

“With us Roma...” : Women’s narratives about Romani social life in the Czech Republic

Natasha Beranek, Department of Anthropology, University College London, e-mail: n.beranek@ucl.ac.uk

Introduction



Fig. 1 Živá Street, the location of my fieldwork in Skála. The buildings here are predominately Romani-inhabited.

My thesis is about how Romani sociality proceeds in a small town in the Czech Republic. As an everyday resident for 18-months in the Bohemian town of Skála, I gained a comprehensive understanding of daily life through the utilization of participant observation on a broad scale. However, by creating a core ethnography based on an extended narrative engagement with two Romani women, I investigate how the intricacies and complementarities inherent within various aspects of social life - individual agency, familial interactions, and cohesion with Romani individuals outside the family unit - are dialectically (re)formulated and performed both publically and privately on a daily basis. In these narratives, a chronicle of their past, present and future lives is presented. Through „ethnographies of the particular” (Abu-Lughod 2006), larger-scale forces embodied in the actions of individuals living in time and place may be read.

Methodology

My primary interlocutors are:

-Alžběta, 58-years old. Mother of three adult children, two of whom are university educated. She has a basic school education. She is the owner of a few apartment buildings. Widowed. Her family is the most well-off and educated of all Romani families in Skála.

-Zdeňka, 37-years old. Mother of five children, four of whom are minors. Educated in a special school. A housewife. Recently filed for divorce and surviving on social welfare. Her three school-aged children attend the “regular” elementary school and are a few of the only Romani pupils.

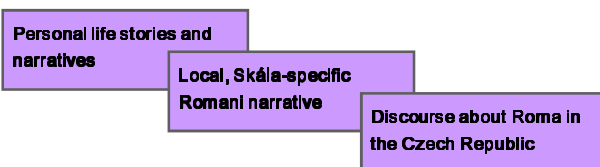


Fig. 2 Schematic showing the various levels of narrative discourse in this study.

Alžběta and Zdeňka are dissimilar in age, level of personal autonomy and financial acumen, but the reality that they live less than 30 metres apart from one another makes this a very localized ethnography.

Found within their tape-recorded individual life stories, their dialogues with neighbors, and their discussions with me as an ‘outsider’ is the expression of a collective, and at times gendered, Skála-specific Romani narrative about poverty, education, racism, love, sex, marriage, friendship and family.

This localized narrative is firmly situated within very palpable, broader academic and media dialogues about the contemporary (i.e. post-communist) experience of Roma in the Czech Republic, their widely-shared communist experience, and the precariousness of their future as fully-fledged and non-excluded members of ‘majority’ society.

Results

One must be careful about making generalizations and therefore ‘flattening out’ the narratives of different informants (Abu-Lughod 1993). Nevertheless, their ongoing narratives - with themselves, as a way to “make sense of things” (Rapport 2000), and with others in their social environments - reflect some interesting similarities, ONLY ONE of which is the following:



Fig. 3 Children posing for the camera in the Skála's community centre playground. The after-school program, which is run primarily by Alžběta's two daughters, is attended primarily by Romani children.

These women primarily perceive Romani sociality in terms of their families. Although the state of one's own agency, “decency” and morality (as well as the state of others’) is reflected upon, it is primarily in terms of how it impacts the functioning and ongoing cohesion of the family. In particular, while Alžběta and Zdeňka regard their female children as ‘extensions of the self’ and as instruments of change through which they can live vicariously (especially with regard to increased educational achievement and financial independence), they discuss their male children and their (potential or completed) actions as being similar/dissimilar from the disappointing behaviors of their husbands. General speaking, their children are viewed as vehicles towards increasing social mobility.

Discussion

Alžběta and Zdeňka are individuals of different ages, therefore they are at different stages of life as women. They enjoy dissimilar freedom of movement and possess unequal amounts of time with which to dispose. They have different responsibilities and concerns. The prominence and the might of men within their families are not alike. Their children are adults and minors, respectively. Most importantly, the fidelity and regularity with which they can rely on family members is completely different.

Yet, their reminiscences about daily social life (not only between Roma, but also between Roma and Czechs) during the communist period, their engagement with discourses about contemporary Romani “ghettos”/social exclusion/marginality, and their roles/responsibilities/ concerns as wives and mothers, reveal many similarities. On the other hand, the ways in which their narratives reflect a concurrence of thought and experience *with each other* are not necessarily in concordance with established academic argument about “the Romani experience in the Czech lands,” past and present. It is these areas of dissension (e.g. their opinion that Romani culture has only really disintegrated in the years since 1989, not as a result of assimilation policies during the communist era) that are of particular interest to me in my thesis.

Acknowledgement

This research project has been supported by a Marie Curie Early Stage Research Training Fellowship of the European Community's Sixth Framework Programme under contract number MEST-CT-2005-020702 within the project European Partnership for Qualitative Research Training (Social Anthropology).

