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The Experience of the Bulgarian Ethnography Museum in the Processes of Roma Cultural Changes

The story of Roma history and culture research and education in Bulgaria is too brief. Till the changes in the end of 1989 as a whole the government policy to Gypsies/Roma was inconsistent and in some periods for Gypsies/Roma was not talked or wrote on the principle: "no gypsy, no problem". In the course of more than 120 years, the policy pursued by the state of Bulgaria to the minorities has been extremely contradictory. Every change of power entailed a change in the approaches to them and, naturally, nothing good could come out of this either for the country, or for the society as a whole, or for the minorities, themselves. On the other hand, coexistence of different cultures in their everyday life creates the "Bulgarian model" of tolerance. This model has been a success till nowadays, despite certain political interference. On the third hand, the period of transition in the wake of 1989 has brought to the fore a new ethno cultural situation in terms of politics and institutions, whose dialogues stability has, however, been motivated by the difficulties of the economic crisis. The aspirations and practices of united Europe have brought forward the problem of interethnic communication as extremely topical in the frameworks of society, in the end of 20th century and the beginning of 21st century. This is important particularly when the mistakes of the past have been reckoned with and the considerations are focused on the present and the future. Increasingly more prominently the surfacing opposition "we-they" has to be considered within the frameworks of a dialogue. The key condition in a dialogue is mutual respect of the parties.

Following this point of view the NEM of Bulgaria has experience with presenting the Roma culture in two dimensions:

- Ethnographic exhibition
- Collecting of exhibitions

We started with preparation of general ethnographic exhibition.

What is the story? At one of the regular meetings of the NEM Museum Council in Sofia in 1994 two of our colleagues - Elena Maroushiakova and Veselin Popov suggested that an exhibition dedicated to the Gypsies in Bulgaria be organized. It is my impression that they did not know what

would be after that. It is much more interesting to say what the reaction of the Museum experts was. The attitude of the members of the Museum Council was negative. Their arguments against it were varied and wide in scope: from a purely professional point of view some said no ethnographic material about the culture of the gypsies had been collected and it was difficult to realize the idea because it would have been the first exhibition of this kind in Bulgaria; some said it was difficult to find place for it in the existing plan; the objections of others, charged with irony and negativism, were frivolous - they said, "We've had enough of those gypsies!" and "Why exactly the gypsies?" I must declare that at that time (and this still persists today) the sociological polls showed that 69 % of the Bulgarians had a negative attitude to the Romanies; this was also indicated in the Sofia newspapers in which often appeared publication with headlines like "Gypsies Beat Someone to Death", "Gypsies Kidnap a Girl", "Gypsies Beat a Cop", "Gypsies Terrorize Social Workers" (И.-Е. МИТЕВ. 1994, pp., 226, 229). It turned out that, generally speaking, not only the majority of the population had a negative attitude to the gypsies. Even ethnologists were so much influenced by it that it had stifled their ethical and professional obligations to study the ethnically specific characteristic features of the various ethnic groups.

The positive attitude prevailed in the end of 1994 and the preparatory work for the Exhibition was started with Agreement between NEM and "Romany Study" Society for the Study of the Minorities was signed.

The Bulgarian museum workers had not experience in working in the field of Gypsy ethnoculture and in preparing this kind of exhibition. The background or Roma history and culture research in BEIM included several studies, archive materials and photos from the mid 20th centuries. During the 1950s and the 1960s Gypsy studies succeeded in attracting scholarly interest though in modest proportions. Anastas Primovski published a survey on the *Agupti* (Gypsy blacksmiths) in the Rhodopa mountain; Vassil Marinov wrote about the lifestyle and traditional culture of the Gypsies in Bulgaria; Ivanichka Georgieva published a study on the Gypsies in Sliven, their way of life, festivals and customs. Very useful are their archive materials and photos which are saved in EIM and which we included in exhibition.

The new one was "Roma Heritage Museum Fund" which was established in 1995 at the Ethnographic Institute with Museum with the co-operation of Minority Studies Society *STUDII ROMANI* in relation to preparation of the exhibition "Gypsies in Times Past". The Roma Heritage Museum Fund is constantly enriched and at present includes over 200 exhibits and over 200 new photographs of traditional Gypsy culture and their modern manifestations.

The work connecting with this new fund has three directions:

I. Scholarly:

1. To describe and typify the artifacts of Roma culture in Bulgaria.
2. To outline the influences between Roma and Bulgarians in the sphere of material and spiritual culture.
3. To identify what is ethnically common in the cultural variety of artifacts studied, depending on the belonging to a group, the way of life – settled or nomadic, the trade specialization and the religious affiliation.
4. To reveal the functional characteristics - utilitarian; everyday and holiday; gender and age; social; aesthetic of the different cultural facts
5. To outline the basic semantic meanings of these artifacts, according to the conceptions and beliefs of Gypsies in Bulgaria.
6. To enrich the scholarly documentation on the culture of the Roma in Bulgaria, by the compilation of written and photographic materials.

II. Museum Applicable:

1. To enrich the “Roma Heritage Fund” of the Ethnographic Institute and Museum,
2. To establish photo documentation of the existing museum exhibits and of the items, newly acquired by the investigations.
3. To create Archives of Scholarly Files for each one of the items covered by the investigation.

III. Socially Beneficial:

1. To popularize Roma culture.
2. To supplement the scholarly archive for Roma culture in Bulgaria.
3. To extend the social circle of interested people through the envisaged publications and catalogues addressed both to specialists and to the mass reader.

Till this moment we have experience with the Roma dress study. The main theoretical framework of the investigation “Roma clothing in Bulgaria” is the understanding that the cultural phenomena are not ethnically determined, initially and by themselves; they become ethnically determined only after their incorporation in a given ethnic and cultural system and their interpretation as such. The specific lifestyle of the Roma in Bulgaria - on a broad scale - a life in the midst of a foreign ethnic environment; and on a narrow scale - with a number of internal subdivisions – is associated with a great number of “intercultural interactions and mutual

influences, which are not in a position to deprive of individuality the ethnically specific principles of establishment and functioning of this system, nor its basic characteristics.”

We searched for answers of two basic circles of questions:

- *The first one* is associated with the relations and influences of the traditional Bulgarian costume on the Roma dress;

The second concerns the search of the ethnically specific principles of making and combining the elements and parts of the Roma clothing.

The application of this approach would make it possible to overcome counter-arguments, which the study could encounter on the part of supporters of the view regarding the absence of specific ethno-cultural forms, and elements amidst the Roma. Their basic argument could probably be the borrowing of the Bulgarian costume by the Roma in its respective local and regional variants, depending on the degree of contact and interaction of the cultures. A basic principle of the investigation is the uncovering of those principles of combining of elements of the costume, known in another culture, which have produced new stylistic specificities in its functioning and have made it ethnically determined. Both the general and the specific in the wear of the Roma will be sought in the principles of making up of the costume; in its structural and decorative elements and parts; in the principles of functioning of clothing on the level of everyday living and the ritual.

The investigation will take a specific interest in:

- clothing in the Roma groups of different religious affiliation: Christians (*Dasikane Roma*) and Muslims (*“Horohane Roma”*); the contemporary costumes as a mixture of traditional and modern elements; the significance of some elements as a religious sign.

- Clothing of groups of different lifestyles: nomadic-craftsmen (*“Thracian tinsmiths”*) and settled – agricultural workers (*“jerlii”*). Distinctions between them in a nowadays – position and tendencies.

The thoroughness of the picture is secured by the following of:

- the male and female costumes in their everyday working variant;
- the ritual costume, worn in certain calendar customs, e.g.: the feast day of St Vasil, Epiphany, the feast days of St Theodore, St Lazar, St. George, Virgin Mary’s day.

- The ritual costume worn on family rituals:

1. Childbirth – clothing of the new-born baby, of the woman giving birth, of the midwife (*“baba”*), of the relatives of the young mother, the clothing of the newborn child at baptism and *sunet*.

2. Wedding – clothing of the bride and the bridegroom, of the godmother and godfather, of the father- and mother-in-law.

3. Funeral – clothing of the deceased, signs of mourning in the clothing.

Chronologically, the study covers the period from the end of the 19th to the beginning of 21st century – a classical period for ethnology targeted at revealing the topologically essential features of the clothing preserved in a relatively “pure” form by tradition in the pre-industrial society and contemporary situation. The result of this investigation is the book “Me bala shukar, mo lolo diklo. Gypsy/Roma Dress in Bulgaria” by M. Decheva.

E. Marushiakova and V. Popov started collecting the photographic materials almost at the beginning of their professional work with the Gypsies in Bulgaria. Collecting photographs was never our specific goal but it so happened that over a period of more than 20 years their personal archive came to contain a great number of different photographs reflecting various aspects of Gypsy life. This archive was substantially enriched in the last 15 years when the social changes in Bulgaria made possible a more active and intensive field work among the Gypsies, including the accumulation of new and richer in volume and content photographic documentation.

The exhibition “Gypsies in Times Past” was a contextual one; it outlines the situation of the Gypsy community in Bulgaria, its historical development and most typical ethnic and cultural parameters. It presented the key elements of Gypsy ethnic culture, everyday life and holidays. The exhibition showed the different groups of Gypsies, their basic crafts and specific features which exist within the macro culture of the majority and this widened their ideas concerning the richness of the culture of the Gypsies. The intention was to revive the “memory” of the Gypsies, create in the present day Bulgarians a positive image of them and thus help to develop, if not to instil a positive attitude to them, at last come to know them better and make them think which form is the basis of tolerance and respect.

The complexity of the problem associated with the planned exhibitions made exclusively important the choice of an approach towards the achievement of the best possible effect. We have staked on the positive image of “the other”, on the great variety and specificity of his culture, on its adaptability and coexistence with Bulgarian culture in the course of centuries. And that solution, which seemed to be holding greatest promise, proved indeed to be operating. I have in mind the history of these exhibitions already staged. The results can be followed along several lines, but in this paper I shall make use of just one of them: the mirror image of the exhibitions, registered in the Visitors’ Books. A mandatory attribute of every museum exhibition, this Visitors’ Book has been little made use of by experts as a source of information. However, it is interesting and

indicative of the public response to the messages addressed to society through the exhibition. The visitors wish to put down in writing his opinion can be interpreted on a personal plane as an inclination to self-expression. But on a social plane it is representative for certain group moods, and as a whole, it is valuable for the museum worker for the position in states: a relationship with those to whom the exhibition has been addressed. Unlike the media news and reviews, the Visitors' Book holds unedited immediacy and directness. We find precisely this confirmation of the correctness of the approach chosen in the view of a number of young people regarding the exhibition "Gypsies in Times Past". To them it reveals "an unfamiliar world, which has been around us all the time".

In the case of the Gypsy exhibition we staked on the "rediscovery" of the Gypsies via their culture. It is a well-known fact that Bulgarians and Gypsies have lived together for such a long time that it seems like eternity. This was the basic motif in determining the time parameters of the exhibition, setting as its most recent limit the 50's of the 20th century. Its title "The Gypsies in Times Past" - takes us right away to the past, to the time of the "traditional" model of the relationship Bulgarian/Gypsies in order to avoid all possible ambiguities which could give the problem political colouring. The impressions of the visitor's confirm the rightness of this choice. In the first few days after the opening of the exhibition in Sofia, someone who identified himself or herself as "A visitor" gave expression of her or his gratitude in the book that we "had touched upon a way of life, which was familiar and not so familiar after all". It is common knowledge that for the Bulgarians coexistence with the Gypsies has been so long that it seems primordial. Challenging of the knowledge/memory of coexistence sparked off not only curiosity regarding the culture and lifestyle of an "unfamiliar", in the words of a visitor, minority in society, but also concern and interest on the part of the majority of society. Placing the Gypsies in the dichotomy "own-strange" in the Bulgarian variant does not affect the harmony of the Bulgarians-Gypsies relations, since in the conditions of the traditional popular culture what is a fundamental, overall feature is precisely integrity, the unity of the world and the upholding of the existing harmony. I.e. though 'strange' as a category and respective status, the Gypsies are an integral part of this world and of the common cultural milieu, in which they have a place of their own. The fact that added to the majority's slighting attitude to the Gypsies has also recently been turning them into "a scapegoat" in the period of crisis was the main motive for the attempt at their "exoneration" via the wealth of their culture. This was our main consideration in determining the temporal parameters of the exhibition "Gypsies in Times Past" - the upper limit being the 1950s. This directly leads to the time of the largely "traditional" model preserved in the Bulgarians-Gypsies relations, so that any ambiguity that might give a political coloring to the problem could be avoided.

The success of the first exhibition in Sofia prompted the idea of its transformation into a traveling exhibition, which has considerably extended both the time and the space of its “own” display life. This has enabled the extension of the circle of viewers, within the frameworks of the country as a whole. Specific data show visits to 12 cities during the past 9 years. It is noteworthy that the initial interest on the part of the hosting museums ensued from the fact that the exhibition was offered completely free of charge with money secured by sponsors. I shall not hide the fact that in a period of crisis and absolute no finances of the museums in the country this has, logically, also played a major role. However, the response to the exhibition on the part of the public imposed another mode of dissemination after the initially sponsored project had concluded: scheduled traveling of the exhibition whereby the hosting party takes over the expenses. That hosting party always proves to be an amalgamation of a museum, a municipality and non-governmental organizations. There was an interesting case in one of the History Museums in the country. In 1996, the NEM’s suggestion to stage the exhibition there was refused by the museum of the town. In the early 2000, the same institution, in cooperation with the municipality and two Gypsy organizations, addressed an invitation to the exhibition to visit the town, covering all the expenses associated with this. I do not doubt that situation nor the trustworthiness of the excuse that “four years ago the times were hard”. I am sure that the reputation of the exhibition has itself “earned” its prestige.

An exceptionally important result of the Programme contributing to the proper organization and presentation of each of the exhibitions has been the cooperation established between the NEM, on the one hand, and the cultural and educational organizations of the individual communities, their national and Bulgarian non-governmental organizations, foreign foundations. That cooperation has proceeded along three main lines:

- the financial sphere
- collection and donation of exhibits
- assistance of methodology.

Skipping the first line, which is quite clear, as well as mandatory, I shall draw your attention to the other two lines. Even in the preparatory stage of each one of the exhibitions, teams of authors had purely practical consultations with representatives of the community, regarding the correct display of the ethnographic artifacts I shall only note that the NEM does not have specialized funds on the ethnic communities, and it is for the first time in its history that interethnic exhibitions have been staged. These consultations often naturally developed into “field research” of the ethnologist and produced new archive registers.

The contributions made have been an unexpected result, highly appreciated by the museum workers. As the exhibitions themselves also included exhibits borrowed from similar museums in the country, as well as from private collections, the donations of valuable artifacts have proved a very agreeable surprise and acts of exceptional importance for the NEM, as they have enriched the museum funds.

The books and catalogues are important part of our work. A lot of materials from the specialised Photo-archive of the EIM at BAS were selected for the exhibitions and many of them were published. The first one was the issue "The Gypsies of Bulgaria. Problems of the Multicultural Museum Exhibition" (1995); the second one was Photo-book "Gypsies/Roma in Times Past and Present" (2000).

So far the experience of the National Ethnographic Museum acquired in presenting the ethnic communities living within the confines of Bulgaria and their image as perceived by the majority has been associated with the exhibitions devoted to the Jews (1998), Armenians (2000-2001) and the Karakachans (2001).

This experience of the NEM in the sphere of interethnic exhibitions has no claims to be a global educational or cultural event in the realm of interethnic relations. Fully aware of the restricted possibilities of a cultural event like an ethnographic exhibition, we have staked on the positive principle of familiarization, underlying tolerance and mutual respect. This is a promising way of a successful dialogue, based on the worthiness of the strangers' difference. The thing that has been at the base of the Programme is the understanding that the ethnographic museum is an entrance to the context and particularities of the past, the present and the future. This is the common space in which the dialogue between the ethnic communities in Bulgaria has proceeded. Therefore, it is of greater importance for us that a specific event may reach those it has been addressed to; that our message may find its supporters and may leave a memory of something experienced together.

These most general considerations have outlined the position of the Bulgarian National Ethnographic Museum, when it took a decision to stage exhibitions dedicated to different ethnic communities living within the confines of the Bulgarian state. It was quite clear that we can not claim to be drawing general conclusions or to change the image of some of these communities in Bulgarian society. Neither could we claim to make any radical changes in the minority/majority interaction. It is common knowledge that the efforts of a number of scholars, social workers and politicians have not produced satisfactory results along these lines. As practice has shown, generalizations and universal recipes are not the most promising highway to building the image of "the other" - in this case of the minority as perceived by the majority. Therefore our target was

specific and clear-cut: to introduce the public to the culture of the different ethnic communities living in Bulgaria. This has been prompted by the understanding that familiarization with “the different other” is the first step towards his acceptance, and towards respecting him, i.e. towards tolerance. What encouraged us was also our confidence that culture is that first bridge across which politicians, social workers and scholars pass as it provides the best prospects of bridging differences.