reselling it in Hungary.

This candy stand belongs to my grandson. Shall I tell you how long it is? It is five metres long.

III. 5

Mihály Frizólia, a travelling funfair owner operating an amusement ride (photo © Anna Lator)



A closely related, but different profession is that of food and merchandise vendors. They sell all sorts of candy, sweets and toys; audio and video tapes were particularly common in the 1990s. While the hierarchy among ride operators is defined by the quality and quantity of their rides, for vendors it is the length of their stands. The longer the stand is, the more goods they must put on the counter and the more goods they have to have in store. Unlike ride operators, they only arrive right before the funfair begins; they work at town markets during the week.

LIFE AND LIGHT

A charismatic Christian movement, Pentecostalism has been spreading in Romani communities all over Europe since the 1950s. The movement seems to be growing and it is still one of the dominant religious beliefs among them. One of its peculiarities is that many congregations are exclusively or almost exclusively made up of Romani people. A number of international organisations are present through their pastors across Europe. One of these is the France-based *Mission évangélique des Tziganes de France* (Evangelical Mission of French Gypsies), also known as *Vie et Lumière* (Life and Light), founded by a Breton minister, the “apostle of the Gypsies”, Clément le Cossec. This organisation started as an evangelising movement among the Manouche in Paris and later became a worldwide network, inspiring a sense of unity among the Romani people and propagating the idea of a Romani church, through which a transnational identity could be created, and eventually setting foot in Hungary as well.

Starting out among the Manouche in France, it comes as no surprise that the movement, when it arrived in Hungary, quickly found its way to the Sinti whose dialect is closely related to that of the Manouche. The village of Gyöng houses the first Bible school built by the French mission to serve all sorts of religious purposes, including baptism by immersion,

III. 2

PRASAPEN

Although it is not practised routinely any longer, an important cultural concept and a principal constituent of the everyday life of the Sinti before the Second World War was *prasapen*, which literally means ‘impureness, dishonour, shame’. There were several different customs and beliefs related to *prasapen*, both minor ones and ones of great significance. For instance, if a *sinteca* ‘Sinti woman’ touched a glass or dish on the floor with her skirt, or stepped over it, it had to be washed up before it could be used again; if a towel was used to dry one’s face and body as well, it qualified as *prasapen*; food was not allowed to be placed in a tub in which people washed; a

spoon had to be discarded if it had been dropped on the floor. One or two months before and after giving birth a woman was considered *prasti* ‘impure’ and as a consequence she could not touch other people’s crockery or knead dough. A more serious form of *prasapen* involved human behaviour that was dishonest or morally wrong: treachery, infidelity or the consumption of horse meat. Certain traditions have undergone a reinterpretation, like the act of eating hedgehogs: while it counted as a fairly common thing in the past, hedgehogs being readily available, it is now regarded as a culinary treat.

which takes place in adulthood, because in their view, only then can one really understand the workings and the word of God. The French pastors preach in Sinti, which is still understood by some of the local people but the sermon is translated into Hungarian by an interpreter, a Hungarian Sinti pastor. One of the Hungarian Romani pastors of Boyash and Vlax Romani origin learnt Sinti so that he can communicate with the Manouche members of the community, and a Hungarian-Sinti/Manouche dictionary has been published and distributed among the members of the congregation. The words *hejlego puho*, written on the pulpit, mean ‘holy book’ in Sinti.

The Bible school in Gyöng also serves as an international hub where new pastors from all over the world are trained and then sent to evangelise. In addition, the local Romani pastors try to spread the word of God and set up new congregations in the neighbouring villages and towns. They say it is easier for a Rom than for a non-Rom to make contact with another Rom. Although the Manouche pastors stayed for a while after having established the local branch of the church, they only come back from time to time these days, leaving the everyday religious work to the local pastors. Evangelisation in Sinti no doubt has its benefits: it contributes to the preservation of the Sinti dialect in Hungary.

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