

**“WITH US ROMA”: THE NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT AND SOCIAL  
KNOWLEDGE OF TWO CZECH ROMANI WOMEN**

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I, Natasha Beranek, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the question of how Romani social life proceeds in a small town in the Czech Republic. It pays particular attention to the ways in which ethnicity becomes salient during interactions between Roma and Czechs. The ethnography is based upon an extended narrative engagement with two Romani women. In their narratives, a chronicle of their past, present and future lives is presented.

Despite the fact that my interlocutors are dissimilar in age, level of personal autonomy and financial security, within their narratives is the expression of a local Romani narrative about ethnic relations, love, friendship and family. It is firmly situated within academic- and media-based discussions about the post-communist ‘experience’ of Czech Roma and their widely shared communist past. This thesis therefore takes into consideration the ways in which Romani individuals make sense of their social worlds through their creation of narratives.

In Skála, *idealized* Romani sociality is composed of various threads: the authenticity of one’s moral agency, the maintenance of a cohesive family unit, a sense of cooperation and harmony with Romani non-kin, dedication to the perpetuation of a collective Romani mentality standing apart from the Czech population, and a symbiotic existence with Czechs based upon daily interaction. Throughout my interlocutors’ narratives, these components of social life are cognitively assigned to the communist era rather than the present-day. Within these women’s narratives, there is evidence of the primacy of the family as both a functional and a conceptual entity of Romani social life past and present. Today, the investment of material resources and emotional energy into one’s children is seen as the most viable means by which one may enact their personal agency as mothers within the private sphere.

## CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>(8)</b>
<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>(8)</b>
<b>II. Main Thesis and Research Aims .....</b>	<b>(12)</b>
<b>i. Justifications for a Narrative Ethnographic Writing Style .....</b>	<b>(12)</b>
<b>ii. Primary Questions .....</b>	<b>(18)</b>
<b>iii. Family as the Core of Romani Social Life and the Location of             Women’s Agency .....</b>	<b>(20)</b>
<b>III. Introducing the Informants and Description of the Field Site .....</b>	<b>(30)</b>
<b>i. Meetings with My ‘Mothers’ .....</b>	<b>(30)</b>
<b>ii. Entrance into Skála .....</b>	<b>(42)</b>
<b>IV. Overview and Structure of Thesis .....</b>	<b>(56)</b>
<b>2. Chapter One: Providing a Local, Social and Theoretical Context for My     Argumentation .....</b>	<b>(61)</b>
<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>(61)</b>
<b>II. Romani/Gypsy Anthropology .....</b>	<b>(62)</b>
<b>i. Major Themes in the Literature with Relevance to My Ethnography             .....</b>	<b>(62)</b>
<b>ii. Group ‘Boundaries’ between Roma and Non-Roma.....</b>	<b>(65)</b>
<b>iii. What Does it Mean to ‘Be Romani?’ .....</b>	<b>(70)</b>
<b>iv. Romani Categories and Classifications .....</b>	<b>(72)</b>
<b>III. A Local Social Context.....</b>	<b>(75)</b>
<b>i. Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s Daily Lives in Skála – a Brief Biography ..</b>	<b>(76)</b>
<b>ii. A Local Context for Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives.....</b>	<b>(81)</b>
<b>IV. Conclusion .....</b>	<b>(83)</b>
<b>3. Chapter Two: A Social History of Romani Ethnicity in the Czech Lands .....</b>	<b>(84)</b>
<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>(84)</b>
<b>II. Roma in the Czech Lands .....</b>	<b>(85)</b>
<b>i. Who Are the Czech Roma? .....</b>	<b>(85)</b>
<b>ii. An Overview of Romani Social History before and after 1989 .....</b>	<b>(94)</b>
<b>iii. On the Subject of ‘Romani Culture’ .....</b>	<b>(109)</b>
<b>iv. ‘Czechness’ and ‘Gypsiness’ within the Context of Intergroup             Behavior, (Theoretically Speaking).....</b>	<b>(115)</b>
<b>III. The ‘Trap of Ethnicity’ .....</b>	<b>(126)</b>
<b>4. Chapter Three: Romani Sociality and the Salience of Ethnicity in Skála .....</b>	<b>(132)</b>
<b>I. Introduction .....</b>	<b>(133)</b>
<b>II. Beginnings .....</b>	<b>(137)</b>
<b>i. Alžběta’s Childhood .....</b>	<b>(137)</b>
<b>ii. Zdeňka’s Childhood .....</b>	<b>(144)</b>
<b>III. Czechs and Roma, <i>Dříve</i> and <i>Ted’</i> .....</b>	<b>(149)</b>

IV. Cultural Compromise, Temporal Orientation and the ‘Public’ and ‘Private’ Self .....	(176)
5. Chapter Four: The Romani Family as a Location for Personal Agency .....	(183)
I. Introduction .....	(183)
i. The <i>Kurva</i> , the Son and the Rash .....	(183)
ii. The Individual and Cultural Compromise within ‘the Romani Family’: a Departure .....	(187)
II. Motherhood.....	(191)
i. “In love, everyone is foolish...” The Enactment of Individual Agency through the Bestowal of Advice to Children Regarding Marriage and Partnership .....	(191)
ii. When Children Don’t Listen .....	(204)
iii. Czech Mothers and Gypsy Mothers .....	(214)
III. The Importance of Individual Will.....	(227)
6. Chapter Five: Men and women .....	(230)
I. Introduction .....	(230)
i. “Do you have a boyfriend?” .....	(230)
ii. Chapter Overview .....	(232)
II. First Love and Marriage .....	(240)
i. Alžběta .....	(240)
ii. Zdeňka .....	(252)
III. Boyfriends and Lovers .....	(258)
i. A Woman’s Need for Love .....	(258)
ii. (Ab)normal Relations between Men and Women (and Women and Women) .....	(263)
iii. “I once had a lover...a Czech boyfriend”.....	(276)
IV. Coming Full Circle .....	(280)
7. Conclusion .....	(291)
8. Bibliography .....	(298)
9. Appendix I: List of Names .....	(309)
10. Appendix II: A Guide to Czech Language and Pronunciation .....	(310)
11. Appendix III: Discourse vs. Narrative: a Clarification .....	(312)

*What can I say about Roma better than the song of a lone Romani woman's life  
experience? – Milena Hübschmannová*

## I. Introduction

“You can’t trust any of the Roma here! With Roma, you have to be careful. You can trust me and you can trust my family, but otherwise, you should just make friends with Czech people. Czechs can visit you here, but I don’t want any *cigáni*<sup>1</sup> in my building. Do you understand me *Natašo*? No *cigáni!*”

Alžběta Procházková, my fifty-eight-year-old Romani landlady, delivered this admonishment to me one early summer evening in 2009 as she vigorously hoed a vegetable patch in her garden. Earlier that day, Erika, the teenage daughter of Zdeňka Kopecká, a thirty-seven year-old Romani woman living in the municipally-owned building next door to Alžběta’s own, had come to my flat with her friend Nadia and asked me if I would like to go for a walk to the local supermarket. The mere presence of Erika and Nadia in her building (the former reputed by several Roma in Skála to be at best a kleptomaniac and at worst a manipulative thief; the latter an alleged prostitute who had once beat up Alžběta’s granddaughter Světlana during a dispute over a young man)

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<sup>1</sup> With regard to nomenclature, in this thesis I have chosen to use the same general terminological methodology as Sokolová (2002). Several Czech, Slovak *and* English terms are used, e.g. *Rom(ka)* (Cz. sg. masc. and fem.) / *Romy* (Cz. pl.) / *Romové* (another form of the Cz. pl.), Gypsy, Romani and Romanes. Like Sokolová, I use single quotation marks to highlight the constructed nature of a concept (e.g. the loss of ‘Romani identity’). When I am making arguments and when I am indicating the self-identification of the Roma, I use the term Roma. Romani is the adjectival form of Roma. Romanes is used to designate the dialect(s) of language spoken by some Romani individuals. Gypsy is used wherever I have translated *cigán* (or the modifier *cigánský*) from Czech or Slovak into English, or if I am citing English language sources whose authors opt to use this terminology instead of Rom(ka)/ Roma/ Romani. If authors have not capitalized the term, I will leave it in the same form as it was originally written. In places where I use equivalent Czech and Slovak terminologies (*Rom(ka)*, *Romové*, *cigán* (Sk. sg.), *cigáni* (Sk. pl.), *romský* (Cz. adj.), and *romština* (Cz. for Romanes)), I do so in order to retain the stylistic characteristics that are inherent to the narrative. My interlocutors alternated between the terms *Rom* and *cigán* (and their adjectival and adverbial derivatives) quite frequently. Although there are no hard and fast rules to explicate the switches within the space of one conversation (or even one sentence), usually there was a switch *from* Romani *to* Gypsy nomenclature. This sometimes happened when they were referring to disliked Romani individuals (e.g. “That *cigánka* is a cow”), or when they were trying indicate Czechs’ prejudicial or condescending opinions about Roma (“They think she is a dirty *cigánka*”). Conversely, *cigán* and its derivatives could be used to denote a sense of authenticity or casualness (e.g. “Take some! It’s real *cigánské* food”, or “They don’t teach *romština* in the schools, so I try to speak a little *cigánsky* with my kids at home”).



had incensed Alžběta to such an extent that she refused to speak to me for several days afterwards.

Alžběta's<sup>2</sup> anger over the girls' visit, despite her claims to the contrary, was not motivated solely by her genuine concern for my safety and well-being. Alžběta had never made any attempts to hide her staunchly held contentions about the general untrustworthiness of 'the Roma' from me. While conversing with me, she regularly drew distinctions between her family and all other Roma in Skála. In Alžběta's opinion, whether the various social ills that she considered Skála's Roma to have – criminality, apathy, ignorance, prematurely initiated sex lives and self-centeredness – were a result of the Romani population's abandonment by a paternalistic Czechoslovak state, or a consequence of their own lack of will to evolve and adapt to today's Czech society following their former status as cogs in the great communist labor machine, her family existed outside of that paradigm.

On one occasion, following an incidence of theft, Alžběta scolded me by questioning my allegiance to her family. Although I never admitted to her that, in fact, I believed Erika and Nadia to be the culprits, Alžběta drew her conclusions independently:

“So *Natašo*, you didn't believe me when I told you that Erika was a thief? Didn't I tell you not to go out with her? You didn't think I was telling the truth? You can't trust any of the Roma here. We've never asked you for any money, but the others have. I'm sure of it! You know we would never steal from you. But the others! This is why I don't go out very much around here. Roma in Skála have stolen from me too!”

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<sup>2</sup> All proper names appearing in this thesis are pseudonyms. The pseudonyms reflect my informants' almost exclusive allocation of Czech and Slavic first names to their children.

After several months of such delineations being drawn, I was finally compelled to ask, “So what you’re telling me is that, in Skála, all Roma besides your family are thieves?” Alžběta looked at me blankly; as if stating the obvious, she threw up her arms and exclaimed, “Yes!”

Yet, in Skála, suspicions about thievery ran amuck about *Alžběta’s* family. As the proprietors of the local community center, the Procházka family’s worth and credibility were under constant scrutiny by both Czechs and Roma due to their recurrent obtainment of funding from Skála’s city council, and due to a level of financial security that manifested itself primarily through its youngest generation’s brand name clothing and expensive extracurricular activities. During a meeting at the community center, council members directly questioned the Procházka family on the ultimate destination of the city’s funds. On Skála’s Internet chat room, anonymous individuals alternately identifying themselves as Czech and Romani hurled accusations of financial manipulation at “that family”. While Czech participants utilized their allegations against the Procházkas – a family of “brown Czechs” using municipal money for their own personal gain and material acquisition – to expound upon the lack of *slušný* (Cz. decent) behavior among the *cigáni* as a whole, Romani individuals castigated “that family” as having turned their backs on their “own” by not using the apportioned local funds for the benefit of their neighbors’ children. These arguments were not strictly constrained by ethnic<sup>3</sup> category and were easily flip-flopped; Roma complained that as particularly

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, the concept of ethnicity, just like the concept of race, nation or culture, is not meant to be understood as an entity or a ‘thing’ existing in its own right, but in relational, processual and dynamic terms. As a way of interpreting and perceiving the social world on both a collective and individual level, ethnicity is not a category (or the categorization) of people so much as it is the categorization of situations, events, actions, stories, images, gestures, utterances, emotions etc. (Brubaker 2004). Through the ongoing process of the negotiation of meaning, the validity of norms and the relevancy of certain patterns of interpretation (i.e. culture (Wimmer 2002)) and ethnicity (like race and nation) are particular ways of

visible members of the town's Romani population, the Procházkas' supposed squandering of money cast doubt upon already precarious Czech opinions about the *slušnost* (Cz. decency) of the rest of Roma in Skála, and Czechs scolded them for not helping out less fortunate Roma despite repeated opportunities to do so. In the non-electronic world, during the process of implicitly communicating their opinion that the family was uppity (even if only through the smug looks they gave to one another during conversations about the Procházkas), people's jealousy of the family's status figuratively seeped out from their pores. Aware of my connection to the Procházka family due to my residence in Alžběta's building and my occasional status as a volunteer English teacher in the community center's after-school program, on more than one occasion, members of Zdeňka Kopecká's family tentatively stopped me on the street and asked me if the Procházkas had received *more* funding, and if so, from whom and how much. When I truthfully answered these individuals' predictable secondary queries about how much Alžběta was charging me for monthly rent, they repeatedly concluded with a great deal of verbal exasperation and gesticulatory disgust that: 1) I was being ripped off, 2) The only thing the Procházkas care about is money, and 3) That this family is a *špatný* (Cz. bad) family. After learning the location of my accommodation, a Czech social worker at Skála's *sociální odbor* (Cz. Department of Social Services) similarly stated, "That family is *špatný*. They can be nice when they need something from you, but you really need to be careful with them. They are my acquaintances, so they are nice to me too. But really, I think that Alžběta's daughter Věra is some sort of parasite. She has all that education and she has received all that good money from the city council, but what good does it come

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framing social closure; it is a way of distinguishing 'us' from 'them' through "distinctive forms of everyday cultural practice" (ibid: 33). Romani ethnicity will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

to? She is cheating her fellow Roma. The only people who benefit from it are in that family.”

## II. Main Thesis and Research Aims

### i. Justifications for a Narrative Ethnographic Writing Style

However, this thesis is not just about “that family”. Without a doubt, the Procházka family *is* the family I got to know best during the eighteen months I lived in Skála, and if the focus of my field research had been left up to Alžběta’s discretion, I would have ventured no further than the invisible boundaries demarcating the epicenter of Alžběta’s daily life on Živá Street. “I think you should write about *one* family,” she would reliably conclude when I would express my frustrated attempts to get to know other Romani people in Skála. Promises of introducing me to Roma who she deemed to be *dobry* (Cz. good) never materialized. As my ticket of entrance into Skála and its Romani ‘community’,<sup>4</sup> my linkage to the Procházkas came with sufficient attendant limitations that Alžběta’s wish could have easily been translated into reality.

It would also be somewhat misleading to state that this thesis is not *only* about the Procházka family, but *also* about another family, the Kopeckýs, with whom I spent many hours during my time in Skála. Rather, at the most fundamental level, this body of work is about individuals and their social lives, a primary sphere of which is the family. It considers the ways in which two Romani women, Alžběta Procházková and Zdeňka

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<sup>4</sup> In the same vein as Gay y Blasco’s (1999: 15) use of ‘community’ to describe a localized population of Gitanos in Madrid, Roma in Skála view themselves as a group that is “similarly positioned vis-à-vis the rest of the world – a community in the sense of ‘commonness’, not of ‘communion’”. The only occasions when I saw Roma in Skála come together in a sweeping and collective way were at Alžběta’s husband’s funeral reception, and to a greater extent at his service and burial. There are also summertime Romani music and dance festivals that large numbers of local Roma attend.

Kopecká, perceive and make sense of sociality through their engagement with narrative on various levels: the individual, familial and local. It explores not only how these women locate themselves within sociohistorical and ethnic narratives of their own making, but how as Romani women (a designation with which they identify themselves *and* are identified by others<sup>5</sup>) they are placed into narratives and collective dialogues which are *not* of their own making. Here, narrative may be understood as the stories individuals tell about themselves and their worlds (Rapport 2000; Buckler 2007). It is a means by which one can comprehend things that happen in daily life. People's narratives describe occurrences, as well as their feelings and explanations about those occurrences, in a naturally sequential order. As these events are contextualized and referred back to, a story or a history is created. The story continues to evolve as it is supplemented with new experiences, sensations and interpretations. A narrative therefore "posits an ongoing order and meaningfulness between distinct moments or sites of experience" (Rapport *ibid*: 76). It is through narrativity that people come to interpret and understand their social worlds and constitute their identities<sup>6</sup> within these social worlds (Somers 1994). In Alžběta's and Zdeňka's individual narratives, a chronicle of their past, present and future lives is presented.

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<sup>5</sup> Although these 'others' (i.e. those who identify themselves as Czechs) just as frequently (or more frequently) would refer to/call them *cikánky* (Cz.) or *cigánky* (Sk.).

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Somers argues for the use of narrative as a way to reconfigure the study of "identity formation" (1994: 605). She suggests that by focusing on the epistemological and ontological aspects of narrativity – by situating narratives within historically specific and relational settings – the recurring problem of conflating identities with singular categories such as race and gender (i.e. essentialization – 'I act because of who I am', not because of rational interest or a set of learned values" (*ibid*: 608)) can be avoided. I dispense with use of the term *identity* in this thesis because, as Brubaker (2004: 44) points out, it designates a *condition* rather than a *process*. He suggests *identification* as an alternative term because unlike *identity*, the *identification* of oneself and others is a *process* that is inherent to social life.

These women's narratives are compositional in terms of the varied methodologies by which they were collected, but they are primarily in two forms: semi-structured, digitally recorded oral life history sessions and informal daily conversations with neighbors and family members. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's ongoing dialogues with me – as an 'outsider' to whom they felt they could entrust certain confidential parts of their lives – constitute an equally significant part of these narratives. If left unfettered, methodological heterogeneity begets stylistic variety. Rather than abstracting significant data from these different narrative forms and erasing all evidence of my presence, I acknowledge that "ethnography is both a product and a process" (Tedlock 1991:72) by exposing how my epistemological reflections whilst in the field had a direct impact on the evolution of the thematic content of our interactions. My conversations with these women not only demonstrate how similarities and dissimilarities in our respective "social perspectivities" (Hannerz 1993: 65) – the ways in which role repertoires in social life, and the habitual schemes and networks of meaning which are associated with them, structure perceptions and interpretations of sociality – were highlighted during our dialogic interactions, but they also show how knowledge was co-produced during these interactions. To use the words of Behar (1993:14) as she describes the interweaving of her voice with that of her informant, she says that as the text of *Translated Woman* progresses, there is a "switch in tone from my comrade telling me her *historia* to the forging between us of a *metahistoria*." In this thesis, an overarching use of a narrative ethnographic writing style permits the demonstration of "a world of shared inter-subjectivity [and] an understanding of the differences between two worlds" (Tedlock

1991: 70). I will describe how, as an anthropologist, I both experienced and observed our joint interactions and conversations.

In a narrative ethnography, although the anthropologist includes himself or herself in the text as a narrator and thus reveals aspects of his or her personality as a character in the story, the focus is not on the anthropologist. In contrast to a memoir,<sup>7</sup> in which the anthropologist is the most developed character, the author of a narrative ethnography is an intentionally secondary character. The anthropologist allows himself or herself enough of a presence in the text to let the audience recognize the consciousness which has chosen and developed the experiences described within the body of the ethnography, but does not have so much of a presence that emphasis is shifted away from its intended target – the character and progression of the ethnographic encounter (ibid). As a situated, perspectival observer, as a researcher goes through the process of representing his or her informants, he or she also goes through a process of self-representation; as the anthropologist “thinks through others” (Shweder 1990: 32-34, Shweder 1991: 108-110), an ongoing self-reflexive state of mind is likewise stimulated. Although an anthropologist is always ‘situated’, the scholastic worth of a narrative ethnography is not devalued by the fact that it is the ‘situated’ anthropologist who is retelling the stories (Haraway 1991).

“Every view is a view from somewhere and every act of speaking a speaking from somewhere” (Abu Lughod 2006: 155), thus “only a false belief in the possibility of a

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<sup>7</sup> Historically speaking, anthropologists have been reticent to include themselves and their epistemic reflections within their final ethnographic products because of a wish to communicate their successful maintenance of objectivity and emotional detachment whilst in the field. Alternatively, the idea of conveying the details of certain fieldwork experiences has been regarded by researchers as more personally embarrassing than non-scholastic (Tedlock 1991). The contradiction inherent to participant observation – that on the one hand, its strength as a research methodology is that it is experiential (participation), but on the other hand, that its analytical robustness derives from keeping a certain measure of ‘distance’ from informants (observation) – has often been maneuvered around by penning one’s fieldwork experiences as a separate memoir or novel after the successful completion of one’s less revelatory professional writings.

non-situated story could make one ask [if] stories reflect the way things, over there, ‘really’ are” (Abu Lughod 1993:17).

Useful reasons for the retention of an anthropologist’s presence within an ethnographic text are for the sake of transparency and so that empirical examples of how culture proceeds “as an open and unstable process of the negotiation of meaning” (Wimmer 2002: 26) can be provided. First, anthropologists understandably may be concerned about unintentionally presenting the cultures of the people with whom they work as bounded and uniform wholes because their ethnographic descriptions can subsequently be misinterpreted or used by persons external to the academic arena for political, exclusionist or nationalistic agendas (Brubaker 2004). The retention of such ‘destabilizing’ dimensions as time, space and relationality in the individual narratives of an anthropologist’s informants, as well as the inclusion of dialogic interactions between an anthropologist and his or her informants within the body of an ethnography, provides a way to avoid the pitfalls of overlooking heterogeneity within a given group and consequently painting a ‘frozen’ portrait of the group’s culture; it is precisely through a rejection of the fundamentally dynamic nature of the fieldwork encounter that the phenomenon of essentialism occurs (Crapanzano 1980: ix-x). Second, within everyday social interactions, actors negotiate and compromise on who should fill which roles, how particular situations should be defined, which norms and values are germane in given contexts and which strategies for action should be followed (Wimmer 2002: 28; Engebriksen 2007). Processes of cultural negotiation and consent are not the sole preserve of those individuals who are the focus of an anthropologist’s field research. As an anthropologist becomes increasingly enmeshed within the fabric of social life at his or



her field locality, he or she also becomes an actor in the scenes comprising the daily lives of its people. The anthropologist and the informants engage with each other in a communicative arena, and where there are concurrences of interests, ideas and values, an anthropologist also becomes an active participant within the ongoing cultural process of the negotiation of meaning (Buckler 2007: 6, 22-23). Interactions that transpire between an anthropologist and an informant, just like interactions that transpire between any individuals (or even conversations with oneself during times of self-reflection) are negotiations in that they require acquiescence to a certain reality. This reality cannot belong to one party; it must belong to both (Crapanzano 1980). While to a certain extent, as Rapport (2010: 92) suggests, such a ‘reality’ could be regarded as a liminal sort of “contact zone” that exists between the mutual “classificatory cultural worlds” of the fieldworker and his or her informants, and that it is in this free space that “notions of the authentically human become visible and credible” (i.e. that one can have an understanding of the “indeterminateness of the individual human being’s inherent capacity to live thousands of lives” (84) were it not for the ‘limiting’ effect of particular sets of collectively negotiated cultural symbols, practices, concepts and values), I feel that my presence within the ethnographic text points less to a joint exercise in existential freedom between anthropologist and informant than to a true sharing of cultural values and ideas. Rather than stepping out of our ‘routine’ cultural modes, our joint narratives evidence areas of *concurrence* within our respective cultural states of being.

## ii. Primary Questions

Narratives provide a framework for how individuals experience the material world and how personal and local stories interconnect with larger-scale political, historical and social forces (Munson 1984; Cruikshank 1998; Abu Lughod 1993, 2006; Skultans 2008). Alžběta and Zdeňka live in adjacent buildings on Živá Street, thus they share the same neighbors, hear many of the same sounds, see many of the same sights and are privy to much of the same gossip on a daily basis. They have both lived in Skála for most or all of their lives. In fact, Alžběta and Zdeňka are blood relations.<sup>8</sup> Various facets of their personal biographies mirror each other – in particular, some of their experiences as daughters, wives and mothers. These parallel aspects of their experiences as Romani *women* not only derive from the persisting relevancy of certain cultural ideas, but also from the social and political realities of the communist and post-communist systems in which they have lived. As a result of their residential histories as well as their current spatial proximity, found within their individual life stories, their conversations with family members and neighbors, and their discussions with me as a somewhat ‘external’ woman in whom they could confide is the expression of a collective (and at times gendered) Skála-specific Romani narrative about topics such as family relations, friendship, romantic love and marriage, racism, employment and the educational system. This local, Skála-specific narrative often reflects their keen awareness of national dialogues about the contemporary (i.e. post-communist) experience of Roma in the Czech Republic, their widely-shared communist past, and the precariousness of their future as

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<sup>8</sup> Zdeňka’s maternal grandmother and Alžběta’s mother were sisters.

fully-fledged and non-excluded members of ‘majority’ society. These broader, public dialogues are found not only in forms of media, but also in academic discussions and publications that have gained media coverage. This body of work thus takes into consideration the ways in which Romani individuals perceive and make sense of their social worlds through their engagement with narrativity on the individual, familial and local levels, as well as through their cognizance of larger-scale dialogues about Romani-related subject matter. How do their narratives reflect the impact of larger-scale processes in both communist and post-communist society on the individual and family levels? How do they actively engage with dialogues (many times not of their own making) that portray Roma as being socially marginalized and ‘ghettoized’?

The spatial proximity of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s residences, the neighbors they have in common, the overlapping events they see and hear, and the communal narrative productions to which they contribute on a day-to-day basis should not obfuscate the significant differences which exist between these two individuals. As Abu Lughod (2006) warns us, when one generalizes from conversations and experiences with a number of different people in a given location, one glosses over important contradictions, conflicts of opinion and belief, and fluctuating motivations and circumstances. Alžběta and Zdeňka are not the same age, therefore as women they are at different stages of life. They are integral members of their respective nuclear families, but in terms of everyday life, they enjoy dissimilar freedom of movement and possess unequal amounts of time with which to dispose. They have different responsibilities and concerns. They have unequal levels of financial security. The visibility of their respective family units and the rhythms of their families’ daily tempos are not the same. The prominence and authority of men

within their families are dissimilar. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's children are adults and minors, respectively. The fidelity and regularity with which they can rely on family members is completely different. They have different resources within reach. In all aspects, Alžběta has more security, reliability and liberty in her life. With the idea in mind that gender is a lens through which processes of social, cultural, economic and political change in any society may be highlighted (Harding 1986, in Sokolová (2002: 62)), and in light of these circumstantial differences, how do the gendered dimensions of their narratives reflect these dissimilarities? How are their thoughts, opinions, roles and experiences *as women* congruent or incongruent?

### **iii. Family as the Core of Romani Social Life and the Location of Women's Agency**

Although the tapestry of Romani sociality is composed of several threads – individual agency, family affiliation, relations with Roma outside of the family unit, self-identification with a unique ethnocultural minority group standing apart from (but existing within) the Czech nation-state, and ongoing contact and interaction with members of the Czech majority population – it is the *rodina* (Cz. family) which is preeminent within the social nexus as both a functional and a conceptual entity. For Alžběta and Zdeňka, the lifeblood of Romani sociality flows to, from and within the *rodina*. The maintenance of family cohesiveness is of paramount importance to these women and they make strides to accomplish it though different means: attempts to exert control over the actions of their sons- and daughters-in-law, the allocation of marital advice to their children, a preference for parent-child friendships rather than friendships with non-family members, and the investment of temporal, financial, physical and mental

energy into children and grandchildren. While these women's lives do not begin and end at the boundaries of their families,<sup>9</sup> issues pertaining to the *rodina* are primary objects of discussion. The *rodina* is an entity into which there is great emotional expenditure.

In Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives, they attest to the primacy of the *rodina* within the tapestry of Romani social life both *dříve* (Cz. before) and *ted'* (Cz. now). Yet it is almost exclusively the era *dříve* – the 'golden age of communism' – to which various *idealized* threads of Romani sociality *in addition to the family* are cognitively allocated. This narrative is, roughly speaking, an inversion of mainstream practice; 'the present' is seen as a time of hardship and shortage which "with luck, prayer and effort [may] be overcome in the future", whereas 'the past' is a 'golden age' that one makes efforts to re-experience (Day et al. 1999: 2). *Dříve*, one could more reliably count on a fellow Rom to help out when the need arose. When one Rom was down on his luck, others would give help without being prompted. Due to the lack of a consumerist culture in Czechoslovakia, individuals weren't as preoccupied with elevating themselves above others in the name of status and wealth. Everyone was *rovný* (Cz. equal). Although all Roma were employed, the fact that they often worked the most physically demanding jobs as well as some of the longest hours not only translated into a public confirmation of their developed work ethic, but also into a default temporal dedication to their families outside of working hours. Just as individuals in a Romani family "stuck together" and "looked out for one another", Roma in Skála felt a sense of togetherness due to the retention of certain cultural traditions. Since Roma and Czechs worked side-by-side, Czech people were, in Alžběta's

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<sup>9</sup> In this thesis, *rodina* is to be understood in a more restrictive sense. One can generally understand Alžběta's *rodina* and Zdeňka's *rodina* as including their children, grandchildren, in-laws and spouses, because these are the individuals who participate in the day-to-day operation and functionality of the family.

words, “in the habit” of Roma and learned to appreciate and adopt some of these traditions. Reciprocally, Czechs socialized with Roma and paid visits to their homes. Czech friends trusted Romani friends and they engaged in patterns of loaning, borrowing and swapping. They made suggestions about how to make more economical choices and safeguard the financial futures of one’s children. Although prejudicial sentiments about ‘the *cigáni*’ existed, the fact that it was illegal to express them or act upon them meant that not only did Roma feel no fear for their personal safety, they also considered themselves to live in a relatively more equitable and fair society. *Dříve*, as long as one worked as arduously as possible, didn’t publicly express any wayward political opinions and consistently proved the ‘decency’ of their behavior (e.g. a strong work ethic, trustworthiness), there was no need to worry about having enough to eat, a place to live or access to an education for oneself or one’s children. Alžběta chose to summarize her recollections of living in a communist society in this way: “There was simply *jistota*” (Cz. certainty).

*Ted’* – the present day, but more generally speaking, the years since 1989 – is a time which Roma in Skála consider to be bereft of either certainty or equality. “*Ted,*” said Zdeňka on one occasion, “people say that you shouldn’t believe in your own shirt because you can’t be sure of what you really have.” Unlike *dříve*, Roma don’t “stick together”; if one encounters some sort of trouble, one cannot count on another Rom to lend a helping hand because he only cares about his own welfare. Alternatively, a Rom who has a genuine urge to assist another is unlikely to be able to provide much assistance due to his or her own serious financial or material limitations. There is reluctance to ask one’s neighbors for aid. People have a difficult time trusting one another: with money,

with secrets and with each another's spouses. There is a consensus that certain aspects of 'Romani culture' and 'Romani tradition' persist (e.g. food, music, language), but there is also the opinion that younger generations show little interest in them. Older and middle-aged Roma lament the "shameful" conduct of Romani youths: drug use, promiscuity, vulgarity and violence. Widespread unemployment among members of the Romani population means that they no longer have as much interpersonal contact with Czechs in the workplace. Czechs are no longer "in the habit" of Roma, and neither Czechs nor Roma seem to have much interest in getting to know each other. By and large, Romani children are segregated from Czech pupils due to their disproportional funneling into *speciální školy* (Cz. special schools). Czechs feel animosity towards Roma due to their frequent receipt of *sociální dávky* (Cz. social benefits), and Roma blame Czechs for teaching them all of the immorality and indecency in which Roma now engage.

Despite the dichotomous modes of thinking with which Alžběta and Zdeňka narratively interpret their lives, in both the past and present cases, they attest to the place of one's *rodina* as the core of one's social world. During the communist era, the number of people who made decisions in the public sphere was relatively small; it was the sphere in which an individual could be subject to pressure and coercion. Consequently, the private sphere (i.e. the family household) was seen as a place of relatively free agency, particularly for women who tended to have a more active role than men within these domestic spaces (Havelková 1993; True 2003). Taking into full consideration the existence of certain customs, ideas of morality and economic conditions characterizing life in the private sphere, here an individual was still at greater liberty to undertake actions that *may or may not* have re-created the same norms and values. Moreover,

because all citizens worked in the public sphere, time in the private sphere was relished and used to the fullest (Holy 1996). But what about in the contemporary Czech Republic? Alžběta and Zdeňka perceive the democratic society in which they live – a society where, within the limits of the law, people can say what they want and do what they like in the public sphere – as being overwhelmingly hostile, unfair and demeaning towards members of the Romani minority. Just as was the case under communism, a liberal democratic society is supposed to purport the concept of equality for all its citizens, yet in the ‘outside world’ (i.e. beyond the boundaries of one’s home or family), Roma feel the effects of discrimination – on the street, in shops, in school and even at the *sociální odbor* (Dvořáková 2009). In practice, the law is often not enforced equally for all members of society, and whether consciously or unconsciously, the dominant Czech majority often complicates fair access to different types of rights, power and resources for members of an ethnic minority group which was not influential at the time when national identity was being conceptualized (Laubeová 2000). Inequities in the public spheres of education and employment naturally impact quality of life in the home. Yet, even in spite of the differences between Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s lives in terms of their finances, the reliability of their family members, their leisure time and their freedom of movement, within the private sphere they both possess relatively more opportunity to undertake actions and develop strategies which they consider to serve their interests. Whilst keeping in mind that all persons have the ability to determine their own interests and goals, their perceptions of what exactly these interests *are*, and the social, cultural, historical and economic factors that influence these processes, are key issues that are addressed within this thesis.



I propose that the past and present-day supremacy of the family in the web of Romani social life is linked to the matter of ensuring and enacting one's individual agency – one's ability to affect one's social world through the use, manipulation and creation of culture (McClusky 2001). Wimmer's theory of *cultural compromise* – a reformulation of the culture concept that aims to strike a happy medium between traditionally reifying ideas of culture and postmodern discourse theories – provides a way to describe how such processes operate. Wimmer's reformulation of culture is built upon a three-pronged approach which takes into consideration: 1) the internalized culture of an individual as a cognitive prerequisite for the unstable and ongoing process of the negotiation of meaning (Bourdieu's *habitus*), 2) processes of collective negotiation through which actors reach a consensus – a cultural compromise – “over the validity of norms, classifications and patterns of interpretation that lasts beyond the open process of its production” (ibid: 29), and 3) the emergence of cultural markers which, as a consequence of cultural compromise, delineate and reinforce boundaries between insiders and outsiders – whether these boundaries are framed as national, ethnic, racial or classed (ibid; Brubaker 2004). An individual's consent to the normative claims predominating his or her social world, balanced by the achievement of his or her own perceived strategic interests (tailored to the individual's own unique worldview), is the negotiation of cultural meaning upon which a compromise is based.

For Alžběta and Zdeňka, investment into their children and grandchildren is a means by which to try to increase the likelihood of being looked after in their older years; it is a way to alleviate feelings of uncertainty and maintain a sense of optimism about the years to come. Funneling monetary and emotional resources into one's children is seen as

way to increase a family's future social mobility. Moreover, they demonstrate a keen awareness of the vital importance of education to their children's and grandchildren's future success in the job market. Crucially, if the younger generations of their families reach a certain rank in the educational and professional spheres of their social worlds, Alžběta's and Zdeňka's commitment to their children's attainment of certain normative 'pillars' of success is proven to those people to whom they wish to demonstrate this interest. Although Alžběta and Zdeňka consider roadblocks against the educational and socioeconomic advancement of Roma to be endemic within post-communist Czech society, their children and grandchildren are regarded as potential vehicles towards ascension.

From a parental point of view, they approach their female children in particular as 'extensions of the self' by which higher levels of educational achievement, in addition to monetary independence from men, can be realized. Differently, male children are often compared to their fathers; neither Alžběta nor Zdeňka want their sons "to be like" or "to become" their husbands due to their past disappointment in their spouses' conduct, including their engagement in domestic violence, alcoholism, adultery and parental neglect. Both male and female children are seen as agents of change who have the potential to 'right the wrongs' or 'improve upon' the actions and achievements of their mothers and fathers.

Despite their belief that their children are vehicles for the realization of their own unfulfilled goals, the rectification of disappointments they experienced in the past and the enhancement of the family's social mobility, they also continue to place certain cultural expectations on their children which increase the likelihood of the reoccurrence of other

difficult circumstances that they have experienced in their own lives (e.g. unhappy marriages). Why do they retain and reinforce the importance of such values in subsequent generations? I propose that certain persisting norms, ideas and beliefs, although in some cases complicating to the realization of the aforementioned goals, continue to be of cultural significance to these women because of their ongoing relevancy within the collective communicative spheres that they participate in on a daily basis. Seemingly contradictory cultural values and social actions persist because in some way (whether it be psychological, emotional or material) they are concurrently perceived as being rewarding to the individuals involved. What an ethnographer perceives as discrepancy – for example between thought and action – can be experienced by his or her informants as an ability “to act in the world in situations where two contradictory options are perceived as equally important and necessary” (Engebriksen 2007:16); whether or not the actors involved consciously view such situations with uncertainty, the occurrence of incongruity points to ambiguity at the base of these interactions (ibid: 14). The balancing act between having one’s worldview accepted as valid by those individuals with whom one has ongoing contact, and also taking action to achieve one’s own interests, is the scenario with which we approach Alžběta’s and Věra’s narratives.

In light of the importance of the family (and narratives about the family) to these women’s social lives, as well as its relatedness to their realization of individual agency, I wish to make clear that unlike other notable Romani ethnographers (e.g. Stewart 1997, Gay y Blasco 1999), I do not approach my informants or their individual narratives as necessarily being exemplary of a common cultural approach to local Romani social life. The lens of this thesis’ ethnography is set on *more* of a micro-level than Lemon’s (2000)

ethnography of various Romani subgroups in post-Soviet Russia, in which she directs her primary focus towards the (often gendered) performances of Romani individuals, as well as onto her conversations and interviews with her informants, as a way to move beyond oppositions between the intergroup relations of ‘the Roma’ and ‘the *gádže*’ and instead investigate Romani agency in everyday social life. By taking into account Soviet and post-Soviet Russian ‘metadiscourse’ about the Roma as a people “without history” who are living in an “eternal present” (3), and investigating the ways that such ethnic stereotypes have *variously* affected the self-consciousness of Romani individuals through their internalization and rejection of (or indifference to) such hegemonic public images, Lemon shows that while what is ‘authentically Romani’ is performed by individuals on a daily basis, the perceived ‘authenticity’ of the behavior itself derives from its connection to various sorts of social memory (21).

Rather than being ‘representative’ of ‘the Czech Romani woman’s experience’, Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives are each unique *representations* of Romani sociality because they serve as empirical examples of processes of negotiation, consent and boundary marking that constitute the culture concept, and because they speak to how macrolevel social phenomena in communist and post-communist times have been *similarly* and *differently* realized on the family and individual levels. Nevertheless, it is also the unique nature of the *shared* aspects of their individual narratives – particularly those involving notions of temporality, family relations, intra-group Romani cohesiveness, and cultural boundaries between Roma and *gádže*’ – which makes this study an important contribution to Romani ethnography. Notably, the ‘present-time’ orientation which is characteristic of many discussions about Czech or European Roma

(e.g. in terms of Oscar Lewis' Culture of Poverty theory) does not easily adhere to descriptions of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's sociality; it is much more complex. The primacy of the family to these women isn't simply a continuation of the paradigm of 'the importance of the Romani family' mentioned within most ethnographies, in which a Rom's behavior is markedly non-individualistic and is completely dictated by his position within the family and his family's position within the greater local Romani population (Jakoubek 2004; Jakoubek and Hirt 2004; Hirt and Jakoubek 2006); here, the family's salience is connected to the realization of individual agency and is characterized by its alignment with certain 'normative' Czech cultural values, such as educational achievement and long-term financial and family planning. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's cognitive allocation of an idealized Romani sociality to the communist past – a time, which from the perspective of the present day, is interpreted as a time of relative equality, certainty and psychological security – is not only premised upon a greater level of social cohesion among the local Romani population, but also upon more social contact *between Romani and Czech* individuals. Here also the classic Roma vs. *gádže* binary is insufficient. Interestingly, Alžběta and Zdeňka perceive social life in communist Czechoslovakia, a period of time that was characterized by the cultural assimilation, population dispersal and even the coercive sterilization of Romani women, as the era in which all aspects of Romani culture and sociality were relatively more 'authentic'.

The intricacies inherent to this thesis' investigation of Romani sociality revolve around the question of how, why, when and where *ethnicity becomes salient*. During daily life, Czech and Romani individuals use narrative as a way to make sense of their surrounding sociocultural environments. Since social life includes the collective

negotiation of what is culturally significant, many classificatory cognitive processes include the assignment of subjective value and emotion to various stimuli – objects, images, sounds, words and ideas. Depending on time and context, cultural and social ‘cues’ may be variously coded as being representative of national, racial, class or ethnic difference. In the Czech Republic, ethnic ‘cues’ tend to be particularly preponderant in social situations in which Romani and Czech individuals primarily interpret each other in terms of their perceived group memberships – in other words, during interactions when various stimuli demonstrated by the *individuals* involved are perceived as being traits that are characteristic of ‘the Roma’ or ‘the Czechs’ (and are therefore interpreted as ethnic ‘cues’). During processes of social boundary marking, Romani and Czech individuals not only tend to make sense of *each other* through the creation of ethnically based narratives, but they also make sense of *themselves* in this way. There are times when Romani individuals place themselves into ethnic narratives of *their own making*, but many times, they find themselves ‘trapped’ into ethnic narratives and ethnic ‘discourses’ which are *not of their own making*. The salience of ethnicity during processes of social categorization and classification in Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s daily lives is therefore a key issue which will be explored throughout the subsequent chapters.

### **III. Introducing the Informants and Description of the Field Site**

#### **i. Meetings with My ‘Mothers’**

As I have already impressed upon, my two primary interlocutors, Alžběta Procházková and Zdeňka Kopecká are Romani women who maintain completely different daily patterns and enjoy unequal amounts of personal freedom and autonomy

due to their respective financial statuses, family compositions and past histories. The initiation of my relationships with these women occurred several months apart and under very different conditions. My ‘work’ with them (i.e. sitting down with them and recording their thoughts and recollections about life in a semi-structured manner) did not proceed under the same conditions, and they certainly had different feelings about engaging in the project as well as distinct motivations for agreeing to participate. Although I conversed at length with both women about their lives throughout my time in the field, the commencement of our recording sessions only took place during the last four months of my stay. The ‘terms of agreement’ for the collection of their histories were tremendously influenced by these women’s respective life circumstances, daily schedules, and the nature of our interactions in the months leading up to the recording sessions.

From the outset, Alžběta clearly had her family in mind as the primary topic of my thesis, although I did not recognize this until I had been in the field for some months. During a pilot research trip in April 2007, I was put into contact with Alžběta through a friend in Prague who has long been active in circles concerned with Romani rights and advocacy. At this point in time, Alžběta had not yet retired from her job as a social worker in Prague, so my friend Blanche and I met with Alžběta in her office in the city quarter of Žižkov. With Blanche serving as a translator,<sup>10</sup> I explained that I was not interested in doing research about Roma living in a Czech ‘ghetto’ or a Slovakian *osada* (Cz. settlement) as had been the prevalent tendency among researchers in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. Instead, I wanted to do my fieldwork in a town where there

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<sup>10</sup> During the duration of my field research in Skála, I always spoke Czech with my interlocutors and I never used the assistance of a translator.

would be somewhat of a spectrum of social and economic positions characterizing the Romani populace. At that time, my proposed project was to examine the dynamics of female adolescent Romani peer groups.

Alžběta was warm and enthusiastic about the idea of my project. With wide eyes, she leaned in as she listened to Blanche's translations of her words and excitedly threw any English words she knew into her Czech speech. Using every ounce of her diminutive figure, with lots of gesticulation she described the topography of the town. She said that Skála's Romani population lived predominately in one area, which was set apart from the town square and the majority of Czech dwellers by steep karst cliffs. Nevertheless, there were also Czechs living side-by-side with Roma in this lowland area. She said that not only could she offer me a place to live within her building, she could also introduce me to lots of Roma because of the harmonious and close-knit feel of the neighborhood. She said that a spectrum of socioeconomic situations characterized the Romani population in Skála; the neighborhood was no ghetto. She felt that my sudden appearance in town would not be regarded with much suspicion by other Roma because my presence could be explained away by my involvement with their community center. "We've had lots of foreigners visit us before. People will notice you, but they won't think about it too much."

Despite the fact that I had hoped to initiate my fieldwork immediately after my arrival in the Czech Republic, there had been a significant deal of miscommunication about the readiness of my accommodation in Skála. Seven months after my first meeting with Alžběta and a few days after disembarking in Prague, I met her eldest daughter Věra and her son-in-law Tomáš in one of the city's famous coffee houses. I was immediately



struck by their ‘odd couple’ quality. Věra carried herself cheerfully yet authoritatively; Tomáš was meek and subdued. Věra was energetic; Tomáš looked exhausted. Věra was dressed in sleek trousers, a blouse, heels and a good deal of gold jewelry; Tomáš was wearing jeans, a leather jacket, and trainers. Věra’s hair had obviously been paid a good deal of attention; it was crimped and had been treated with dye that gave it a purplish-red hue. In contrast, some dwindling tufts of hair awkwardly flopped over on the crown of Tomáš’s head. As Věra laughed and eagerly scooped up the whipped cream that had descended to the bottom of her glass, Tomáš fidgeted in his chair and alternated between looking at the decorative chandeliers and speaking in nearly inaudible tones to his wife. As I was mentally taking in all of these visual disparities, she explained that indeed there *was* an apartment that could be occupied – that was much was accurate – but that it required a significant amount of refurbishment and they would need some time to make it livable. Moreover, Christmas was coming up and it would be difficult to work on it during that time. I said that I was more than willing to rent a spare room in Skála because I didn’t have many things with me. Moreover, it would also help me to improve my Czech if I distanced myself from Prague and all of its English speakers. Tomáš looked bashful, and Věra shook her head and resisted. “No, in Skála it isn’t like it is in London. People don’t have spare rooms that they rent out. Anyway, *u nás*, we wouldn’t have a single woman living with us.” I asked why. She shrugged her shoulders. “It’s our *mentalita*.”<sup>11</sup> I reluctantly reconciled myself to bide my time in Prague for the coming weeks.

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<sup>11</sup> *U nás* can mean several things based on the context in which it is used. It can mean “in our country”, “in our family” and “at our house/apartment” (just to cite a few examples). In this case, *u nás* means “with us Roma”. During my time in Skála, Alžběta often used *u nás* as a way to set up comparisons between Romani and Czech ways of doing things, such as incongruent approaches towards child rearing and

Two months later the flat was ready – or so I thought. I excitedly made the trek to Alžběta’s *panelák*<sup>12</sup> apartment on the outskirts of Prague to iron out the details of the long-awaited bus journey to Skála. In the course of my hour-long visit, the type of girlish camaraderie *and* serious conversational intimacy that would come to characterize most of my one-on-one interactions with Alžběta was firmly established. Following her inquiries, not only did I fully brief her on my romantic history with the opposite sex, she gave me an overview of her strained relationships with her husband Aleš and her son Alexandr. She playfully mimicked my body language and hand movements when I received an unexpected phone call from my mother and was speaking in English. Despite what I perceived to be rather quick efforts towards familiarity on Alžběta’s part, even I was taken aback when, as I put on my coat and gathered my things up on my way out of her apartment, she unexpectedly handed me a pair of tweezers, leaned in towards me, and asked me to pluck out any aberrant hairs that were growing from her chin. Throughout the many months I spent in Skála, this *mélange* of emotions – curiosity, playfulness, austerity, pensiveness and a less reserved sense of personal space – did not change. Alžběta’s interest in talking about relationships with members of the opposite sex, as well as her disappointment with the conduct of her son, heralded the beginning of an ongoing thematic exchange that would link most of our future conversations.

The rhetorical preservation of certain themes, Crapanzano (1980:14) notes in relation to his extended conversational engagement with the Moroccan tile maker Tuhami, was “symbolic of our desire to maintain [...] mutual self-recognition”. Alžběta

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gendered domestic roles. Within these explanations, the Romani *mentalita* was often offered as a summary explanation for why Roma tend to like things one way and Czechs another way.

<sup>12</sup> *Panelák* is a colloquial term used in the Czech and Slovak Republics for a building made out of pre-fabricated concrete. It is derived from *panelový dům* (Cz.)/*dom* (Sk.), meaning “panel house”. Such constructions are found elsewhere throughout the Soviet Bloc.

would often start off our visits by relating to me her latest frustrations with her son or her most recent dramas with her boyfriends Jiří and Václav; sometimes it was as if our conversations had been paused by a span of ten minutes rather than a few days. Similarly, the conversational refrains to which Zdeňka and I most often returned had to do with her anger and humiliation over Erika's "shameful" public behavior, her concerns about being able to adequately provide for her four younger children, and the profound emotional pain and humiliation she continued to experience due to her husband's adulterous behavior and parental neglect. As wives and mothers, and simply as human beings, Alžběta's and Zdeňka's continual return to these themes reveals that gaining a sense of comprehension of the various intricacies, negotiations, joys and hurts that are intrinsic to both romantic and family relationships was of utmost importance to them. They wanted to know *why*, despite their best intentions and energies, their spouses had caused them physical harm and mental trauma. They wanted to understand *why* their children continued to make what they considered to be bad life choices. Alžběta and Zdeňka were bereft of answers to these questions, and in me they not only saw a listening ear, but perhaps a potentially unique source of knowledge and alternative perspectives on life due to our tangibly different life backgrounds.

Yet, their interest alone would not provide adequate explanation for our joint return to these topics of conversation. As Crapanzano posits, its occurrence is a joint venture. Female anthropologists frequently find themselves positioned in the daughter role in relation to the people with whom they spend their time during fieldwork (Behar 1993). During especially warmhearted conversations, Alžběta and Zdeňka both declared that I was "like a daughter" or a "special daughter" to them. At the initiation point of my

field research, I was a twenty-four-year-old young woman. Just as would be the case in my adopted home of London or in my birthplace of Cincinnati, Ohio, during certain moments of day-to-day life in Skála, I would take on various personas or would adopt particular ‘masks’ as a given situation compelled me to do. Some examples stand out more than others because of their deliberateness: my efforts to seem ‘tough’ in front of rowdy teenage boys when I was a volunteer English teacher in the *speciální škola*, my wish to appear unfazed by the catcalls Romani men gave me when I walked by them on Živá Street, or my desire to demonstrate my academic capabilities when I was having conversations with Czech educators. A performance, according to Goffman’s (1990: 26-27) definition, may be described as “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”. At times, a performer may “act in a thoroughly *calculating* manner, expressing himself in a given way solely in order to give the kind of impression to others that is likely to evoke from them a specific response he is concerned to obtain”, but at other times, the performer may be “calculating in his activity but will be relatively *unaware* that this is the case” (ibid: 17).<sup>13</sup> In either situation, when an individual plays the same part to the same audience on multiple occasions, a social relationship is likely to develop.

Alžběta and Zdeňka always spoke to me as a unique individual, making mental notes of my likes and dislikes, stories about my childhood that they found interesting or unusual, and anecdotes that I told them about my friends in London or different family members in the States. Still, their conversational proclivities show that in many cases they were approaching me ‘as a woman’, and more specifically as a younger woman.

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<sup>13</sup> Italicized emphasis is mine.

While I did not consciously try to paint myself as being anything other than what I really considered myself to be at the time, I also did not portray myself as anything other than I felt comfortable and natural portraying myself as in their presence. This is an important distinction. Judith Butler famously speaks of one's gender as an ongoing, repetitive performance that is "at once a reenactment and re-experiencing of a set of social meanings already established... It is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization" (Butler 2006: 191). Leaving aside the primary thrust of Butler's argumentation – that an individual's gender performance proceeds within the operational frame of a dominant heterosexual society which reinforces normative modes of masculinity and femininity - what I wish to take away from her conceptualization of gender is the notion that performance is rooted in a web based on one's prior social and cultural habituation and one's current environmental and contextual circumstances. While in Alžběta's and Zdeňka's eyes, my 'outsider' position made me both more approachable as a confidant and more interesting as a potential source of unique perspectives on certain events that were happening in their lives, my level of comfort in 'being myself' – in not feeling compelled to engage in some sort of affectation whilst in their company – entails that 'as a woman', I was positioned within a larger social and cultural web that was not without some overlap with those of Alžběta and Zdeňka. Our interactions were not premised upon our self-elected disassociation from our regular 'cultural states of being' but from points of mutual comprehension (and often concurrence) within our respective worldviews and belief systems.

Much as Marjorie Shostak describes how she presented herself in relation to the !Kung women with whom she worked in Botswana, with Alžběta and Zdeňka, my

performance can be well described as that of a “girl-woman” who was “struggling with the issues of love, [...] sexuality, work and identity” (1981: 6). If I had not seen from the start that these topics of conversation were of particular interest to Alžběta and Zdeňka, I would not have discussed them at as high an incidence or with as much candor as I ultimately wound up doing. Indeed, I probably would not have discussed them at all out of fear that I might offend their sensibilities. Yet, on the subjects of men, love, sex, marriage and children, Alžběta and Zdeňka considered themselves to have a lot of advice to impart to me due their own ups and downs with respect to these sectors of life. I venture to say that they initiated discussions with me on these topics because they reasoned that, as a woman, *shouldn't* I enjoy talking about such things? I recognized their inclination, therefore I engaged with them on these subjects. After much joking about men on one occasion, Věra laughed and told me, “You have your school tutors in London, but my mother is your tutor in life!” In the social relationships that developed between us, I was a daughter that Alžběta and Zdeňka felt needed to be ‘instructed’ about things. In this way, much as Behar (1993:7) concludes about her own relationship with her older female informant Esperanza, my status as a “fictive kin” member “both highlighted and formalized the contradictions of the [...] differences between us.” On the other hand, I suggest that it was *because* of my different ethnic, cultural, national and educational background in relation to these women that they considered me to be someone who could also ‘instruct’ them about *their* male/female and parent-child relationships.

The immediate eagerness that Zdeňka and Alžběta demonstrated for divulging secrets and shedding the ‘masks’ they felt compelled to wear in front of their children,

relatives and neighbors was a major inducement for them to seek out my company; they were no less apt to don personas and engage in performance than I was. Simmel (1950: 403-404) writes that the stranger “often receives the most surprising openness – confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person”. While I certainly was not a stranger, my unique position – as a person existing somewhat outside the fray of their day-to-day lives, my proficiency as a Czech speaker who could understand and communicate a great deal but whose non-native skill level made me somewhat less threatening, and their knowledge that my presence in Skála would ultimately come to an end – contributed to the similar place I occupied in both of their lives. I was a ‘safe’ person who was not a risk to their desire for discretion yet who was convenient for the fulfillment of their yearning for human companionship without ‘pretence’ – or at least without the same types of image maintenance that their interactions with neighbors and family members involved. The extent to which Alžběta in particular assumed these masks during her daily life was significant. As she once so matter-of-factly told me, “I am a *herečka* (Cz. actress). No one knows the real me. No one knows that I am unhappy – not even my children.”

The nature of my fieldwork conditions means that this study is more or less focused on individual *women* and their perceptions of social life. Zdeňka and Alžběta are women, *they* spoke to me ‘as women’, they addressed *me* ‘as a woman’, and they were the most accessible individuals to me at my fieldwork locale. For varying reasons I often felt limited in building an easy sense of rapport with men in Skála’s Romani population. If one accepts a minimal definition of feminism to be a “concern with women’s conditions

and with the political, economic, social and cultural implications of systems of gender for them” (Abu Lughod 1993: 4), then this thesis could also be labeled as being a feminist ethnography. I did not consider it as such during much of its configuration because although the ethnographic material certainly demonstrates that Alžběta and Zdeňka regard certain cultural ideas about gender roles and gendered behavior as being inequitable or out-dated, and as a result they try to challenge or resist them on a routine basis, its content does not involve women’s collective and organized resistance to gender inequality in its various guises. In addition, while the narratives that this thesis is based upon are framed by Romani women’s focus on particular themes, it doesn’t mean that issues concerning men are excluded from the text. Indeed, they could not be excluded because the primacy of the family in Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s social realities, and its consequent discussion within their individual narratives, precludes this possibility. These women largely define themselves in terms of their families, and because matters that are important to their husbands, sons and sons-in-law are also matters that are important to them, male interest is manifested within their narratives.

The individual agency which they strive to enact within their families, as well as their common utilization of ‘the narrative *of* the family’ as a form of agency in itself, is evidence of the primarily ‘collectivist’ nature of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s social lives. Their family members are arbiters of what is permissible, desirable and unthinkable and are therefore a key motivating force that drives and directs their behavior. These Romani women develop their particular sense of ‘I’ as individuals in ‘we’ relationships, (Buckler 2007: 110), and their actions constitute a source of pride and shame for their family as a total unit. To a certain extent, however, the obvious level of enjoyment that Alžběta and



Zdeňka derive from engaging in certain clandestine behaviors (e.g. their involvement with men unbeknownst to their husbands or children, smoking), as well as from keeping (and eventually divulging) secrets related to these activities, shows that that they view themselves as individual agents who do not want to be completely beholden to the opinions and wishes of their family members. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's social relationships and behaviors are influenced to a greater extent by those with whom they are linked in traditional role relations than are the relationships and behaviors of people who live in so-called 'individualistic' societies (Ross and Nisbett 1991), but the fact that Alžběta and Zdeňka are compelled to shroud themselves in so much secrecy means that the self-realization of *certain* aspects of their 'individuality' – the independent seats of consciousness and distinctive internal networks of meaning that guide interpretation and action (Rapport 1992) – occurs within a sphere that is both physically and mentally separate from the family. They see their behavior as being dependent *not only* on social context but also on the individual demeanors and personalities with which they were born. The primacy of the family within these women's social worlds does not prevent them from also seeing themselves as beings who are important and worthy of self-reflection and purposeful contemplation. Contrary to how Jakoubek (2004: 119) describes the relationship between the Romani individual and his or her family in the Slovakian Romani *osada*, Alžběta and Zdeňka do not “gain personal respect and unique identity *only* (and *solely*) as part of [the] family” (118).<sup>14</sup> Their 'identity' isn't defined *only* in terms of their position in the family network.

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<sup>14</sup> Translated from Czech. Emphasis mine.

Their stories and life histories might not be tales of Romani women's collaborative protest against social phenomena that have impacted them on a personal basis, but Zdeňka's and Alžběta's narratives do betray their individual efforts and wishes to make changes in their lives. They are women who make strides to enact individual agency within the contextual capabilities that characterize their life circumstances at a given point in time. Although the agency I discuss is Alžběta's and Zdeňka's own, the time of its fruition is often oriented towards the future rather than the present-day because often their children are the vehicles by which they intend for the change to be actualized. A human being is a "strategically competent actor" (Wimmer 1995, 2002: 27), and despite one's natural possession of certain habitual dispositions due to one's existence within a given sociocultural environment, one still has the ability to critically evaluate one's own situation and create life strategies which may or may not be at odds with certain cultural patterns. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's opinions about their individual aims and interests are contingent upon their respective positions within a sociocultural environment, but they do not blindly fill the roles that society and culture design. They do not necessarily desire only what their social positions permit them to have (Rose 1996: 152 and Rapport 2003: 42, cited in Buckler 2007: 145).

## **ii. Entrance into Skála**

My introduction to a number of the town's Romani residents, as well as the solidification of my connection to the Procházka family, occurred under such grand, stereotypical, "Self versus Other" circumstances that, from my perspective, it almost bordered on the surreal. On the very day I arrived in Skála, Alžběta's husband Aleš

passed away. In fact, he had passed away in the early hours of the morning when Alžběta and I were in transit between Prague and Skála, but her children and grandchildren only broke the news to her after I had been dropped off and left to unpack my suitcases in my temporary accommodation in a room adjacent to the community center's office. Several hours later, a few of Alžběta's grandchildren made several trips through the room to get glasses, dishes, pots and pans out of storage. I asked them what was going on, but I couldn't yet understand their rapid speech, therefore I remained totally oblivious to what was going on. In the middle of the night, I was awakened by cries of a wailing and screaming man in the hallway. Having already heard stories from Blanche about Alžběta's alcoholic and physically abusive husband, and having witnessed an argumentative phone conversation between Alžběta and her husband the day before when I had been at her flat in Prague, I figured that the cries were coming from him. The following morning, this assumption was bolstered in my mind when I opened the office door to find Alžběta standing before me, looking exhausted and dabbing at bloodshot and tear-filled eyes. "*Natašo*, I apologize that I didn't come back to check on you last night, but my husband..." Thinking I already understood everything, I cut her off and said, "Don't worry about it!" Looking slightly relieved, Alžběta said, "Come up to my place tonight, yes? Everyone will be upstairs and there will be food."

It was only after speaking with Věra later that afternoon that I finally grasped what had happened. Deeply embarrassed about not realizing the gravity of what had occurred, that evening I ran upstairs and headlong into the center of Alžběta's living room, exclaiming, "I'm very, very sorry! I didn't understand that your husband died! I thought –" I cut myself off due to the sudden drop in volume in the room. As I scanned my

surroundings, I saw that approximately forty pairs of eyes were squarely set on me. Romani men young and old were sitting around a long table on the left side of the room. Romani women were sitting around a similar table and on a sofa in the center of the living room. Children and other extraneous or less easily classified individuals were located around a small table in the kitchen. All the tables were spilling over with beer, wine and liquor bottles, soda, crisps and nuts, *chlebičky* (Cz. small sandwiches), trays of deli meat and sausages, and various desserts. Wishing to escape the quizzical faces looking in my direction, I quickly walked over to Alžběta and her children and explained my lapse in comprehension.

During that evening and the next few evenings that followed, my optimism about my prospective fieldwork soared. The conviviality and harmonious air characterizing Aleš's *vatra* (Rom. gathering) led me to believe that not only did the Procházkas have good relations with their Romani neighbors on Živá Street, but that these Roma would be happy and willing to spend time with me in the future. Several individuals had no reservations about approaching me and asking me questions about my proposed work in Skála, and based on my summary, some individuals stated that Skála was the right place for me to be. Other people said that Skála was not much different than any other place and that all Roma live in ghettos. Some individuals expressed that the poverty and squalor associated with Slovakian settlements was unlike anything they had ever encountered. Others said that they couldn't say much about Roma in Slovakia because they had no first-hand experience of it.

Over the next few months, I spent many evening hours in Alžběta's flat with her middle-aged daughters Věra and Ludmila, her son Alex (in his early thirties), her

grandchildren (usually Věra's eighteen-year-old daughter Světlana and Alex's fourteen-year-old son Ruda), her sons-in-law Jakub and Tomáš, and Alžběta herself. At first, I was somewhat torn about how much I should encroach upon their space and their lives given their recent trauma. I felt that I was receiving no consistent signals from any member of the Procházka family on that note. Alžběta was in the depths of the grieving process, although her visible anguish was minor in comparison to her daughters. Alžběta always *told* me to come up and visit her, but there were several times when I did, and in addition to being relatively uncommunicative, she gave me signs that I interpreted as meaning that she would rather be left alone.<sup>15</sup> Věra and Ludmila both had to return to their teaching jobs the weekend after their father's funeral, and although I saw them in the community center office in the afternoon hours, they were either busy with paperwork or disciplining children and therefore were not in the most relaxed of moods. Sometimes they would be warm and respond to my prompts to chat, while other times they would avoid making eye contact with me when I went into the office to say hello. As relatively new acquaintances, I did not know how to best interpret their vacillations in mood.

During the evenings in the weeks directly following their father's death, Věra and Ludmila spent their time upstairs with their mother and their children. As time wore on however, they often went directly to their own homes after the community center closed for the day (both a five minute walk from Alžběta's building); they did not invite me to visit them in their own households. The member of the family who seemed most keen for me to visit Alžběta's apartment in the weeks directly after Aleš's death was Alex, but due to the

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Alžběta sometimes walked out of the room when I was in the middle of a sentence. I could never figure out if Alžběta did this in order to indicate that she didn't particularly want my company at that particular moment in time, or if her system of etiquette was simply different than mine, and therefore this was not intended as a slight.

fact that Alžběta had already informed me that she and her son did not have the most steady of relationships, as well as the fact that at that time, I was the recipient of Alex's unwanted and overt flirtations,<sup>16</sup> I was hesitant to accept his invitations to visit lest he get the wrong impression.

It was difficult to get to know people *outside* of the Procházka family as well. In addition to Alžběta's subtlety-expressed unwillingness to introduce me to other Roma and her disinterest in socializing with Romani people outside of her family, the open inquisitiveness that many Roma demonstrated towards me at Aleš's *vatra* (which was apparently facilitated by a significant amount of alcohol consumption) was primarily restricted to that event. Individuals I recognized from the *vatra* typically acknowledged me with a smile and an informal greeting like *ahoj* or *čau*<sup>17</sup>. If I was lucky enough to bump into people on the street, they truncated conversations at a relatively preliminary level ("Where do you live? Where are you going? What are you doing?). Oftentimes, the majority of interest in conversing with me came from male individuals, and their incentives for engaging with me were clear enough that I felt fairly uncomfortable about continuing the dialogue ("Are you single? Do you have children? Where do you live? You're good-looking. Do you want to go for a drink?").<sup>18</sup> There is noticeable gender segregation

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<sup>16</sup> Alexandr restricted his advances to times when his sisters and mother would not see it, but had no qualms about being forward in front of his male friends.

<sup>17</sup> I always tried to greet people with the more formal *Dobry den* (Cz. Good Day), yet most of the Romani people I bumped into replied with less formal greetings. I remembered which individuals greeted me in which ways, and then I stuck to their preference. I always erred on the side of caution and used the more formal form of the 2<sup>nd</sup> person (*vy*) instead of the more familiar *ty*. Within a single meeting, once the person with whom I was conversing switched to the less formal *ty*, I then felt comfortable to follow suit.

<sup>18</sup> My discomfort was not just of the kind that women tend to naturally feel when men with whom they are not already acquainted make 'positive' comments about their physical appearance or ask them out on dates as they walk along the street (i.e. a sense of intrusion). I was also concerned about the women these men were likely married to, dating, or otherwise romantically attached to in some way. I didn't wish to accidentally anger any women who might misunderstand if they saw their partners speaking with me.

between men and women during social activities, and many of my brief interactions with men on the street were characterized by their sexually suggestive comments.

During the winter months, the isolated feel of Živá Street could become downright comatose due to the inhospitable temperatures. When the mucky river that ran along it was frozen, the absence of rushing water produced a deafening silence. The river was a popular dumping ground for, of all possible things, broken baby strollers and prams, and during these particularly cold times, their mangled wheels and joints protruded awkwardly out of the river's icy surface.

I often wondered if the town's official population of 8,000 could possibly be correct because I generally saw the same set of Czech individuals doing their shopping in town day after day; the set of familiar faces changed based on the time of day I went out (morning time pensioners; middle-aged and young adult working people during lunch hour; teenagers, children and their parents when school had let out; mothers with non-school aged children all throughout the day). Although members of the Romani population do not only reside on Živá Street, the majority of Romani families call it their home. Rampant unemployment<sup>19</sup> and poor school attendance are reflected in the overall lack of movement along the street during the colder months; people naturally prefer to stay inside. Employed individuals leave for work before sunrise and usually return home as it is getting dark. In the evenings, the only tangible signs of life along the street are the playful lights of people's television screens streaking through their naked windows. Due to the fact that Živá Street runs parallel to the North-South axis of town, sporadic street noise mostly emanates from

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<sup>19</sup> The social workers with whom I spoke confirmed that the vast majority of Roma in Skála are recipients of *sociální dávky*.

semi-trucks, police cars and fire brigades that use the road as a quick way to get from point A to point B without being slowed down by pedestrians in the town square.

Živá Street's demarcation from the majority of Skála's Czech population is not just a geographical separation. While one can *objectively* distinguish the town *nahoře* (Cz. above) from Živá Street *dole* (Cz. below), these terms carry subjective meaning because the karst cliffs also act as an ethnic and class-based landmark for Skála's citizens. When discussing the part of town *dole*, local Czechs communicate that they are speaking about the run-down area<sup>20</sup> where the *cigáni* or *černoši* (Cz. Blacks) live. Outside of Skála, the very mention of Živá Street triggers a similar understanding. For example, upon hearing my address, Czech teenagers at a vocational school in the neighboring town of Hráz identified Živá Street as being *černý* (Cz. black) and Skála as a whole to be *cigánský*. With much sympathy, one of the Czech teachers at this school suggested to me that it must be quite unpleasant to have my accommodation on Živá Street since children there "like to set fire to things". If estimates that Roma constitute approximately 2% of the total Czech national population are correct (Dluhošová et al. 2007: 5), given that it is projected that 10% of Skála's population is Romani, its regional reputation as a "Gypsy town" or a place where there are "lots of blacks" is not surprising. The 'annoyances' of living with *cigáni* were a common topic over which I heard Czechs commiserating during their daily shopping trips, while on local buses and in the work place. These easily overheard conversations were only slightly less harsh than anonymous complaints posted on the town's online discussion forum, where participants engaged in fear mongering over the "invasion" of "large groups of Gypsies from Slovakia", Gypsies with "expensive tracksuits" and "knives and baseball bats" who

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<sup>20</sup> In fact, the external appearance of many of the buildings inhabited by Roma on Živá Street was just as shabby as many of the buildings *nahoře* (except for those in the immediate vicinity of the town square).



“roam around town at night in packs” and who “loiter outside the disco and get into fist fights”, and most often about “lazy” and unemployed Gypsies who milk the welfare system so that they can squander their social benefits on “alcohol and cigarettes instead of food for their children”.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, my first several months in Skála proceeded in much the following way: in the mornings, I would do my shopping in town. In the afternoons, I would spend my time helping out with the community center’s after-school program (e.g. coloring, making arts and crafts, teaching English and correcting children’s homework assignments) and conversing with a Czech mother-daughter pair who were employed by the Procházkas to look after the children.<sup>22</sup> In the evenings, I would visit Alžběta for an hour or two, during which time I also might chat with her daughters, Alex (if he and Alžběta were currently on speaking terms), Světlana and Ruda. My “interactions” with the other grandchildren – Ludmila’s teenage daughters Jarmila and Mariana and Věra’s teenage son Štefan – were mostly non-verbal. It is more fitting to describe my contact with them as being in their presence. During my visits to Alžběta’s place, Jarmila came off as a stereotypically disaffected teenager, rolling her eyes and grumbling under her breath about everything that her grandmother suggested to her. I reached conversational dead-ends with her relatively quickly, and her dour facial expression didn’t encourage me to try too hard as time wore on. Her younger sister Mariana, described by Alžběta as the “clever” one due to her love of books and the fact that she had skipped a year at the *gymnazium*, was similarly shy, but she

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<sup>21</sup> Translated from Czech, October 2008.

<sup>22</sup> Before the end of the academic year in Skála, this mother and daughter suddenly disappeared. The mother, Bara, had often complained to me about how frustrating it was for her to come up with things to do to entertain the children because she was provided little if any money to buy supplies (e.g. markers, construction paper, scissors). She lamented the sorry state of the children’s toys, as well as the dirty condition of the community center. According to Bara, Věra and Alžběta had not paid her or her daughter for several months, therefore she was no longer willing to clean the community center.

typically seemed in relatively good-spirits. Štefan's acknowledgment of my presence was restricted to the times when he needed help with his English assignments. As the youngest grandchild, Lucie, Věra's six-year-old daughter, was given a great deal of affection from all her family members and she thoroughly soaked up all the attention.

I met Zdeňka Kopecká during the summer after my arrival in Skála. In the afternoons, the playground across the street was populated, if at all, by Romani women from the surrounding buildings who were watching over their children as they played. With the exception of Alžběta and her daughters, the only other women in the playground who responded to my greetings and attempts at conversation were Zdeňka and her husband's Aunt Kamila. At this time, we mostly discussed very light things and they helped me to improve my Czech. What was evident to me, however, was that unlike the other women who spent time there, Zdeňka seemed to crave human contact on a more emotional level. Most especially, she communicated a hunger for some sort of stimulation or diversion that was lacking in her life. The ease and openness with which she stated her discontent struck me. She reiterated how agitated her nerves were from watching her children all day, every day, and that she would be happy when the summer holidays were over and she could have a little bit of peace and quiet because her children would be back in school. She said that she was supremely bored with her life because her daily routine was limited to doing cooking, cleaning and looking after her children. "*Natašo*, what I would really like is to have a job, so I could get out of the house and have somewhere to go. My husband won't allow me though." I asked why. Zdeňka shrugged her shoulders and gave a wry smile. As she would do many times during our conversations in the future, she gave me a response which, while technically true, was also infuriatingly commonsensical: "He wants me to

stay at home.” She quickly added, “And I have children too. I need to look after them.” I asked what kind of work she would prefer, and she said, “Oh it could be anything.” Perhaps the question had caught her off-guard because she paused and gazed into the distance in front of herself, as if she previously hadn’t thought beyond the idea of simply *having* a job. After a pause, she said definitively, “I’d want to work in an office. Like as a secretary. Yes, that would be nice.”

I only really began to spend more time with Zdeňka in the fall of 2008, almost a year after I had arrived in Skála. I was planning to be away for a few days, so I decided to ask Zdeňka if she would be willing to check my mailbox and gather anything that I received. Up until this time, besides seeing in her in the playground during the summer months, I had occasionally seen Zdeňka at Skála’s *speciální škola* when she was dropping her daughter Zlata off at the morning preschool. Zdeňka’s continued interest in catching up with me when we bumped into each other distinguished her from the majority of the other Romani women living in the vicinity. Besides Zdeňka, these women tended to either ignore me when I said hello to them or grunted the same greeting back in response. Not having any other non-superficial contacts in Skála other than the Procházkas, I leapt at the chance to have a legitimate reason to show up at Zdeňka’s door and show her that I would appreciate her assistance. Zdeňka was pleased to help out and she readily agreed to check. “I’ll look every day!” she exclaimed. “It’s not like I ever go anywhere!” she laughed.

Over the next few months, I began to visit Zdeňka in the mornings. She preferred these hours because her children were in school and her husband was at work. As she would cook lunch and stand between the stove and one side of the table in the cramped kitchen, I would sit directly opposite her and drink tea or coffee. I offered to help her with

things, especially as her pregnancy wore on and she began to experience a lot of physical pain, but she always refused. When she had finished the tasks at hand, she would usually collapse into a seat at the table, sigh, and continue on with whatever we had been talking about all along.

At approximately this time, as I thought back over the months I had spent in Skála, and on the nature of the data I was gathering, I couldn't help but be disappointed with the small number of contacts I had made within the town's Romani population. I felt conflicted about the direction in which I should take my field research in the five months I had left remaining. My attempts to get to know teenagers via my classroom participation in the special school, as I feared, had mostly been rebuffed. I had anticipated that it would be a challenge to walk the line between *učitelka* (Cz. teacher) and *kamarádka* (Cz. friend) and still hope to maintain any semblance of classroom order when I was giving English lessons. Although advisers with whom I shared the ethnographic material I had gathered from the *speciální škola* said that it was highly interesting and worthy of pursuing further, such a project would require more time than I had left at my disposal.

At around this time, I was also gaining a clearer understanding of the unique strength of my ethnographic data. Although from a classical anthropological point of view, for instance, I might not be equipped to paint a comprehensive portrait of Skála's Romani population due to the numerically limited ethnographic material I was gathering, I believed that, as the individuals with whom I had the closest and most frequent contact, Alžběta and Zdeňka were providing me with very rich narratives that deserved to be included within the existing body of literature about Roma in the Czech Republic. I felt that the level of detail characterizing their narratives could provide a unique window into the lives of members of

the Romani population, but certainly not because there was something about these women's profiles that made them especially 'representative' of Roma or Romani women. To imply that there could be such a thing – an ethnography that could be representative of the 'experience' of members of a particular ethnic group or of a gender within an ethnic group – is essentializing. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's histories, as well as their present-day feelings, convictions and conversational interests, are as hard to typify and are as intrinsically resistant to being "summed up" as any human being's. While their narratives and conversations possess an evident consistency of thought, this is not to suggest that the content lacks complexity, nor does it mean that it is not occasionally contradictory. They are not persons who mechanistically live life within preordained social roles and according to predetermined cultural rules. It is for these reasons that I believe that these women's stories stand as a unique contribution.

Before the initiation of our recording sessions, I formulated lists of topics for both women to discuss. Several of these ideas were based on themes I had picked up on during our several months of conversing. I said that these were merely suggestions and that they didn't have to feel obligated to stick to the list if they had no interest in discussing the proposed topics. Sometimes, despite Alžběta's and Zdeňka's former engagement with the themes during casual conversation, they seemed at a loss for words when I turned on the recorder. Alžběta's befuddlement was never due to shyness, and it was typically overcome if I gave her a few questions to ponder in particular. Zdeňka, on the other hand, did get shy. As she would look at the recorder and giggle, her mind would seem to go blank, perhaps because she felt under pressure to say something 'interesting'. Of course, moments like these filled me with the common anthropologist's fear that informants are

saying what they think the anthropologist would *like* to hear rather than the ‘truth’, or that they are saying what they would like to say themselves. Other times, both women said they simply didn’t have anything to say on the topic at hand. When this happened, we simply moved on to another theme. On yet other occasions, despite their initial difficulties speaking on a given subject, they inadvertently discussed it in conjunction with another theme. To sum up, I attempted to have Alžběta and Zdeňka speak about themes they had previously shown a fondness for discussing or that I felt would contribute to the composition of a more comprehensive life history. Whether or not they ultimately discussed these themes was left completely within their jurisdiction.

In the some of the most well-known narratives and life histories in anthropology (e.g. Shostak’s *Nisa* (1981), Crapanzano’s *Tuhami* (1980), Abu Lughod’s *Writing Women’s Worlds* (1993)), the authors remark upon their interlocutors’ intensity and panache during bouts of narration – their vivid facial expressions and body language, dramatic reenactment of reported speech, and vacillating volume or tone of voice. Their unique talent for storytelling stood out in comparison to other interlocutors. Alžběta certainly had this talent for flamboyance, but unfortunately she tended not to use it during our sessions. On several other occasions, I had been audience to spirited tales of how when her children were growing up, she liked to embarrass them by climbing up trees on the side of the road and stealing apples. There also was the time when she laughed about how (much to her husband’s chagrin) she decided to take driving lessons. Her reenactment of her difficulties (and her husband’s vexation and terror as he occupied the passenger’s seat) was something into which she threw her whole body, lurching forward and slamming on an imaginary brake pedal as she made screeching noises. The joy she

derived from entertaining people with such humorous recollections was not something she got from our sessions. Sometimes she wasn't very successful at concealing that she wanted to get the recording over as quickly as possible. As we went on, she seemed to regard the sessions as something to 'tick off' of a list and finish. Despite her impatience, in the process of recollecting, her memories fueled her desire to go into great detail. When our time was over for the day, she often appeared reinvigorated and contented by our conversation.

With Zdeňka, the fact that I was paying for her time and energy meant that we were involved in a sort of business exchange. This meant that to a certain extent, she also viewed the recordings as a type of 'job' – a task that she would be paid for once she had finished.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, despite her incentive to try to do so, she never attempted to rush through things. I don't believe that Zdeňka especially enjoyed many of the recording sessions. The themes of our discussions often led to the drudging up of memories that were painful or otherwise unpleasant, so I believe that her willingness to go through things slowly can mostly be explained by her profound loneliness. She looked forward to my visits not because she wanted to take trips down memory lane, but because they represented a break from her daily existence. Throughout the span of our acquaintance, there were many things in Zdeňka's life about which she was angry, frustrated and depressed. She seemed to view me as a person in whom she could confide her feelings of discontent without fear of gossip or her husband's reprisal.

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<sup>23</sup> Originally I told Zdeňka that I would pay her after the completion of each recording session. I believed this was a way to better ensure the completion of the life history. However, when Zdeňka's washing machine stopped working, she asked me if I would pay her the rest in advance so that this money could go towards the repair. Zdeňka stayed true to her word and we finished our work in the weeks that followed.

#### **IV. Overview and Structure of Thesis**

Narrative, in all of its various guises – conversation, verbalized self-reflection and life history – possesses a natural chronological element. As people make sense of their social worlds, their thoughts and feelings about the various occurrences composing their daily lives are contextualized and used as reference points during the ongoing cultural process of the negotiation of meaning. Narratives continue to evolve as they are enriched by new life experiences and one's perceptions of these experiences. The cultural process renders significance between the moments, feelings and sensations that compose human life (Rapport 2000).

Yet narratives do not necessarily come ready made when it comes to putting them down into written text. Despite their overall linear progression forward, their augmentation by new life experiences sometimes involves the reinterpretation of one's perceptions about things, while other times it involves their verification; in either case, there is a repetition of established themes and a cognitive revisit to prior events that are of salience to the individual involved. As McCarthy Brown (1991:17-18) describes the story telling of the voodoo priestess Mama Lola, “[She] moves in a spiral fashion over and over the same ground when telling [a] story. Each pass over familiar turf creates redundancy, but it also brings out some additional nuance or detail.” The structure of this thesis is representative of my attempt to strike a balance between stylistic readability, methodological transparency, ethnographic veracity and anthropological interest. The organization of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives is organized around five themes: childhood and school, motherhood and the family, relationships between men and women, friendship, and ethnic relations between Czechs and Roma in communist



Czechoslovakia and the post-communist Czech Republic. Although the organization of their narratives might follow an “anthropological logic” due to the categories’ “social constructedness” (Abu Lughod 1993: 18), this is not meant to give a mechanistic impression of how these women’s social lives operate. Their lives might not be ‘representative’ of ‘the Romani woman’s experience’, but their narratives are ‘representations’ of Romani life because they serve as empirical examples of the processes of negotiation and consent which constitute the culture concept, and they speak to how macrolevel social phenomena have been realized on the familial and individual levels. Thus as ‘representations’, Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives are organized with respect to the contexts in which they will be read (i.e. sociocultural anthropology, Romani studies, post-socialist studies, gender studies). The organizational themes I use are amalgams of more specific topics that guided my informal conversations and semi-structured recording sessions with these women because at times their words speak to issues they could not have anticipated, and at many other times, their conversational interweaving of these intentional topics of discussion with more perennial issues which were of greater conversational interest to them constitute crucial instances of cultural compromise and social closure.

Within each chapter, I use an overarching narrative ethnographic writing style so that Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives are grounded by the social context in which they originally occurred – the ethnographic encounter. Although a life history constitutes a response to a demand posed by an Other and carries within it expectations of that Other (because the questions posed by the Other reflect certain aspects of his or her own culture), through the retention of my presence within the ethnographic text, there is a

clear admission of the various processes by which their narratives were gathered (Crapanzano 1978; Rapport 2000). Given the thematic organization of the chapters, their progression throughout the thesis is not indicative of a linear chronology, but within each chapter, a temporal dimension is provided by virtue of my epistemological reflections and the inherently chronological nature of narrative.

In Chapter One, I will place my thesis's contribution to the field of Romani anthropology within theoretical debates that have emerged from this particular body of literature. I will also connect and relate key features from some of these Romani ethnographies to a more developed local and social context in which to place my informants' narratives and life histories. I will highlight how my informants' experiences, as well as this thesis's ethnographic characteristics, are distinctive *or* similar to those that have preceded them. I aim to bridge the gap between the *microlevel* lens through which this thesis's rich ethnographic content is examined and the *broader* theoretical discussions of culture, ethnicity, narrative and intergroup behavior that are crucial to its examination, by making clear how these women's narratives are socially positioned within an *intermediary, local* context.

In Chapter Two, I will provide a historical context for Roma in the Czech lands since the Second World War, as well as an overview of discussions about Romani education, poverty and unemployment in the communist and post-communist years. The salience of ethnicity in contemporary Czech and Romani social life (including the origins of the content of ethnic stereotypes) has deep roots in the history of the Czech and Slovak lands. The historical weight of these issues as it pertains to social relations between

Romani and Czech individuals will be discussed within the context of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter Three I will present Alžběta's and Zdeňka's individual narratives about relations between Roma and Czechs before and after 1989. Their narratives parallel each other because they are composed of ideas, beliefs and social experiences that continue to ring true to both women. As Romani persons, they continue to be *interpreted* through ethnically framed discourses that are *not of their own making*, yet they also *interpret themselves* through the ongoing creation of ethnically framed narratives that *are of their own making*. The situational influences, psychological motivations, emotional reasons and inferential errors that tie into their construal of themselves and others in terms of group memberships – the why, when, where and how of ethnic salience – will be surmised through their narrative descriptions of their past, present and future social lives. I will also present some additional empirical observations from the time I spent in Skála's special school as a volunteer English teacher.

In Chapter Four, I will explore how Alžběta and Zdeňka realize their personal agency in the domestic family sphere through various means: their attempts to exert control over the actions of their sons- and daughters-in-law and their husbands, their allocation of marital advice to their children, and their investment of temporal, financial, physical and mental energy into children and grandchildren. Within their narratives about their families, the salience of ethnicity with regard to their family-oriented actions and beliefs will also be discussed.

Chapter Five explores the nature of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's relationships with men past and present. Romantic relations with men are a topic that Romani women in

Skála invest a great deal of energy into discussing. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives about romantic love, marriage, and male behavior highlight a severe tension between expectation and realized experience. Discussions about the opposite sex represent an ongoing thematic exchange that linked most of our conversations, and the rhetorical preservation of this theme points to how the gender performances of both the ethnographer and the informants led to the crystallization of our mutual social roles as fictive 'daughter' and 'mother'. Romani women's ideas about the masculinity of Romani men is largely based upon the notion that a man is an altogether 'different' sort of person than a woman. Is Romani women's belief that Romani men have naturally occurring weaknesses actually a cultural construct that is ethnically marked? Through these women's narratives, I will try to examine the interplay between nature, culture and ethnicity. Finally, taking into consideration Alžběta's and Zdeňka's skepticism about entering into friendships with other women, how do their friendships with their children or with members of the opposite sex work in practice?

## **Chapter One – Providing a Local, Social and Theoretical Context for My Argumentation**

### **I. Introduction**

The magnitude of social science research on those who (self-) identify as Roma/Gypsies has increased exponentially in recent years. To an extent, much of this growth has been related to the expansion of the European Union; as countries with more significant ethnic Romani minority populations have joined entry or have initiated the road to membership, national and international non-governmental organizations have sprouted up in order to assist and monitor candidate countries on their progress towards meeting the EU's criteria for specific potential member states. The development of NGOs in the Central and Eastern European Region that focus their energy on Romani populations' access to education, employment, housing and health services, among other things, has in some cases led to the merging of research that is anthropologically methodological in origin with that which is performed by those who are primarily interested in enabling progress on crucial and immediately pressing 'Romani Rights' issues.

A description of Czech Romani-focused research within these general parameters will be covered in Chapter Two. Here, my discussion on Romani/Gypsy studies will be directed towards the wealth of ethnographic and anthropological literature that exists on the topic. My rationale for this is two-fold: 1) so that I may place my thesis's contribution to the field of Romani anthropology within theoretical debates that have emerged from this particular body of literature and 2) so that I may connect and relate key features from some of these Romani ethnographies to a more developed local and social context in

which to place my informants' narratives and life histories. In this chapter, I will highlight how my informants' experiences and life circumstances, as well as this thesis's ethnographic and methodological characteristics, are distinctive *or* similar to those that have preceded them. How does my thesis address key issues in Romani/Gypsy anthropology? How do these issues elucidate the primary themes I discuss?

By providing brief biographies of Alžběta and Zdeňka and developing a more social context for their individual, familial and collective narratives, I intend to address the crucial question of how my informants' life histories correspond to the local context in which they live. I aim to bridge the gap between the *microlevel* lens through which this thesis's rich and detailed ethnographic content is examined, and the *broader* theoretical discussions of culture, ethnicity, narrative and intergroup behavior that are crucial to its examination, by making clear how these women's narratives are socially positioned within an *intermediary, local* context. I strive to substantiate my claim that within Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives there is the expression of a collective and gendered *Skála-specific* Romani narrative about family, friendship, and ethnic relations by elucidating the social structures that underpin their individual life stories. Their narratives do not exist in isolation; they speak about what it means to be a Romani woman in Skála. For this reason, it is important that the links between their narratives and the local circumstances in which they have come into being be expounded upon.

## **II. Romani/Gypsy Anthropology**

### **i. Major Themes in the Literature with Relevance to My Ethnography**

In this section, three primary questions (to follow in italics) that have been integral to ethnographic inquiries about the sociality of self-identified Romani/Gypsy

groups will be examined in conjunction with my own investigation of the social lives of Roma in Skála. First, the *issue of 'boundaries'* between Romani and non-Romani populations has been one of the most conspicuously discussed topics by Romani/Gypsy anthropologists. The nature of 'Gypsy identity' has been approached by researchers from more or less 'bounded' perspectives, but almost all have utilized the metaphorical notion of 'boundaries' in their ethnographies. Those who have emphasized boundaries in terms of binary oppositions, such as Sutherland (1975), Gropper (1975), Okely (1975, 1983) and Silverman (1985) have interpreted 'Gypsy identity' as being contingent upon the existence of the *gadže*; Although Buckler (2007: 8) views these anthropologists' writings as portraying Romani group identity as being reliant on non-Roma as a matter of "oppositional contrast" and as being seemingly "fixed in terms of its characterizing cosmology", her intent is to underscore these scholars' focus on Romani/non-Romani duality. Okely (1983: 231) clearly states that the "separation between Gypsy and Gorgio<sup>24</sup> is socially constructed and can never be absolute" and Sutherland (ibid: xiii) accentuates that *marime*, a moral code based on ideas about ritual impurity which serves to reinforce Romani/non-Romani distinction, "is an amazingly flexible code...adaptable to anything new while preserving a sense of tradition". In these more 'dualistic' ethnographies, although shifting and fluctuating environmental circumstances are taken into consideration, the division between Roma and *gadže* remains paramount because the idea that Roma have 'shame' and non-Roma do not – that Roma believe that only they know how to properly conduct themselves, behave morally and remember right from wrong – is crucial to the formulation of Romani identity (Engebrigtsen 2007).

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<sup>24</sup> Non-Roma.

Stewart (1997), Gay y Blasco (1997), Lemon (2000) and Theodosiou (2007, 2010, 2011) have approached Romani identity and Romani/non-Romani group boundaries from a more contextual vantage point. Stewart's (ibid) study of Hungarian Roma has acknowledged the importance of social space and place to individuals' self-identification as Roma, outside of which people are identified as non-Roma (e.g. the horse market). Theodosiou (ibid) illustrates the significance of place to the constitution of Romani identity and identification near the Greek-Albanian border by arguing that their musical heritage – which they view as their source of group distinctiveness – is firmly rooted within the geographical region where they have resided since the end of the Ottoman period. Both Lemon and Gay y Blasco (ibid) have highlighted the importance of performance and performativity, with Lemon asserting that shifting social circumstances in the newly post-Soviet Russia mean that Romani individuals are continually shifting their identification (and therefore their 'identity') in conjunction with newly emerging ideas. Gay y Blasco investigates the performed nature of identity for Gitanos in Madrid by placing ideas of 'Gypsiness' within webs of relationships. Their “ ‘way of being in the now [is] the foundation of their singularity’” (ibid: 14), and their understandings about what persons, as men and women, are and *should*<sup>25</sup> be like, constitute a gendered moral divide between Gitanos and Payos.<sup>26</sup>

Taking this rich ethnographic tradition as a starting point, I will discuss my ethnography's treatment of 'boundaries' within the context of publications by Van de Port (1998) and Engebrigtsen (2007). Along with a recent ethnography by Buckler (2007)

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<sup>25</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>26</sup> Non-Roma



on the narrativity of Gypsies in Northern England, I will also locate my discussion on *what it means to 'be Romani'* within the context of these studies.

The *classification and categorization of those who identify (and are identified) as 'Roma'* is an issue that will be revisited throughout this thesis, given the subjective valuation of various traits (i.e. cues) that are triggered according to national, ethnic or cultural frames during intergroup interactions between Romani and Czech individuals during to day to day life. In this chapter, I will briefly cover the issue of the subjective appropriation/rejection/manipulation of classifications as it has been covered by Van de Port's (1998) ethnographic exploration of interactions between Serbs and Roma in 'Gypsy bars' and Fosztó's (2007) field research on charismatic Christian movements among the Romani population in post-socialist Romania. I will also discuss this theme in conjunction with a few selected papers from Gay y Blasco's and Iordanova's (2008) recent volume on "Picturing Gypsies".

## **ii. Group 'Boundaries' between Roma and Non-Roma**

As the title of this thesis attests, in Skála, individuals like Alžběta and Zdeňka frequently categorize 'the Roma' collectively and in opposition to 'the Czechs' by saying "*u nás Romové...*" (Cz. With us Roma), but the ways Romani individuals interpret themselves during ongoing contact and interaction with members of the non-Romani population are simply one thread in the tapestry of Romani sociality. Cultural processes that contribute to the operation of group boundary marking during interactions between Romani and Czech individuals are indeed very significant on a day-to-day basis, but they are not 'the end all and be all' of my informants' sociality. As I have outlined in the

introduction, Romani sociality is also intimately bound up with an individual's relations within the family and with other Romani individuals. Although they interpret themselves as belonging to a group that is different and separate from local Czechs as well as non-Roma nationally (and even internationally), this doesn't imply that there is a sense of community cohesiveness. Harmony with local Roma outside one's family is idealized and seen as part of their social history rather than the present-day reality. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's expressed desire for a *return* to social cohesion among members of Skála's Romani population indicates that peaceful relations with non-kin are considered to be a more authentic manifestation of 'true' Romani sociality than are fractured relations. Similarly, as Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives express their inability to escape 'the trap of ethnicity', the social distance that exists between Roma and Czechs is often reinforced during instances of contact between Romani and Czech individuals even when Romani persons would rather that their skin color not be interpreted as being indicative of their 'Gypsiness' – their social indecency and purported lack of civilization. As my informants' narratives show, however, Czechs' frequent conflation of dark skin color with certain 'non-normative', 'gypsy' sociocultural traits does not mean that they wish to lose their 'Romani identity' or their 'Romani culture'; they simply wish to be ethnically unique in the ways that are conferred with positive valuations during their evaluations by themselves and by others. These 'positive' Romani traits need not be without a great deal of overlap with 'normative' traits that Czechs consider to be representative of their own nationally framed group identity. Alžběta and Zdeňka communicate in their family-focused narratives that they are striving to manifest this reality in the future by raising their children and grandchildren in such a way so that they will have a better chance of

living their ‘Romaness’ in a way that results in positive rather than negative evaluations by Czechs during their interactions with each other in various daily social scenarios. As a consequence, this thesis argues for the primary localization of these Romani women’s agency within the private family sphere.

Since, according to their current circumstances, Alžběta and Zdeňka can more successfully authenticate their morality (and therefore their self-identification as ‘Roma’) through their actions within the family sphere rather than through communion with Romani non-kin or Czechs, the narratives that they formulate within the family and *about* the family are a source of power. As Buckler (2007) and Engebrigtsen (2007) found during their own field research with Romani/Gypsy populations, the stories and verbal performances that are expressed within the family provide a basis for moral decision making. Engebrigtsen (ibid: 77, 95) states that moments when one’s *familia* is evaluated positively in contrast to the lack of morality pervading other Romani families – strikingly similar to Alžběta’s *u nás* statements – serve to evoke the morality that is at the crux ‘Romani identity’. Such ‘true words’ (Stewart 1989, 1997 in Engebrigtsen ibid) create restructuring moments that express the cohesiveness of kin, a major trait of ‘Romani culture’. Since the family sphere is the location where my informants’ offspring are learning how to be ‘good’ adults in the future through their mothers’ and grandmothers’ family narratives, they are experiencing their families as systems of stories that are taught through their (grand)parental relations. In this sense, when I refer to *family* in this thesis, I am referring to the time that my informants spend with people who share the same landscape of consciousness and action. They are people who walk into each other’s houses (Engebrigtsen ibid: 13). Alžběta and Zdeňka experience their network of relations

as circling around themselves at the centre (13). When they say *u nás*, Alžběta and Zdeňka often are referring to *u nás Romové* (Cz. with us Roma) in contrast to ‘with the Czechs’, but when *u nás* refers to the family, ethnicity, as one aspect of kinship, prompts cohesiveness and unity rather than dissension and fracture (see *ibid*: 93).

Leaving aside ‘boundaries’ between Romani kin and non-kin and returning to the issue of how ‘boundaries’ between Roma and non-Roma have been theoretically described in Romani ethnographies, I do not wish to give the impression through my own ethnographic descriptions that ‘the trap of ethnicity’ that my informants often find themselves in precludes the possibility of cultural negotiation and social change. While the cultural change that Alžběta and Zdeňka strive to bring forth within the family sphere is *agency* because they are self-reflexively attempting to follow their aims and interests in accordance with normative Czech cultural values regarding employment and education, during their daily interactions with Czechs in Skála, there is also the possibility for social boundaries to be contested, transgressed and negotiated upon. While Van de Port discusses the disappearance in Gypsy bars of the ‘typical’ social distance that Gypsies and Serbs experience on a routine, daily basis as being representative of the sort of free ‘liminal zone’ that Rapport (2010) describes as existing between mutual “classificatory cultural worlds” (see Introduction, pg. 18-19), when Serbs ‘cross’ this cultural boundary, it is indicative of the fusion and juxtaposition of cultural ideas and traits that normally trigger group boundary marking (Van de Port 1998: 188-189). In this context, boundaries are not areas of delimitation but those of interaction (Buckler 2007: 6-7). By ‘becoming Gypsy’ in Gypsy bars – by purposely and self-consciously embodying the social knowledge they have acquired through childhood stories about Gypsies (i.e. that they

represent waste, destruction, living for the moment, anomie, sexuality, violence and physicality) – Serbs are both acknowledging who they *are* (i.e. ‘the Gypsy’ within them) and who these childhood stories have instructed they *should not be* (i.e. ‘the Gypsy’ within them) (189). Rather than being a cultural-free zone, activities in Gypsy bars are what Buckler (2007: 204-205) would describe as the ‘inchoate’ grey areas of a cultural landscape, in which there is “the sense of both possibility and insecurity [that is] involved in being human”. Depending on context and need, such areas can be filled in with familiar information (e.g. one’s ‘knowledge’ about Roma) in order to gain a sense of control during more ambiguous social situations.

Ambiguity and uncertainty do not necessarily prompt an individual to reassert their belonging in a social group through the reification of ‘group’ traits that are culturally or ethnically framed, however. As Van de Port shows, Serbs ‘become Gypsy’ in bars so that they can attempt to gain knowledge about ‘the primitive’: a ‘way of being’ that they believe Gypsies to be exemplars of. Serbs strive to experience this ‘wilderness’ so that they can better come to terms with the lack of ‘civilization’ with which they were bombarded during the war in the Balkans. They purposely attempt to extricate themselves from the narratives whose relevance they acquiesce to on a routine basis so that they can seek ‘the truth’ that lies beneath but with which they were not formerly acquainted on a conscious level (ibid: 202). Along a similar line of thought, as Engebriksen (2007: 11) describes in her ethnography in a multiethnic Transylvanian village, the substance of boundaries between Roma and non-Roma is not as informative as the social actions that take place surrounding these boundaries because these are the circumstances under which Romani individuals have the potential maneuverability to align themselves with various

(and possibly contradictory) cultural ideas and values. The conflation of Romani ethnicity with ‘Gypsiness’ – the ‘trap of ethnicity’ – is a moral and social boundary that my informants wish to cross and then distance themselves from, but their awareness that these boundaries are reinforced in the Czech public consciousness as a matter of media and academic discourses on the ‘ghettoization’ of Czech Roma complicates their flexibility to do so. Nevertheless, even if they cannot prevent such boundaries from being reinforced, their actions during instances of social contact with Czech individuals do have the potential to bring the individuals involved together in novel and unknown ways. Since my informants to a great extent share local moral codes with Czechs (e.g. regarding education and motherhood), in these grey areas of social life, Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s individual agency *can* be enacted due to the ambiguous nature of the circumstances. Within the family sphere, however, these women have relatively *more* power and freedom to take action on the cultural ideas with which they align themselves, so this is consequently where they focus most of their personal energy.

### **iii. What Does it Mean to ‘Be Romani’?**

In light of the theoretical approach to Romani/non-Romani boundaries that I describe above and with which I choose to align this thesis’s ethnographic material – that boundaries between ‘groups’ are not necessarily areas of social inaction and cultural stagnation and that they should be afforded their due consideration as potential spheres of individual agency (i.e. cultural change and production) – addressing the question of what it means to ‘be Romani’ in Skála naturally progresses along similar theoretical lines. ‘Being a Rom(ka)’ does not involve strictly adhering to cultural rules, although as I state

elsewhere throughout this thesis, certain ideas that are negotiated and agreed upon by my informants as culturally relevant in collective communicative spheres will become a part of processes of ethnic boundary marking. As I have explained above, for Alžběta and Zdeňka, ‘being a Rom(ka)’ also involves aligning themselves both mentally and actively with specific cultural ideas that mainstream Czechs acknowledge as both positive and ‘normal’. ‘Being Romani’ in Skála therefore is an ongoing social and cultural process that involves a certain level of interdependence between Romani and Czech individuals. It is a “creation of social processes in time and space” that is “flexible, changing and explorative in adaptation to [local] surrounding populations” (Engebrigtsen 2007: 1). As “strategically competent actors” (see Introduction, pg. 50), in spite of their possession of habitual dispositions that they have learned as part of their particular sociocultural environment (i.e. *habitus*), Alžběta and Zdeňka have the ability to strategically and consciously evaluate their life circumstances and try to achieve aims that might contradict other internalized cultural values and ideas. Since all Romani individuals possess this ability, ‘being Romani’ also means arguing, agreeing and conferring *on what it means to be Romani* (ibid: 115-116). Since ‘being Romani’ is based on moral decision making and social actions *that are informed* by this moral decision making, in theory, it is possible that a non-Romani person could ‘become Romani’ through their successful performance of behaviors that have been widely agreed upon as markers of ‘Romaness’ in a collective cultural arena.<sup>27</sup> As Buckler (2007) found during her fieldwork with Gypsies in England,

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<sup>27</sup> Conversely, as my informants suggest (and as other anthropologists have found (Holy 1996)), it is nearly ‘impossible’ for a Romani person to ‘become Czech’ (see Chapter 2, pg. 125) because 1) Czechs commonly view the inception of ‘Czech identity’ as being located within culturally specific, personally formative childhood socialization processes. One’s identity as a Rom is therefore something that cannot be changed because the cognitive schemas that channel his or her interpretations of the world are already ‘set’

in Skála, processes of childhood socialization within the Romani family sphere include the use of narratives. Sometimes these morally themed narratives are formulated within a cultural landscape that is not neatly bracketed off from the non-Roma. ‘Being Romani’ therefore means that no matter the unique personality with which a Romani child is born, it is up to the personal strength of the individual (something that develops over time) to behave in a ‘good’ (i.e. moral) way as they grow into adulthood. As mothers, Alžběta and Zdeňka strive to enact their individual agency and affirm to themselves (and to others) that they are ‘good’ Romani women by emphasizing the importance of such ideas as educational success whilst engaging in narrative production within the family sphere. Since it is through their roles as mothers that my informants have relatively more opportunity to engage in culturally rewarding behavior, in Skála, Romani individuals’ realization of agency is a gendered process.

#### **iv. Romani Categories and Classifications**

An exhaustive diagnosis of how categories and classifications have been subjectively adopted, renounced and exploited by individuals who identify *and* are identified as ‘Roma’ is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the ample amount of discussion that has been devoted to this topic in Romani/Gypsy ethnography has demonstrated a general thread of continuity in terms of how Romani populations throughout Europe tend to answer the “bacchalian need” of their non-Romani counterparts to explore ‘unreason’ (Van de Port 1998, cited in Hasdeu 2008: 356). Their subsequent representations in different forms of art, literature and media have reflected

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along different pathways of thinking; and 2) Romani persons feel that their skin color prevents their neutral evaluation by Czechs.



*gadže* populations' need to envision their alternate selves as they could or even *should* (not) be (Gay y Blasco 2008: 300-301). Romani populations' rendering by non-Roma as 'noble savages' who happily and 'freely' live in poverty is a social myth that has persisted over the centuries despite the *gadže*'s widespread knowledge of the *lack* of freedom that large numbers of Roma actually experience (e.g. as victims of ethnic and racially motivated violence, health problems, domestic violence). Pasqualino (2008) and Iordanova (2008) argue that in the past fifty years, although changes in Romani-themed films have taken on a more socially concerned bent, most productions have failed to cease drawing on the aforementioned preconceived notions about Roma. The fact that such myths persist, as Gay y Blasco (*ibid*) suggests, has a lot to say about the *gadže*'s hunger to consume these representations. Just as an important a question to ask is why many of these representations do not portray Roma as they are – as populations that have adjusted alongside their local *gadže* counterparts in response to social, economic and political changes. Many times Roma are imagined in the social consciousness as people who “belong to an orgiastic space-time out of line with normality” and with whom non-Roma share no historical or “evolutionary link” (Hasdeu *ibid*: 350-351). The “imagined Gypsy” and the “metaphoric Gypsy” have been cheated in that they have not been afforded acknowledgement of the fact that they and the *gadže* have frequently occupied shared cultural landscapes. Local Romani populations' understandings of the world around them, their place in it and their self-representaitons and views of non-Roma have not been given due consideration outside of anthropological circles (Gay y Blasco *ibid*: 301-302; Iordanova *ibid*: 310).

In Skála as is the case elsewhere, Roma are aware of how they are portrayed in the arts and in the media. Iordanova (ibid: 30) quite aptly brings up the point that “it must be quite a burden for Roma to live in a world where compliance with all these cultural stereotypes is expected of them.” Throughout this thesis I will discuss how my informants feel about this pervading aspect of their social reality, but it is also imperative that I mention that Roma in Skála, as has been described of Romani populations in other ethnographies (Okely 1983; Lemon 2000; Engebrigtsen 2007), also use their awareness of the *gadže*’s stereotypes of ‘Gypsies’ to swerve social and/or economic circumstances to their advantage. In Chapter Three, I will discuss how Romani pupils exploit non-Romani teachers’ expectations of their classroom behavior and academic performance within the context of the special school environment.

Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s cognizance of non-Romani opinion in Skála and in the Czech Republic, and the perpetual mental burden that they feel due to the ‘trap of ethnicity’, is a key theme in this thesis. In their narratives, the salience of ethnicity in their daily lives is described as being something that was substantially less acute during the communist period. It is indeed ironic that both women express that they felt more valued as individuals, and therefore as *Romani* persons, when they lived in a society that officially *denied* ethnicity. Romani individuals’ desire to fashion alternate, and in some cases non-ethnic, identities is proposed elsewhere, such as in Fosztó’s (2007) discussion of the Roma’s interest in the Pentecostal religious movement in postsocialist Romania. Part of the conversion process, in which individuals become ‘born again’, emphasizes the link between the individual and God. The importance of this connection to the exclusion of all other social classifications (ethnic, racial, linguistic) is extremely empowering

because it is based upon the idea that *every* person can have direct access to God, without regard to skin color or ethnic origin. Fosztó illustrates how local and specific manifestations of this belief resonate strongly with Romani converts. For example, through Romani individuals' tailoring of certain passages of Scripture, they explain to other converts that 'the Roma' were originally on equally footing with all other nations, but as a result of Noah's curse, Roma became "the lowest nation". Romani individuals' alteration of the Scripture to meet local circumstances provides a narrative explanation for the current subjugated social position of the 'Roma'; the low status of Roma is not a result of God's divine design but of human sin (ibid: 125-126). Fosztó suggests that although such revitalization rituals could potentially be resources for the mobilization of an alternate collective Romani identity, the main tenets of Pentecostalism are based on the symbolic disassociation of an individual from other social and ethnic identities and relationships.

### **III. A Local Social Context**

In this section, I will provide a local social context for Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives so that I can elucidate the ways in which a collective and gendered Skála-specific narrative manifests itself through their individual stories. By bridging the gap between the microlevel and the theoretical, I will show how my informants' narratives speak to what it means to be a Romani woman in this town. After providing a brief biography of my informants and an illustration of a 'typical' day in the life of each woman, I will briefly discuss the social situation of Roma in Skála: their ways of earning a livelihood, housing conditions, religious affiliations, etc.

### **i. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's Daily Lives in Skála – a Brief Biography,**

To a certain extent the aesthetic disparity between Alžběta's building and the one in which Zdeňka resided mirrored my substantive and spatial integration into the daily life of Živá Street. My studio apartment, which was furnished with a threadbare red fabric couch and creaky swivel chairs that looked as if they had been appropriated from a 1970s student dorm, was qualitatively a step down from Alžběta's airy and light wood-floored one-bedroom flat. However, the fact that I could afford to buy rubbish bins, the handles on my doors were not missing, and that I had been provided with some new furniture from Ikea put it a step above the flat inhabited by Zdeňka and her five children, which was badly ventilated, cramped and decrepit. My flat, located one floor below the flat of Alžběta, was situated on the left wing of her building; this wing shared a wall with the dilapidated city-owned building in which Zdeňka lived.

The rhythm and substance of their daily lives was no less dissimilar. Alžběta is very much the head of her family. She is the matriarch. She views herself as the linchpin of her family, and the movements of her children, grandchildren and sons-in-law confirm her status. On days that Alžběta is out-of-town, her family members are much less likely to hang around her building at the end of a workday. An aura of silence ensues from Alžběta's absence. As a retired and widowed older woman with three adult children, she has much more liberty with which she can schedule her daily activities; she has more time for herself. She is her own boss. She no longer has a husband to which she defers authority or with whom she must share authority. She has responsibilities and worries that are different from a woman like Zdeňka, a full-time mother of four young children

and an unemployed housewife who is completely beholden to either her physically abusive and philandering husband or the social welfare system for her income. She has no adult family members on whom she can depend with any sense of certainty or reliability. They are also separated by another issue: although Alžběta might not think of herself as a woman who has ceased to be physically attractive to men (and indeed, according to her narratives about men in her life, she absolutely has not stopped being sought after), she is no longer in the reproductive years of her life. It is not that men do not view her as a woman, but when many men interact with her, their preliminary categorization of her is not as a sexual female. This, as well as her seniority as a property-owner, permit her relatively more room to be publically assertive. Zdeňka is not unfettered in this way.

On a regular weekday, the movements of Alžběta and her *rodina* can be described as follows. Alžběta's presence is made known to the world at around 11 am. In the warmer spring and summer months, at around this hour one hears Romani music or Alžběta's own powerful voice calling for one of her children or grandchildren blasting from the open windows of her flat on the third floor. Alternatively, the muffled tones of her TV can be detected through the thin walls and ceiling of my own flat. After rising, she drinks a quick coffee and perhaps eats a *rohlík bez masla*<sup>28</sup> and then she busies herself with her morning exercise tapes and a portable abdominal-crunch contraption. Sometimes she watches morning television before getting dressed. Alternatively, she might start cooking lunch and dinner for herself and for any of her children or

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<sup>28</sup> A roll without butter. Many Czechs rise very early in the morning and therefore don't take breakfast. Alžběta rises later than most, but she still told me that she has a hard time eating breakfast, and at most this is what she will eat. Coffee is just hot water poured over coffee grounds (not instant coffee). This produces a very strong and gritty coffee that is almost inconsumable without adding a significant amount of sugar.

grandchildren who might drop by either before they start their work in the community center office, or later on in the early evening after the office is locked up. If Světlana is staying at her grandmother's place and has not gone to school that day,<sup>29</sup> she will likely be involved with the cooking or else she will be doing some sort of house cleaning.

From 12 pm to 1 pm, Věra, her sister Ludmila, and whoever is working with the community center children at the time<sup>30</sup> begin to trickle into the office. At 1 pm, the children go outside to the playground, get help from the office staff with their homework assignments, or play in the center below the office. Until 5 pm, there is a good chance that Alžběta and her family will be in the office hanging out or using one of two desktop computers to use the internet. Usually, the speakers will be turned up to maximum volume so one will hear music or goofy sound effects from the computer games that the children play. Věra is likely to be engaged in paperwork, meetings with tenants, phone calls, or reprimanding children for one thing or another. If Tomáš or Jakub come by to visit their wives or kill time in-between building jobs, they are likely to stand around and not say much.

In the warmer months when their office responsibilities are taken care of, Věra and Ludmila will sit in the playground, chatting with neighbors and soaking up the sun

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<sup>29</sup> Světlana and her other cousins are not slaves to school attendance. They are in no way truants or delinquents, but they also do not hesitate to stay home from school due to illness or perhaps just because it is a nice day and they do not wish to be stuck inside a classroom. On the few occasions that I questioned them and asked if their school was having some sort of holiday, they generally would look slightly embarrassed and tell me that they just didn't want to go to school that day. "It's a holiday for us," Světlana sheepishly said to me on one occasion. Please refer to my chapter on education to read more about the Procházka women's opinions about school attendance.

<sup>30</sup> At the beginning of my stay in Skála, a Czech woman and her teenage daughter were employees of the community center. For reasons that are still unknown (presumably because Skála's city council chose to no longer fund the community center and the Procházkas could no longer pay these women a salary), they were let go. A year later, the Procházkas hired Liliana, a childhood friend of Věra and Ludmila, to watch after the children during the after-school program. Věra told me that she had received funding from another source, but she did not identify the source.

while their children and the community center kids play outside. In the summer, the Procházka children and grandchildren might sit in the playground and talk until the sun is almost gone. After the office closes between 5-6 pm, Věra and (less often) Ludmila, as well as their grandchildren, go up and eat with Alžběta. After her daughters return to their own homes (both within five minutes walk of where she lives) in order to attend to their own household responsibilities, Alžběta usually relaxes by watching the evening news and then some hour-long biographical or historical television specials. She might be involved with ironing or hanging up clothes. At this time, she also bathes and performs parts of her beauty regimen (e.g. making a homemade hair treatment for her dandruff, applying lotion to her skin rashes, etc). She occasionally goes down to the office and reads her daily online horoscopes. At around 9 or 10 pm, if Alex is staying with his mother he will return home from the pub, microwave some of the food his mother made earlier in the day and station himself in front of the television. At around the same time Světlana will return to Alžběta's flat after spending time with her boyfriend Radek.

Zdeňka lacks the support of her family members due to their respective ages, overall health or willingness to help. Her daughter Erika is untrustworthy, unreliable and lacks the educational qualifications necessary to have more than an unskilled or manual job, her mother Karolina (who is in poor health due to her constant drinking) lives off pensioner's checks, and Zdeňka's only companions are her three younger children and baby. Her husband does not help her financially or in terms of parenting and household-related tasks, and his arrival and departure from the Kopecký's one-bedroom flat is unpredictable. When he is without girlfriends or lovers, he leaves for work in the early morning (as early as 5 am), maybe comes home for lunch at midday, and returns home

from the pub in the late evening. When he has lovers, he might return home to sleep or eat, but he just as easily might not.

On a regular weekday during the school year, Zdeňka wakes up at around 7:30 am and gets Adela, Miloš, and Zlata ready for school. Zlata attends the preschool that is housed in the *speciální škola*. The preschool is a twenty-minute walk away from their flat, so Zdeňka walks Zlata there if her daughter cannot walk there with the mother of one of her classmates. Adela and Miloš attend the ‘regular’ elementary school and often walk there with other Czech children from Alžběta’s building. Like the younger Procházkas, their school attendance is marked by non-severe absenteeism.<sup>31</sup> After her children are gone, Zdeňka either stays home and cooks and cleans or she does any necessary shopping in town. Shopping is completely contingent upon whether or not she has any money. In many cases, she might have need to shop but will have to wait until her mother or another individual can provide her with some cash. When she has money, Zdeňka often sends Erika out to do shopping for her,<sup>32</sup> but it is not unusual for Erika to disappear with the money and come back hours later, having instead spent the morning (and perhaps the money) with her friends.<sup>33</sup>

Zdeňka’s housework and her confinement to the apartment often continue on into the late afternoon, especially in the cold months. During the spring and summer she often

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<sup>31</sup> For example, Adela, Miloš and Zlata typically missed school one day per week. I was too worried about pushing Zdeňka over the edge into a more extreme state of frustration and depression to ask her why her children were not in school. On such days, the children displayed no tangible signs of illness.

<sup>32</sup> Erika was employed first at a bakery and then at a garden nursery, but during my last months in Skála, Erika was not working. I attempted to ask both Erika and her mother why she was no longer working at either place, but these questions were evaded or shrugged off. I am not sure if Erika was fired or if she quit.

<sup>33</sup> On several occasions, Erika would go about the kitchen, looking in jars and patting the upper shelves in order to ascertain if her mother had stashed some cash somewhere. When this would happen, Zdeňka would insist that there was no money to find. Erika would persist in looking, clearly indicating that she didn’t believe her mother was completely without some hidden emergency money (which was often the case).



spends time in the playground with the Procházkas and other Romani women from her building, but this only comes after housework has been completed and her children have had lunch.<sup>34</sup> In the early evening, she gives her children dinner. All of her children sleep in one tiny room (the three younger ones in a bunk bed, Erika on a small couch). Zdeňka sleeps on a pull-down bed which is located in the living room.

## ii. A Local Context for Alžběta's and Zdeňka's Narratives

I have provided a sketch of my informants' daily lives (and therefore an individual context for each of their narratives), but how do their individual circumstances relate to the social realities of other Romani women in town? In turn, how do their individual narratives tie into a local, gendered narrative of what it means to be a Romani woman in Skála?

As of the present, there exist no official demographic data about the local Romani population, but as a resident of the town for eighteen months, my sense of how each of my informants' lives were similar, different or distinctive from other women naturally became developed. Religion is not an important element of their lives in a 'formal' sense. Over the course of time, all the Romani women I got to know expressed a belief in God or a 'higher power', but Alžběta's daughter Ludmila was the only one who attended church service (Protestant). The economic circumstances, housing conditions and family dynamics of Zdeňka's life closely approach those of other Romani women in town. One's

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<sup>34</sup> School children in Skála usually do not eat lunch at school. Czech children often get lunch from the *jidelna* (cafeteria), which is a five minute walk from the elementary school and a two minute walk from the *gymnazium*. Older Czech children and teenagers often go to one of Skála's cheaper restaurants for lunch. At the *speciální škola*, healthier snacks are available for purchase from its school *jidelna* in relatively generous portions. These are usually bought during the 10-minute breaks between lessons. See the chapter on "education" for more of a description on food and the *speciální škola*.

family or kinship network is mostly defined in terms of shared space and time spent together rather than in terms of particular relationships (e.g. cousins, aunts and nieces, etc.), although residential patterns are relatively ‘nuclear (i.e. within three generations or less). Zdeňka’s total reliance on social benefits as a source of income due to her unemployment, supplemented only by the erratic ‘beneficence’ of her husband, is a common challenge that Romani women must tackle. Many men suffer from long-term unemployment alongside their girlfriends and wives, but for those women whose partners have jobs (most often in the construction industry), the tendency for their men to blow money on gambling, drinking or their own comforts (e.g. stylish clothes or shoes) was a source of lamentation. As will be discussed in later chapters, social relations between young Romani women and men are stuck in a sort of time warp; young women are striving to strike a balance between their desire for what older women describe as ‘the way things used to be’ in romantic relationships, their exposure to the physical abuse and lack of personal freedom that characterizes other married women in their families, and the present-day exigencies of maintaining subsistence. The relative ambiguity of young women’s and men’s roles indicates that it is a sector of social life that is ripe with the possibility of cultural change.

The degree of freedom and personal autonomy that are manifested through Alžběta’s daily routine are positively luxurious relative to what is ‘typical’ of Romani women in general. Her life before the death of her husband, however, contains a great deal of thematic overlap with Zdeňka’s (and other Romani women’s); she worried about financial security and her ability to adequately provide for her children, she had to deal alone with her husband’s alcoholism and violent outbursts, she was reluctant and

ashamed to ask other people for help, she was distrustful of other women's intentions towards her husband and their trustworthiness with her secrets, and she was concerned about monitoring her public image as a 'decent' (i.e. a demure and feminine) woman.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In the next chapter, I will provide a comprehensive overview of the social history of Romani ethnicity in the Czech lands. The local social context for my informants' narratives which I have illustrated above, as well as my discussion of how my ethnography is thematically and theoretically situated in relation to the wealth of literature that currently exists on Romani/Gypsy anthropology, serve as logical precursors for an exploration of the broader national history of Czech Roma. Taken together, the local and national factors outlined in this chapter and in the text below anchor the detailed narrative engagement of my informants in a broader context so that the manifestation of macro-level social, economic and political changes on the family level will be able to be more easily ascertained from their life stories.

## Chapter Two – A Social History of Romani Ethnicity in the Czech Lands

### I. Introduction

An individual's thoughts and memories about past events are always selective and are mediated by factors considered relevant in the present day (Holy 1996; Leydesdorff et al. 1996; Skultans 1998). All histories are subsequent reconstructions, and the experiences that are lived by an individual and later verbally communicated to others are bound up with the "pragmatics of cultural production" – the attempt to strike a balance between the desire to realize one's personal strategic interests and the universal human need to have one's singular worldview accepted as valid by other actors in a communicative arena (Wimmer 2002: 41). The moral categories and social classifications on which a cultural compromise is based must make sense from the vantage points of all those who are involved, yet individuals constantly interpret a compromise in ways that meet their own unique aims and allow for the justification of their actions. When certain cultural patterns are interpreted as being characteristic of 'insiders' or 'outsiders', they are perceived as markers of ethnic, national, racial or class boundaries (ibid: 33, Brubaker 2004, Ch. 3; Tajfel 1981, 1982). *Sometimes* it is the case that when consent (whether feigned or real, subconscious or conscious) to a 'normative' cultural order or a 'non-normative' subculture or counter-culture is no longer relevant or beneficial to the interests of those involved due to social, economic or political changes on the macro- or micro-level, cultural change proceeds (Barth 1969; ibid). At other times, cultural change *does not* proceed, despite the fact that a given cultural compromise is not 'beneficial' to the social actors in question; ecological and economic factors and ideological factors can reinforce one another in such a way that the status quo is more or less preserved (Ross

and Nisbett 1991). The ‘utility’ or ‘relevance’ of specific cultural practices is also a wide-ranging concept, and is influenced to a great extent by local and national ‘normative’ value hierarchies, hegemonic images, sociohistorical myths and intergroup relations.

The salience of ethnicity in contemporary Czech and Romani social life (including the origins of the content of ethnic stereotypes) has deep roots in the history of the Czech and Slovak lands. In this chapter I will provide a historical context for Roma in the Czech lands since the Second World War, as well as an overview of discussions about Romani education, poverty and unemployment in the communist and post-communist years. The historical weight of these issues as it pertains to social relations between Romani and Czech individuals will be discussed within the context of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives in subsequent chapters.

## **II. Roma in the Czech Lands**

### **i. Who Are the Czech Roma?**

In giving an overview of the history of ‘the Czech Roma’, it is first essential to note that Roma who reside in the Czech Republic do not comprise a homogenous, resolved ‘group’ – neither in terms of how they regard themselves nor in terms of the social constructs which others use to classify them. First, due to the annihilation of the original Czech and Moravian Roma during the *Porrajmos* (Rom. The Devouring) of World War Two and the ensuing post-war migration of Roma from Slovakia, Romani subdivisions in the Czech lands today mirror those of Slovakia. Only one-tenth of the 6,000 original Czech Roma survived the Holocaust, and German Sinti who resided in the Czech lands met much the same fate (Hübschmannova 2002). Today, more than two-thirds of the Czech Romani population are *Slovenská* (Cz. Slovakian) Roma whose

relatives and ancestors have been settled in Slovakia for centuries. A smaller number are *Rumungri* who claim a Hungarian identity and language. *Olašská* (Cz. Vlach)<sup>35</sup> Roma constitute the smallest subgroup (~10%), and have retained a dialect of Romani that is shared with *Kalderash* Roma who have origins in the Balkans. They emigrated from the provinces of Wallachia and Moldova two hundred years ago and retained a nomadic existence until they were forced to settle by the communists in 1958 (Marushiakova and Popov 2001).<sup>36</sup> Today, Roma constitute approximately 2-3% of the total Czech national population, a percentage relatively lower than many other post-communist countries (Dluhošová et al. 2007).

Second, just who ‘the Roma’ are considered to be and by what criteria their group ‘identity’ should be defined is an issue of debate in the Czech Republic. Sometimes researchers do not specify who the Roma they deal with really are; they refer to ‘the Roma’ in a general sense and inadvertently communicate group homogeneity when this is not the case (Lemon 2000; Budilová 2006). With respect to how ‘the Roma’ are conceptualized by Romani activists and elites and by Czech government officials who are involved in discussions about ‘Romani integration’ or ‘Romani emancipation’, three collective Romani ‘identity frames’ are used: 1) The Roma are a non-territorial, pan-European nation; 2) They are a national minority whose homeland is identified as the Czech and Slovak Republics; and 3) The Roma comprise a social underclass or

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<sup>35</sup> According to the Czech Romani leader Karel Holomek, while other Roma who are living in the Czech Republic wish to integrate into mainstream society and participate in social initiatives, *Olašská* Roma are “a closed community who are living only for themselves and are keeping their customs” (see <http://www.radio.cz/en/article/10818>).

<sup>36</sup> Law 74/1958 “On the Permanent Settlement of Nomads” brought the travels of approximately 6,000 nomadic *Olašská* Roma to an end, but the apparent target of the legislation – the more than 100,000 sedentary *Slovenská* Roma – was left unaffected (Guy 1975).

‘ethnoclass’<sup>37</sup> – an ethnic group which resembles a class because they are disproportionately concentrated at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy (Vermeersch 2003). Even in the first two cases, an ongoing state of widespread Romani socioeconomic marginalization is stressed. These national, ethnic and socioeconomically based conceptualizations of Roma, all of which are meant to distinguish ‘the Roma’ from the Czech majority/non-Romani population, are manifestations of different aspects of the cultural process: they reflect which differences between Roma and non-Roma are deemed socially and politically significant according to the ‘normative’ cultural consensus of the Czech mainstream (and as a consequence, according to government officials who are supposed to act on the behalf of their constituents), which social constructs Romani activists feel they must use in order to achieve their aims for ‘the Roma’s’ social mobilization, which conceptual rubrics Romani activists feel present ‘the Roma’ in the least negative light, and which rubrics Czechs use to define themselves. For example, as is the case in other post-Soviet/post-socialist territories, the word *národ* (nation) has been applied to ‘the Roma’ in the same way that Czechs use the term in reference to themselves as a collectivity (i.e. as ‘a people’) (Sorabji 1995; Lemon 2000). Different conceptual and rhetorical framings of ‘Romani identity’ in the post-communist context have clear roots, if not outright continuity, with approaches that were implemented in conjunction with the ‘Gypsy question’ in communist and interwar Czechoslovakia. Similarly, despite drastic shifts of political regime and significant socioeconomic changes in the past sixty-five years (1945-2010), the ways in which Roma living in the Czech and Slovak lands have defined themselves in contrast to the *gádžé*– and vice versa – reflect a

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<sup>37</sup> Gurr, T. R. and Harff, B. 1994. *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*. Boulder, San Francisco and Oxford: Westview Press. Cited in Vermeersch (2003: 891).

large degree of continuity (Hubschmannova 1986, in Lacková 1999; Sokolová 2002). This is because categorization, whether it is of oneself or others, carries with it expectations and ‘knowledge’ about how members of different groups ‘tend to behave’ (Tajfel 1981, 1982). Such knowledge is encoded in collective memory, embodied in myths and narratives, and found within institutions and organizational routines. What are interpreted as *categories* of people are in fact subjective *categorizations* of otherwise abstract entities such as images, events, gestures and utterances (Shweder 1990, 1991; Brubaker 2004).

‘Ethnicity’ and ‘nation’ are two framings of a similar part of the cultural process – social closure (Wimmer 2002). They are *ways* of seeing, interpreting and anatomizing social experiences and the social world rather than being *entities* in the world (Brubaker 2004). Yet, because ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’ are generally perceived as types of bounded groups, their salience to two other aspects of the cultural process – an *individual’s habitus* (internal networks of meaning which are selectively activated during daily thinking and action (Bourdieu 1977, Ch.2)), and an individual’s engagement in collective cultural compromise – should also be considered.

On the first level, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘nation’ operate on a cognitive plane. Every individual’s *habitus* is based upon an internalized matrix of routinized predispositions that determine action, perception and interpretation. As habitualized cognitive processes, schemes are tailored to one’s position in a social structure or hierarchy, and they are gradually built up by means of learning processes or through one’s ‘socialization’ (Wimmer 2002). While every individual’s *habitus* is unique because of the influence of one’s particular environment and social position, it is not a part of the cultural process



that is totally relegated to the mental domain of the individual; cognitive schemes of perception and interpretation are built up from culturally shared knowledge of certain images, events, etc. As templates for sense-making, routinized networks of meaning are triggered by cues specific to the culturally shared knowledge with which the individual is familiar. When an individual experiences cues that are interpreted as ‘other’ (i.e. belonging to ‘them’ and not ‘us’), cognitive processes of social categorization are stimulated (Brubaker 2004, Ch. 3). Whether an individual conceptualizes cultural signals of the ‘other’ as being indicative of ethnic, national or class difference is based on which framing is culturally relevant within the given social context. Although socioeconomic and political changes on the macrolevel can affect the distribution of classification ‘cues’ (and as a result, the triggering of classification schemes (ibid)), the fact that the ways in which ‘the Roma’ and ‘the Czechs’ demarcate each other in the Czech lands have remained relatively consistent throughout large-scale sociopolitical changes means that ethnic / national boundary markers continue to be of cultural importance to both groups. Thus, on a collective level where Romani and Czech individuals relate to one another in spheres of social interaction and communication, many categorization schemes continue to be triggered by cues related to behaviors, values and other traits on which there is not cultural consensus or similarity, or on which it is *perceived* that there is not cultural consensus or similarity; they interpret each other more as members of their respective *groups* than as unique *individuals*. With regard to the latter possibility (i.e. perceived dissimilarity), some categorization schemes (and their attendant value orientations) operating in relation to social closure are reinforced even when individuals experience social cues that challenge their habitualized patterns of perception and interpretation.

Such classificatory schemes are economical because working on a largely subliminal level, they allow individuals to disregard cues that are ‘irrelevant’ (i.e. not culturally rewarding to consider) and to perceive different cases as being the same (i.e. stereotyping) (ibid: 71-73). Even when the facts might tell people otherwise, ‘knowledge’ informing social categorization is often resistant to change because its main *raison d’être* is to reify boundaries, exaggerate differences and distance between social groups, and minimize intragroup incongruities between individuals – generally speaking, to “introduce simplicity and order where there is complexity” (Tajfel 1981: 132). Revision only takes place when an internalized classification scheme, and the collectively-negotiated norms and values to which it is bound as part of the cultural process, is “grossly inadequate...because it is consistently unrewarding to act upon within the domain where the actor makes it relevant” (Barth 1969: 30). What is ‘inadequate’ and ‘unrewarding’, however, is not always a straightforward matter. Especially for members of minority groups, the impetus to reduce feelings of ‘inferiority’ and to augment positive self-image is a key factor in the determination of what is culturally salient (Bléseni 2002).

This thesis primarily concerns itself with the ways in which Romani women perceive and make sense of their social worlds through their engagement with narrative on the individual, familial and local levels, thus the crux of analysis is oriented towards processes like the collective negotiation of meaning, cultural compromise, cultural change and social closure. The minute details of cognitive processes that often lead to errors in human inference – causal attribution, prediction, judgment and covariation to name a few (Nisbett and Ross 1980) – mostly extend beyond the possible scope of this study. However, given that individuals’ habitualized and internalized matrices of

meaning are the platforms from which collective negotiations of meaning proceed, and that they channel the ways in which formulizations of social closure work in practice, it is necessary to give an overview of the social and historical ‘knowledge’ – embodied in myth and narrative and encoded in collective memory – which informs patterns of cultural compromise and social closure.

For the sake of simplicity, when referring to framings of social closure and the groups that are perceived as being encompassed by these boundaries, I will frequently use the designations ‘Romani ethnicity’ and the ‘Czech nation’. Clearly, certain forms of categorization are highly politicized, and the various conceptual rubrics that are used to define ‘the Roma’ are not as clear-cut as with other supposedly ‘bounded’ minority groups. The tendency in Central and Eastern Europe for nations to be ‘ethnicized’ and for ethnicities to be ‘nationalized’ is not directly applicable to Roma due to their lack of a territorial homeland and their widespread socioeconomic marginalization (Vermeersch 2003; Brubaker 2004: 149), however the alternate understandings of a *národ* as a ‘people’ or a ‘nation’ complicate the issue of terminology further, as does the dichotomization of nation ‘types’ into a ‘civic’ versus ‘ethnic’ dyad (Brubaker 2004, Ch. 6; Nedelsky 2009). The salience of collectively framing Czech and Slovak Roma as an ethnicity/ nation/ ethnoclass/ underclass or as having a ‘culture of poverty’ has been questioned by Czech academics since classification methods that Roma use to categorize themselves tend not to be the same as the methods used by their official categorizers. For example, Lozoviuk (1997: 209) and Jakoubek (2007:1) suggest that Roma are “ethnically indifferent” because their self-classifications are determined by notions of kinship and ritual (im)purity rather than by concepts like ethnicity or nation. Roma feel under

pressure to ‘show’ ethnicity because the cultural stimuli they come into contact with during their interactions with members of the majority population are framed along ‘ethnic’ or ‘national’ lines (Lozoviuk: *ibid*). By expecting ‘the Roma’ to declare their belonging to the ‘Romani’ nation or the ‘Romani ethnicity’ and therefore mobilize and ‘emancipate’ themselves, the majority population is therefore foisting a part of their culture on the Roma since Czechs tend to perceive themselves according to their membership in the Czech *národ* (Uherek and Novák 2003). The wish to avoid analytical ‘groupism’ is utterly valid (Brubaker 2004: 8), but the fact remains that even if Roma only ‘show ethnicity’ due to external pressure from majority populations, it is a social phenomenon that exists under these circumstances, therefore it must have cultural relevancy to these individuals.

In this thesis, ‘ethnicity’ is simply a convenient frame with which to discuss Romani individuals’ engagement in processes of social closure – processes that encourage Romani persons to promote their sense of themselves as ‘a group’ that is set apart from Czechs. Perhaps another frame would be preferable, but the important issue at hand is that in Skála, individuals like Alžběta and Zdeňka frequently categorize ‘the Roma’ collectively and in opposition to ‘the Czechs’ by saying “*u nás Romové...*” (Cz. With us Roma). They never use the word *etnika* (Cz. ethnicity) to describe themselves, and they only rarely use the word *národ*. The ways Romani individuals interpret themselves during ongoing contact and interaction with members of the non-Romani population are simply one thread in the tapestry of Romani sociality. Alžběta and Zdeňka also interpret their social worlds in terms of their individual agency, family membership and (un)friendly relations with Romani individuals not belonging to their family. Much

like the sociality of one population of Spanish Gitanos near Madrid (Gay y Blasco 1999), although Romani individuals in Skála think of themselves as belonging to a collective group that is unique and separate from the *gádže*, they are aware of the lack of ‘community’ cohesiveness and social harmony within the local Romani population. Both Romani non-kin and *gádže* (or in the Gitano context, *Payos*) are viewed as perpetual sources of distrust, conflict and violence. As members of an “imagined community”, Romani persons prove the authenticity of their morality in the “here and now” (and the “then and there”) through their kin relations, not through communion with unrelated Roma (Gay y Blasco 2005). However, Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s adamantly expressed desire for a *return* to social cohesion among members of Skála’s Romani population indicates that harmonious relations with non-kin are considered to be a more authentic manifestation of ‘true’ Romani sociality than are fractured relations.

Similarly, I use the ‘nation’ as a simple frame with which to discuss Czechs’ engagement in processes of social closure when they interpret their sociality in a *collective* way. I choose not to use the word ‘ethnicity’ because 1) the Czech *národ* is more frequently discussed in both academic and popular spheres, and 2) I believe it might be helpful to use two different social closure ‘frames’ in my analyses of Czech and Romani cultural boundaries, simply as an additional measure to make as coherent as possible what sometimes have the potential to be rather ‘dense’ descriptions. Whether it is other nations, ethnicities or classes that Czechs tend to collectively frame themselves in opposition to during certain parts of the cultural process, the fact that negative social descriptions tend to be ascribed to the Roma *collectively* indicates hostility based on a Romani *group* ‘identity’ rather than on the basis of the conduct of Romani *individuals*

(Hübschmannová 1986, in Lacková 1999: 4-5; Fawn 2001; Nedelsky 2009). Possible ways of understanding how Czech and Romani group-oriented categorizations operate at different levels of the cultural process – how, when, where and why *ethnicity becomes salient* – will be outlined later in this chapter.

## **ii. An Overview of Romani Social History before and after 1989**

Prior to World War Two, the experiences of Roma residing in the Czech lands and Slovakia were quite different.<sup>38</sup> While Roma in Bohemia and Moravia were typically viewed by authorities as annoying and superfluous, and were either ignored or ruthlessly driven out in order to repel further immigration to these territories, in Slovakia (which was part of the Hungarian territories until 1918) patterns were more like those of the Balkans, where at times Roma were considered to be helpful and they were either allowed or required to settle by the authorities. While working alongside other peasants,<sup>39</sup> Slovak Roma remained distinct as a result of their language, customs and physical appearance. They usually gained their livelihood by offering crafts and agricultural services to non-Roma. Nowhere in the Central Eastern European region did Roma live as completely independent and self-sufficient communities (Guy 2009). Although following the Thirty Year's War, conditions for Roma in both the Czech and Slovak territories worsened considerably and they were routinely the victims of drowning, hanging or other forms of execution, Roma in Slovakia were not threatened with death unless they failed to permanently settle within three weeks of entering Slovakia. Tactical incongruities

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<sup>38</sup> For a more detailed history, please also see Z. Jamnická-Šmerglová (1955) *Dějiny našich cikánů*, E. Horváthová (1964) *Cigáni na Slovensku* and C. Nečas (1995) *Romové v České republice včera a dnes*.

<sup>39</sup> Roma became more settled and habitually employed, with Romani women serving in and around feudal castles as washerwomen and domestic servants, and Romani men working as musicians, smiths, and soldiers.

between the Czech and Slovak lands might have had an economic explanation, since the elimination of Slovak Roma would have meant a significant loss of tax revenue (Guy 1975, 2001b).

Most of the brutal forms of violence against Roma came to an end after the accession of Maria Teresa to the Hapsburg Throne in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. A systematic assimilation program included the dispersion of Roma throughout the Hapsburg territories and the enforcement of serfdom. Roma were envisioned to become productive workers for the local landowning gentry and help transform the Hapsburg lands into an organized and cohesive territory, thus they were prohibited from their traditional occupations (e.g. horse dealing), from having their own Romani leaders, from speaking their own language and sometimes from raising their own children. Following the death of Joseph II in 1790, attempts to assimilate Roma temporarily ceased, and they were left alone to travel through the increasingly industrialized Czech lands, “apparently causing little more than occasional local aggravation” (Guy 1975: 207).

During the years of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938), Roma were classified as a separate nationality along with Hungarian and German minorities (Fawn 2001), yet they were still the targets of government-decreed settlement legislation. The everyday implications of such legislation on Roma living in Slovakia was felt less strongly than the effects of increasingly depressed economic conditions, leading to claims by the Slovak Peasants’ Union that, “since they have nothing, the gypsies either beg or steal,” or to claims by the newspaper *Slovák* that “the gypsy element, such as it is today, is really an ulcer on the body of our social life which must be cured in a radical way” (Nováček 1968: 25-26, in Guy 2001: 288).

The beginning of the post-war period was a turning point in terms of the living conditions of Czechoslovak Roma and their coexistence with non-Romani populations, thus it is a point of departure for further developments in their collective history. This discontinuity facilitated Czechoslovak society's perception of Roma as a new, foreign element and enabled a sense of alienation and superiority (Sokolová 2002). Most of the approximately 100,000 pre-war Romani population in Slovakia emerged from the ruins of war as a result of delayed action by the pro-Nazi Hlinka Guard. While a clear countrywide policy towards Roma was absent in the immediate post-war period, as so-called "social inferiors", Roma in Slovakia were still subject to actions that had been perpetrated against them during the war: pogroms, limitations on their personal freedoms, consignment to labor camps and forcible resettlement to locations far from cities and towns (Lacková 1999; Čaněk 2000; Davidová 2004). Slovakia's agricultural economy was less developed than in the Czech lands, and Romani *osady* (Cz. settlements) had often been left in a bad state if not devastated completely. As one of the most industrialized states in the region, the expanding post-war economy in Czechoslovakia experienced a labor shortage, and it was decided that the most immediate solution to the labor deficit was to draw on the manpower of Slovak Roma. As a result, some Slovak Romani families left for the Czech lands in hopes of obtaining better work and living conditions, usually settling in northern industrial districts or border towns where more than two and a half million Sudeten Germans had been expelled in 1946 and 1947 (Davidová *ibid*, Guy 1975); due to public perception of Germans as traitors, only those who could prove their involvement in resistance activities were allowed to retain their Czechoslovak citizenship. Official attitudes towards Germans remaining in the country



were rather hostile, and their assimilation was promoted until the establishment of diplomatic relations with the GDR in 1949 (Čaněk 2000).<sup>40</sup> Some Slovak Roma were relocated to Czech industrial centers by force and became concentrated in dilapidated inner-city housing. They were usually assigned the most physically taxing jobs and thus became “the most proletarianized and urbanized of all European Roma” (Guy 2001:289). Despite the fact that state authorities planned to concentrate Roma in certain areas, it was the very concentration (i.e. visibility) of Roma in these locations that instigated new programs for the transformation of Roma into model socialist citizens and for their spatial dispersal. After 1989, and particularly in the past decade, concentrated areas of Czech Romani inhabitants, some of which have their roots in communist-era congregations, have been discussed according to the paradigm of ‘the ghetto’ and the ‘culture of poverty’ (Asiedu 2006; Cameron 2006; Hirt and Jakoubek 2006; Jakoubek 2004).

Although the pressure put on Roma to assimilate was not consistent throughout the communist period, the regime rhetorically framed the ‘Gypsy problem’ as a socially based phenomenon. Immediately following the war, the conflation of criminal behavior (such as theft and beggary) with different cultural values (such as nomadism and family beliefs) during the creation of rationales to do away with Romani difference led to an interchange of ethnic and social categories as part of official discourse on both the local and national levels. The dismissal of ethnic difference as social pathology also crystallized popular attitudes about the Roma (Sokolová 2002) – attitudes that have

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<sup>40</sup> Sokolová (2002: 78-79) and Čaněk (2000) propose that the communist government’s wholesale strategic responses to complex ethnic issues such as the ‘Czech-German question’ played an important role in the way Czechoslovak society dealt with the Roma. The ethnic purification of Czechoslovak citizens’ social networks through force and violence enabled people to think that an ethnically homogenous state was desirable and that ethnic tensions can be addressed through administrative measures. Interestingly, pre-war Czechoslovakia was one of the most generous countries towards its national minorities, granting them linguistic rights in administrative and educational arenas.

extended without discontinuity into the present. Roma were viewed as victims of a capitalist class system, and Marxist-Leninist theorists argued that all aspects of Romani culture, including language, were antiquated relics that had been distorted by the oppression of previous social orders and therefore were roadblocks to their full integration. To underscore the point that a unique Romani identity was to be eliminated, the denomination ‘gypsy’ was officially replaced by the phrase ‘citizen of gypsy origin’, and in accordance with Marxist-Leninist theory, they were not acknowledged as a legitimate national minority (Guy 1977, 2006; Hübschmannová 1986, in Lacková 1999).<sup>41</sup> By eradicating poverty and providing employment for Roma – that is, by addressing economic reasons for ‘gypsy backwardness’ and providing education, health care and social security – it was argued that their situation would be ameliorated, their integration into Czechoslovak society would be facilitated, and that they would share in the zeal of building a communist society (Laubeová 2000).

It is generally agreed upon that as a consequence of full employment, a healthier diet, better housing and greater access to health care, Romani living standards improved during the communist period, yet the social division between Roma and non-Roma continued to be significant and persistent (Guy 2009). In the late 1970s, the Czech dissident group Charter 77 denounced the Czechoslovak government for intentionally keeping Roma in conditions of decrepitude in order to retain them as an unskilled labor force that could be drawn on when they found it necessary or desirable. Charter 77 quite accurately predicted that if the Czechoslovak economy would change in the future and the demand for unskilled labor would decrease, the Roma would not only be in a very

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<sup>41</sup> In contrast, Hungarians, Ukrainians and Poles were declared national minorities in 1960, and Germans were in 1969.

bad socioeconomic position, but their social ostracism and material oppression would be fused with a new (suppressed) ethnic consciousness.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the post-Communist state inherited a situation in which the Romani population was quite socioeconomically disadvantaged relative to the majority population (Nedelsky 2009). Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989, the emergence of Václav Havel as national president was a legitimate cause for Romani optimism, as he was the man who had been the primary champion of their predicaments; unfortunately, as the ‘conscience of the Czechoslovak people’, Havel’s empathy for the Roma and his view that the Czechs’ treatment of Roma “is a litmus test of civil society”<sup>43</sup> was not appreciated by the public at large. For the most part, the communist regime failed to acknowledge that members of the majority population as well as municipal officials harbored negative feelings towards the Roma, and it ignored demonstrations of prejudice and stereotyping despite their awareness of structural discrimination at the local level.<sup>44</sup> Popular attitudes about Roma during communism were mixed; despite the fact that Roma and non-Roma worked and lived alongside each other to a greater extent than before, and that any criticisms that non-Roma had about their Romani colleagues or neighbors were probably of lesser importance than their constant anxieties about dealing with challenging aspects of communist society, there was, for example, popular resentment towards Romani housing initiatives at a time when housing was in short supply among the general population (Guy

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<sup>42</sup> Charter 77. Document 23 about the situation of Gypsies in Czechoslovakia – Part I.

<sup>43</sup> Cited in Fawn (2001: 1195) and in I. Fonseca (1995: 293) *Bury Me Standing: The Gypsies and their Journey*. London: Chatto and Windus.

<sup>44</sup> Although in 1950, in a report entitled “A Report on the Life of Gypsies in Czechoslovakia”, the Ministry of Labor states that one of the most crucial aspects of integrating Roma into society as equal citizens was to improve the attitudes of the majority population (Sokolová 2002: 101-102).

2009). Today, many younger Czechs<sup>45</sup> have similarly prejudicial views to those of their parents and grandparents (Laubeová 2000; Guy 2001).

After 1989, Roma were formally acknowledged as an ethnic minority group with the right to state funding for cultural development and media (Barša 2002; Nedelsky 2009), but the separation of Czechoslovakia in 1993 brought to the forefront the question of who would qualify as a ‘citizen’ in the new Czech Republic. The Czech lands had already been left relatively ethnically homogenous following the Second World War,<sup>46</sup> and as of 1993, Roma constituted the largest minority group in the country. The Czech Republic’s dedication to building a sovereign community based upon civic principle versus ethnic origin was brought under international scrutiny when it was declared that only those who had held “Czech citizenship”<sup>47</sup> in the former Czechoslovak state would receive automatic citizenship. Although only one-third of the 200,000 - 300,000 Roma residing in the Czech lands after 1989 had been born in Slovakia or had Slovak-born parents, the government deemed them to be Slovak citizens because of their pre-World War Two origins there. Roma who wished to remain in the Czech Republic entered into a complicated bureaucratic process, which according to Human Rights Watch<sup>48</sup> was intentionally obstructive due to a desire to dispense with a now unnecessary Romani

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<sup>45</sup> In 2007, a survey of 1,685 Czech pupils aged 12 -20 performed by the NGO People in Need found that 75% of those surveyed have negative feelings about Roma, although the same number believe there is no discrimination in Czech society. 80% are convinced that the problems Romani people encounter are due to their ‘low adaptability’. Almost 50% believe that the state should create ‘special schools’ for the Roma. 30% would like to expel Roma from the country ([http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007\\_3540](http://www.romea.cz/index.php?id=detail&detail=2007_3540))

<sup>46</sup> Before the war, the country’s population consisted of a substantial proportion of minorities – in particular, the German minority in Prague, Plzeň and the border areas of the Czech lands, and the Magyar minority in southern Slovakia. In addition, there were Roma, Poles and Rusyns (Čaněk 2000).

<sup>47</sup> Czechoslovak citizens were identified as either Czech or Slovak according to their birthplace, but these designations were not printed on passports or other identifying documents and were therefore rather insignificant.

<sup>48</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Roma in the Czech Republic: Foreigners in their Own Land*. 8 (11), June 1996.

workforce.<sup>49</sup> Likely due to international pressure, in 1999 the Czech parliament passed a law allowing former Czechoslovak citizens who had been living in the Czech Republic since 1993 to obtain citizenship through a simple declaration (Fawn 2001; Swimelar 2008; Nedelsky 2009).

The concentration of Roma in the heavy-industry sectors of the communist economy meant that both unskilled and skilled Romani laborers were the first to become unemployed during the move to a market economy. Even in expanding job sectors that have traditionally employed large numbers of Roma (e.g. construction), Roma have often been detrimentally affected by the enactment of long-suppressed anti-Roma sentiment on the part of employers; labor offices often bend to the will of employers' requests for no Romani applicants, or Roma have been replaced by guest construction workers from the former Soviet Union who are willing to work for very little (Guy 2001). Although no official statistics are kept on racial discrimination in the employment sector, non-governmental organizations report that their Romani clients frequently face prejudice on the basis of their ethnicity.<sup>50</sup> In a country whose average poverty rate has ranked among the lowest in Europe (Sirovátka and Mareš 2006), in the year 2007, in contrast to an average unemployment rate of 6%<sup>51</sup> for the entire Czech Republic, the unemployment rate for Roma was estimated to be 70% - 80% for both genders and 90% - 100% in the

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<sup>49</sup> For example, the so-called 'Roma clause' of the new citizenship law required a clean criminal record for five years and proof of two years' permanent residence. Small-scale crimes driven by massive unemployment and housing shortages made both of these stipulations obstacles for some Roma. An internal government document was leaked which blatantly stated that the division of the republic provided an opportunity to export Roma to Slovakia (Human Rights Watch *ibid*).

<sup>50</sup> For example, the Czech NGO IQ Roma Servis submitted this finding in a 2007- 2008 report to the Czech Government's Human Rights Council. Cited in Albert (2007: 11).

<sup>51</sup> Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs of the Czech Republic, Information on unemployment by December 31, 2007 <http://www.mpsv.cz/files/clanky/4967/textangl1207.pdf>

three hundred poorest Romani localities (GAC 2006). Most Roma who are employed work as unskilled laborers (Albert 2007).

In comparison to poverty during the communist period, which was primarily linked to particular life cycle stages (e.g. becoming a pensioner, the birth of (more) children), unemployment is now the strongest determinant of poverty (Sirovátka and Mareš 2006). As a consequence of the higher educational qualifications required of people entering the job market, levels of Romani unemployment (and long-term poverty) since 1989 are also strongly linked to low levels of educational qualification in both the communist and post-communist eras. Although the communist regime emphasized the importance of a highly educated society as a whole,<sup>52</sup> and political elites promulgated a policy of increasing the access of lower social classes to education, from an economic perspective it made little difference if an individual had a university degree or was a graduate of the *zvláštní škola*; there was little disparity between wages for manual and intellectual work, and unskilled manual labour was often valued more highly than jobs for which qualification was necessary. Education was provided free of charge at all levels, and given the regime's prioritization of heavy industry, the education system particularly stressed qualification in technical and vocational fields. Central planning determined quotas of how many students could study particular fields or specializations and where they would be employed following graduation. Admission to post-secondary school was often contingent upon the employment and political leanings of a student's parents, as well as factors such as place of residence and nationality. Parents possessing low levels of education were hesitant to let their children pursue studies at the secondary

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<sup>52</sup> Although the Czech population's overall opinion of the intelligentsia was more negative than in any other state in the Soviet bloc (Simonová 2008).

school in case they were not admitted to university after graduation. No long-term reduction of unequal access to education was achieved in Czechoslovakia because the already-heavy dependence of children's educational paths on their parents' social status was bolstered by policies that promoted manual jobs and income leveling. The structure of the school system contributed to the intergenerational reproduction of education; the chances of children from lower classes to study at prestigious schools decreased, and since there was no other benefit to investing effort or money into obtaining a higher education other than its traditionally high cultural value, only members of higher social classes possessed the necessary social influence and cultural capital to be able to maneuver around obstacles to admission at higher educational institutions. Concordant with pre-communist trends, the cultural capital of one's parents (their education, and the acquired symbolic and linguistic codes connected with it) played more of a role in intergenerational educational reproduction than economic capital (Simonová 2003, 2008).

Overall, most improvement in access to education for lower social classes occurred right after 1948 (as a result of spontaneous post-war changes in the economy) and up until the Prague Spring of 1968. During "normalization",<sup>53</sup> the inequalities between children from families with higher and lower educational statuses started to grow. Statistics measuring maximum educational qualifications attained by the Czechoslovak Romani population followed the same general trend. Roma migrating from Slovakia in the post-war period were identified by authorities as being characterized by very high levels of illiteracy and low levels of educational achievement (Jurová 1993, in

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<sup>53</sup> Beginning in 1969, conservative members of the Czechoslovak Communist Party eliminated all possible remnants of the 1968 reforms. This included purging supporters of reform from intellectual, political and economic positions of power. Censorship was restored. Student organizations and publications were disbanded and citizens' groups were brought back under the authority of the Party. The effects of normalization on economic and political life lasted until the end of communist rule (Wolchik 1998).

Čaněk 2000). It was decided that such a significant disparity between Romani and non-Romani educational qualification in Czechoslovakia could not be addressed simply via policies of non-discrimination. A few measures were initiated in order to improve literacy for adult Roma and Romani children who had not yet attended school. A 1952 decree<sup>54</sup> stipulated that Romani children should be integrated into schools with other children and that special schools and classes for Romani children could only be used in cases where immediate integration was not possible. The assignment of Romani students into these programs was to only be temporary, as the goal was to achieve integration into mainstream schools as soon as possible. Some Romani children were preferentially placed in kindergartens prior to their enrollment in school in order to increase their future educational chances.

Nevertheless, official statistics show that by 1970, a significant proportion of Roma had not completed elementary school or were enrolled in schools for the mentally handicapped.<sup>55</sup> During the late 1970s and the 1980s, due to educational reforms that increased the difficulty of curricula and cut the duration of elementary school by one year, there was a marked rise in the number of Romani children attending schools for the intellectually challenged (Laubeová 2000). After the reform's inception, the proportion of Roma in special schools rose dramatically, and by the mid-1980s almost every other Romani child was attending a special school.<sup>56</sup> In contrast to the authorities' concerns about over-proportional representation of the Roma in special schools in the 1950s and

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<sup>54</sup> Regulation of the Situation of Persons of Gypsy Origin, a decree of 5 March 1952

<sup>55</sup> *Povinná školní docházka cikánské mládeže v ČSR v letech 1970–1971* (1972), cited in Čaněk 2000.

<sup>56</sup> *Analýza československé výchovně vzdělávací soustavy* (1988), p. 45.



1960s, by the late 1970s and 1980s officials seemingly were not disturbed by the elevated attendance of Roma at these schools (Čaněk 2000).

The post-communist transition, and the increased demand and competition for higher education that has come with it, has led to elevated financial returns for those who pursue higher education. The involvement of the private sector in upper secondary education and the proliferation of diploma holding graduates demonstrates that although there has been a reduction in the extent of unequal access to post-secondary education, the influence of the socioeconomic and educational background of a family on a student's educational attainment has grown (Simonová 2003). In terms of pre-secondary and secondary schooling, the Czech educational system continues to be one of the most selective among OECD countries (Matěju and Straková, 2005).<sup>57</sup> Rather than putting pressure on an instructor to consider the different needs of individual students during lessons, the system's high selectivity enables schools and teachers to rid themselves of weak students by transferring them to another school, track or stream.

In conjunction with the accession of the Czech Republic to the European Union in 2004 and a commensurate international expectation of minority rights' protection, the overrepresentation of Roma in schools with curricula for the mentally disabled was identified by the European Court of Human Rights as being unlawful form of discrimination. The practice of administering psychological testing for all students prior to their assignment to first grade classes has been highlighted as particularly problematic

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<sup>57</sup> Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development rankings take into consideration the age at which first selection takes place for a student, the proportion of variation in literacy testing performance, and the average socioeconomic status of students in a school.

due to the test material's cultural and linguistic bias in favor of Czechs.<sup>58</sup> Romani parents, many of whom have been educated in special schools themselves, are sometimes not fully aware of the long-lasting ramifications of their children's placement in a remedial stream and their parental right and responsibility to make a decision about which schools their children attend. Unless parents request it, schools are under no legal obligation to re-test pupils in special schools, thus most Romani students who enter special schools do not re-enter standard schools. Besides vocational or technical training, after grade nine all paths to further education are closed to graduates of 'special schools'. In some cases, Romani parents prefer for their child to go to special schools because 1) their child will be more likely to be in class with a larger number of Romani pupils, 2) their child has siblings who already attend the special school, and 3) they wish to spare their child from teasing and harassment from non-Romani students (ERRC 2009).

One change brought to bear by the Czech government's amendment of educational legislation via the 2005 School Act was the elimination of the category of schools formerly known as *zvláštní školy* and *speciální školy* (both translated as 'special school') and their transformation into *praktické školy* (Cz. practical schools). Under the new legislation, *praktické školy* fall into the category of standard primary schools, yet students who attend these schools are still following curricula designed for children with mild mental disabilities. The change is therefore mostly terminological rather than substantive. Many Romani parents remain uninformed about the alterations, and those who are aware feel that the change in terminology has reduced the social stigma attached to attendance at a special school. Moreover, the School Act's introduction of the category

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<sup>58</sup> Romani children are disadvantaged either because their family members primarily speak Romanes in the home, or because they are speaking a dialect that differs from the standard Czech upon which the test is based.

“socioculturally disadvantaged children” – a category that is explicitly associated with Roma in other government legislation – not only implies that cultures are hierarchal, but continues the long-established practice of cloaking measures which fundamentally target Roma in ethnically neutral terms (ibid; Čaněk 2000). Positive measures have been made, including the introduction of preparatory classes that provide assistance to children from ages five to seven so that they learn enough Czech and ‘social skills’ to cope with standard primary school requirements. Unfortunately, they may actually be serving to continue the tracking of Roma into the practical school system (Burton and Grahn-Farley 2002). In standard primary schools where relatively more Romani pupils attend, there is sometimes the phenomenon of ‘white flight’, in which non-Romani parents opt for their children to attend school where the percentage of Romani students is lower (Albert 2007).

The Czech government ceased collecting ethnic data on students in 1990, thus there are no statistics that comprehensively sketch the educational performance of Romani pupils (ERRC 1999, in Roma Education Fund 2004). However, a 2003 report estimates that: 1) although the vast majority of Roma participate in the Czech educational system, approximately 80% of Romani pupils are in special schools; 2) those Romani pupils who attend mainstream primary schools are six times more likely not to complete their compulsory education (i.e. ninth grade) than non-Romani pupils; 3) around fifteen hundred Romani students attend upper secondary schools; and 4) approximately one hundred Roma are university students (Nová Škola 2003<sup>59</sup>, in Roma Education Fund 2004).

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<sup>59</sup> *Tandem*, [www.novaskola.org](http://www.novaskola.org)

Laubeová (2000) and Dluhošová et al. (1999) suggest that the main obstacle to the successful integration of Romani children into mainstream schools is that the cultural values of the majority population that are reproduced in schools are in conflict with Romani cultural values. While traditionally, Roma might value education very highly because it is viewed as part of one's preparation for adult life, they propose that this type of education takes place within the extended family. Children are encouraged by adults to cultivate exploratory behavior, and initiative and responsibility are valued within a flexible framework without rigid schedules or constraint; maturation is not a matter of forcing an authority structure onto children (Stewart 1999). Social control is present but it is exercised by the group rather than by individuals. Along with the rest of the external world, school is viewed as a source of hostility and negativity, and because parents often have bad memories about their own school experiences, their children are instilled with fear. In the classroom, a Romani child is suddenly hindered from autonomous action and is expected to follow what are viewed as arbitrary rules. The worth of his or her own talents might be downplayed while unfamiliar skills are praised. Consequently, the disparity between the two educational systems fosters anxiety and aggression in a Romani pupil.

Interviews with Romani parents conducted by the European Roma Rights Center (2009), however, suggest that while many stress the importance of formal education in shaping their children's futures, their hopes for their children do not extend beyond the possibility of vocational training. In another recent study investigating the educational disparities of Romani pupils in Czech schools, it is noted that the ambitions of Romani children usually do not reach beyond what they observe their parents' activities to be on a

daily basis (e.g. cooking, household repairs, manual labor). Lack of professional mobility lessens the drive of students to study, thus this limited horizon is copied (GAC 2008). Conversely, during focus group interviews with Romani women who have sought adult vocational training and involvement in children's educational initiatives and other community social programs, Gulová et al. (2006) found that their interlocutors not only express an awareness of the relative value of education, but also of the importance of one's own "internal motivation" and "will" to achieve it.

### **iii. On the Subject of 'Romani Culture'**

Within the context of the European Union and discussions of minority rights, any consideration of Romani culture is politicized (Engebrigtsen 2007; Guy 2009). In the past decade, the Czech government's call for Romani integration into Czech society has included the declared development of "multicultural" or "intercultural" education, which is described as "mainly getting to know other cultures and obtaining information about them" and "...a change of attitude from traditional ethnocentrism to tolerant perception of cultural differences".<sup>60</sup> This definition has been criticized as advocating an absence of conflict with minorities – or a claim that minorities are 'normal' – rather than a celebration of cultural diversity (Laubeová 2007).<sup>61</sup> Yet a crucial question that generally has not been posed outside of anthropological circles is what exactly 'Romani culture' is considered to be. Despite the fact that the various local cultural patterns of Roma in Europe have been interwoven with those of people amongst whom they have lived for

centuries, Roma have commonly been perceived as an archetypical ‘other’ – bearers of a unique culture that has been unaltered due to their supposed marginality from majority societies.

An exception to the aforementioned lack of dialogue about ‘Roma culture’ is the dissension of opinion between Czech social scientists Pavel Barša and Marek Jakoubek which has permeated academic circles and made its way into the Czech media.<sup>62</sup> In response to the publication of several books written by Jakoubek and his colleagues at the University of Plzeň, Barša (2005) has claimed that their main arguments – 1) that Czech Roma do not exist as an ethnic group or ‘a people’, 2) that their traditional culture, which came to fruition in Slovakian settlements, was destroyed by their migration to the Czech lands during communism, 3) that even before their departure from Slovakia, Roma did not comprise an ethnic group because they have never possessed a unifying identity, 4) that Roma in the Czech Republic form a socially excluded underclass, and 5) that residual fragments of traditional Romani culture deriving from the culture of Romani settlements have been incorporated into a different ‘culture of poverty’ – jeopardize attempts to develop multicultural coexistence between Czechs and Roma. Barša (2002: 254) suggests that the most feasible way to integrate Roma into Czech society is to create elective courses for Romani pupils on Romani history, culture and language so that Roma can cultivate a “dual identity”; as the state of Romani language and literacy now stands,

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<sup>60</sup> The Czech Government, 2002: *Conception of Roma integration*. Resolution from 23 January 2002 nr. 87. Cited in Laubeová (2007).

<sup>61</sup> See also ČŠI, Česká školní inspekce, 2002: *Monitorování situace ve vzdělávání cizinců v základních a středních školách v ČR (Monitoring of the situation in education of foreigners in elementary and secondary schools)*.

<sup>62</sup> For example, N. Brabenec. 2005. Anthropologist Claims Roma Do Not Exist <http://www.radio.cz/en/section/curaffrs/anthropologist-claims-roma-do-not-exist> and J. Krčík. 2007. Co znamená nechut' reagovat na hypotézy Marka Jakoubka (What does an aversion to react to the hypothesis of Marek Jakoubek mean?) [http://www.romanohangos.cekit.cz/clanek.php?id\\_clanek=1630](http://www.romanohangos.cekit.cz/clanek.php?id_clanek=1630)

he argues, Roma “lack the cultural resources necessary to develop their own distinct society.” While this should be done within a multicultural context, in order for Czechs to endorse multiculturalism, their conceptualization of ‘Czech identity’ must be divided into political (if culturally specific) and ethnic parts. Only after a Romani individual’s sense of belonging to the Czech state is detached from a sense of belonging to the Czech ethnicity can he become a member of the ‘Czech civic nation’. Barša adds that even if as citizens of a liberal democratic nation, Czechs understand their state as promoting an idiom of universal human values and protecting individuals’ rights to personal autonomy and equality, members of the Czech majority do not simply think of themselves as a collection of ‘individuals’; they also consider themselves to be part of a unique Czech *národ*. Moreover, modernity isn’t simply an era based on abstract civic communities composed of individuals, it is also an era based on the existence of nation states. Since “Czechs are not skilled in understanding Romani citizens as anything other than variations of themselves” (ibid: 4),<sup>63</sup> they expect Roma to also derive their ethnic or national identity from the ancestral culture of their rural communities (i.e. from the content of folklore festivals and ethnographic museum exhibits). Thus if Roma want to be integrated into Czech society as full citizens, they have no other option than to let go of the residual aspects of what Jakoubek (2007) terms the “traditional Roma culture” and accept the ‘modern’ culture of the majority. Barša asserts that Romani integration does not require a denial of ‘Romani culture’ (i.e. the fairytales, songs and dances that members of the Czech majority think of as analogs to their own Czech folk traditions), but it is contingent upon their simultaneous membership in the Czech civic nation and the

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<sup>63</sup> My translation

Romani ethnic group (the latter of which is based upon a sense of *common origins* and a *common history*) (ibid).<sup>64</sup>

The implication here is that these folk aspects of ‘Romani culture’ are something about which Czech Roma are either oblivious or not well informed. Jakoubek concurs that ‘Romani culture’ –in Barša’s aforementioned sense of the meaning – is not only something about which the majority of Czech Roma are unaware, it is also something in which they have little or no interest. It is of no use to them since “the vast majority of these people want to live ‘like the *gádže*’. They want to dress like them, to earn the same money as them, to have apartments like them...” (2007: 4).<sup>65</sup> In Jakoubek’s words, ‘Roma culture’ is a “national Roma culture”; it is a high culture that has been manufactured and packaged by Romani elites and politicians. It is in direct contradiction to the “traditional Roma culture” of Slovakian settlements, which is based upon three organizing principles: 1) One’s individual identity derives primarily from one’s membership in a kin group; 2) There is a belief in ritual (im)purity – that one can become defiled through contact with other ‘impure’ people (e.g. those who have consumed ‘impure’ things such as dog meat, snails or faeces); and 3) One’s identity also derives from membership in a subgroup (e.g. *Slovenská, Olašská*) because one subgroup usually considers other subgroups to be impure.

Jakoubek (2006) states that his writings have been misconstrued and therefore widely misunderstood. He stresses that he has never said that ‘the Roma’ are the bearers of a ‘culture of poverty’. Using the premise that one component of a ‘culture’, which is transmitted orally during the life of an individual, is affected more by the social context

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<sup>64</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>65</sup> My translation



in which it functions rather than by other components of the given culture, he argues that isn't possible to say that Roma are the bearers of either a "traditional" culture or a 'culture of poverty'; certain components of both these cultures are similar (e.g. high birthrate, distrust of state institutions, living strategies oriented towards the present, male physical abuse towards women, the absence of private ownership, shared assets and food, and general reciprocity within kin networks), but any residual aspects of the "traditional Roma culture" that are found within socially excluded localities or (sub)urban ghettos fulfill quite a different function and have a different significance than they did in the Slovakian settlements in which they were originally formulated. Jakoubek suggests that under conditions of social exclusion – such as long-term unemployment, material poverty and substandard housing – persisting elements of the "traditional Roma culture" have probably become devoid of their original *romstvi* (Rom. *Romipen*).<sup>66</sup> In other words, cultural patterns found in these ghettos are better described as those of social economy than of Romani ethnicity. For this reason, Jakoubek opts to approach discussions of 'the Roma' from a theoretical perspective of social exclusion rather than in terms of 'primordial' ethnic unity (Jakoubek and Hirt 2006). It is impossible to state that 'the Roma' have a 'culture of poverty' because it is not possible to describe intergenerationally transmitted value systems and living strategies that are found within socially excluded localities as 'Romani' (Jakoubek 2005).

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<sup>66</sup> *Romstvi* has been defined by Sekyt (2004:191-192) as a feature of the bearers of Roma, and includes a knowledge of some dialect of Romanes, family (kin) traditions, hierarchal family/kin organization, recognized and rejected values, specific family rearing and education. It is a system of rejection and punishment, a way of communicating, a way of orientation in space and time, relations towards surroundings/ things/ nature/ people, stereotypes of perception, a manner of assessment and negotiation, preconceptions, superstitions and beliefs.

In one sense at least, Barša's and Jakoubek's views are fundamentally similar: they both agree that whether a Romani individual lives in accordance with aspects of the 'culture of poverty', the culture of a socially excluded locality or the "traditional Roma culture", these cultural components are antagonistic to many of the cultural patterns shared by members of the Czech majority. Jakoubek suggests that the so-called 'Roma problem' (the post-communist version of the so-called 'Gypsy question') is not a social or ethnic problem but a *cultural* one, in that the 'failure' of a Romani person to match the normative values and behaviors of the Czech majority – whether it is because their conception of humanity is hierarchal and based upon notions of ritual impurity or because their orientation of time is based on 'living for the moment' – is determined by cultural factors (which are influenced by the socioeconomic context in which they are formulated and reinforced) (ibid). All of the aforementioned argumentation directly and indirectly orients us towards the idea that, in the Czech Republic, Romani ethnicity becomes salient when Czech and Romani *individuals* understand their social interactions with one another in terms of their perceived membership in two different groups. *Romani individuals* may think of their united singularity in opposition to the *gádže* with scopes of varying degrees based on the specific context of a social interaction (e.g. on their street, in their town, in the Czech Republic or in Europe), and their Romani singularity may be based on different concepts (e.g. greater sexual morality, ritual purity or egalitarianism in comparison to the *gádže*), but it is always premised upon feelings of "living under siege" (Gay y Blasco 1999: 3), defense against humiliation (Stewart 1999) and the preservation of positive self-image. Given that hegemonic images and opinions about the Roma may be rejected, imbibed or ignored by Romani persons themselves, just how Czech

individuals conceptualize the their own uniqueness ‘as a people’, as well how they categorize and interpret Romani individuals’ shared group membership, is a matter of no less importance with regard to the functioning of Romani sociality on an individual level.

#### **iv. ‘Czechness’ and ‘Gypsiness’ within the Context of Intergroup Behavior, (Theoretically Speaking)**

While the combined effects of deindustrialization, economic restructuring and discriminatory practices in the spheres of employment and education likely constitute much of the causation behind widespread Romani unemployment, it continues to be the contention of many members of the Czech majority that Roma have no one to blame for their perpetual poverty but themselves. In light of their present-day circumstances, Czechs often cite communist-era efforts towards the socioeconomic elevation of Roma (and even a perceived favoritism towards Roma) as proof that Roma have squandered these opportunities; in other words, they either lack the self-discipline to succeed or they simply choose not to adapt to socioeconomic realities of the Czech Republic (Fawn 2001). Perceived abuse of Czech social services (e.g. that Roma prefer to live off of social welfare because they yield more money than they would from employment as unskilled laborers)<sup>67</sup> also breeds resentment among the majority population.

Popular and official rhetoric surrounding events that have caused international outcry and have been pointed to as proof of significant discrimination against the Romani minority in the Czech Republic (e.g. the construction of a wall by police in Ústí nad Labem in 1999 that separated mostly Romani residents on one side of a street from mostly Czech residents on the other side; Moravian mayor Jiří Čunek’s eviction of

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<sup>67</sup> According to the Czech government’s 1997 ‘Bratinka Report’, for a family with three children, this would be accurate.

several Romani families from the center of Vsetín to substandard housing on the town's outskirts) continues to be couched largely in ethnically neutral terms. Czech residents in Ustí nad Labem defended the wall's construction by saying they were tired of dealing with the "carelessness" and "unbearable noise, mess and smell" of their "non-paying" neighbors who lacked the social "decency" to "respect" their elderly Czech neighbors (Sokolová 2002: 1-2). Čunek declared that he was simply "cleaning an ulcer" from the town center of Vsetin (Cameron 2006). Within such contexts, descriptors such as 'uncleanliness' and 'impropriety' are culturally meaningful because they operate as codes which mark ethnic boundaries, but which cannot provoke accusations of explicit discrimination against Roma (Sokolova 2002: 6).

The ethnic neutrality of such descriptors is culturally significant in itself, as the Czech(oslovak) nation of Tomáš Masaryk and Václav Havel traditionally has been considered a nation of multiethnic tolerance (Fawn 2001; Nedelsky 2009). In the Czech Republic, denial of racism and ethnic discrimination is not uncommon. Like many other Central and Eastern European countries, the Czech Republic has experienced a rise in skinhead and right-wing extremist violence against Roma since 1989 (Barany 1994, 2002), and there has been a further surge in the past few years (Albert 2007). When racism is acknowledged, it is a phenomenon that is associated with these groups, while more prevalent non-violent discrimination against Roma – systemic, indirect or inadvertent discrimination – is ignored (Laubeová 2003; Nedelsky 2009). This could be due in part to the widespread conceptualization of 'race' in Czech textbooks as a biological rather than a social construct<sup>68</sup> (i.e. if one rejects the notion that some 'races'

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<sup>68</sup> For a discussion of this in the American context, see the American Anthropological Association's "Statement on Race" at <http://www.aaanet.org/stmnts/racepp.htm>

are biologically superior to others, one is not a racist). Although for the most part, the Czech government refused to discuss Roma within a human or minority rights framework throughout much of the 1990s, and significant government measures made towards Romani integration (e.g. The ‘Concept for the Integration of the Romani Community’ in 2000 and the Czech government’s National Action Plan for the ‘Decade of Roma Inclusion’<sup>69</sup> (2005-2015)) have been suggested to have primarily been initiated on the basis of prospective EU accession or internationally scrutinized events (e.g. the construction of the Wall in Ústí nad Labem or the mass exodus of Roma to the United Kingdom and Canada), shifts in attitude have become generally accepted as appropriate and ‘right’ at the elite level (Swimelar 2008). The interplay between popular consciousness about Roma on the one hand and the attitudes of the elite level on the other is rather antagonistic, as Czechs often perceive certain ‘normative’ cultural values of the majority to be at odds with those of the Roma – and vice versa (ibid; Fawn 2001; Nedelsky 2009). Even at the national level, Romani cultural values are represented as existing in opposition to those of mainstream Czechs, but they are portrayed in a less condemnatory fashion than they are at the local level and most often from a vantage point of social exclusion.

However, what it means to ‘be Czech’ or to demonstrate ‘normative’ Czech cultural values could be described as somewhat of a polarized issue. Since the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, Czech nationalism has been intertwined with

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<sup>69</sup> The Czech government openly stated that “the way in which [the draft] is accepted...will have a significant influence on the assessment of the EU Committee for the Czech Republic...and will be crucial for the entry of the Czech Republic to the EU...The integration of Roma into society will influence the integration of the Czech Republic into Europe” (2000). *Conception of Government Policy Towards Members of the Romani community Designed to Facilitate their Social Integration*. Decision 599. Prague: Government of the Czech Republic. Cited in Guy (2001a).

perceptions (both foreign and indigenous) of democracy, ethnic tolerance and liberalism (Pynsent 1994; Fawn 2001); these notions of nationhood were formulated primarily by nineteenth century “National Awakeners” like František Palacký, Karel Havlíček, and Tomáš Masaryk. All were democrats and all used the Czechs’ anti-Catholic Hussite uprising in the fifteenth century as a key historical event on which they could base their belief in both the individual and the (ethnically based) nation as rights-bearing entities. Masaryk in particular advocated the civil and political equality of *individuals*, but he also made clear that the new republic was to be a Czechoslovak nation-state that was *accepting* of minorities rather than a state with many *official* nationalities (Nedelsky 2009). Inspired by the Germanization policies that had predominated the Austro-Hungarian Czech lands, Revival nationalists defined the Czech *národ* by Czech language in particular; in more than one sense, “Czechness was the bearer of an opposite principle”<sup>70</sup> during the Revival era.

For the most part, the communist regime was unsuccessful at purging previously dominant Czech political cultural orientations from the psyche of the ethnic Czech population, thus post-communist understandings of nationhood are not the product of an ideological vacuum, but are manifestations of a normative continuity of ideas that has traversed not one but several transitions of political regime. This is not to say that ‘Czech national identity’ has been perceived in a rigid way, but that certain cultural norms which have been regarded as particularly significant markers of ‘Czechness’ have operated as interpretative frameworks despite periods characterized by vastly different social,

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<sup>70</sup> J. Patočka. *Was sind die Tschechen?* Pp. 177-178. In Pynsent (1994: 185).

economic and political conditions (Nedelsky 2009).<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, in the early 1990s the Czech press pondered anew Czech national characteristics; no longer were Czechs to discard their ‘Czechness’ in favor of traits typifying the ‘new socialist man’. In a series of public surveys,<sup>72</sup> participants offered negative stereotypes of the ‘Czech character’ (e.g. envy, excessive conformism, cunning, intellectual limitation, parochialism and egoism) much more often than positive characteristics (e.g. industriousness, skillfulness, and being democratic, highly cultured and well-educated). The *Čecháček* or ‘little Czech’ is the self-image into which various negative traits that Czechs regard as typical are collapsed, while positive self-images are usually expressed within the context of ‘Czech national tradition’ (Holy 1996).

Holy suggests that the coexistence of a very positive image of the Czech *nation* and a highly negative image of the typical Czech *character* might be explained by the operation of two different cognitive processes: “lived experience” and “perceived experience” (Thompson 1981, in *ibid*: 79-80). ‘Lived experience’ is based on the observation and appraisal of events according to a filter of cultural relevancy. Events either confirm already established criteria or bring them into question, the latter of which *can* enable cultural change.<sup>73</sup> Negative self-images are generalizations of individual Czechs’ lived experiences, the behavior evinced by Czechs they know, and their perception that certain behavioral and attitudinal differences ‘typically’ exhibited by Czechs are unflattering in comparison to those ‘typical’ of non-Czechs. While one person’s generalizations are not necessarily the same as those of another individual

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<sup>71</sup> The Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918), interwar democracy (1919-1938), fascism (1939-1945), post-war democracy (1945-1948), communism (1948-1989) and post-communism (1989–)

<sup>72</sup> See Holy (1996) Chapter 3, particularly pgs. 72-78.

<sup>73</sup> Emphasis mine.

because people's life experiences differ, a Czech individual's opinions are 'proven' by selecting the conduct of particular individuals and deeming it characteristic of others, along with those of whom the selector has no prior experience. Differently, Holy proposes that positive images of the 'Czech nation' are generated by 'perceived experience', which involves mediated accounts of life experiences rather than actual participation in them or witnessing of them. The experiencing of stereotypes and images involves one's cognizance and familiarity with them, but it lacks any basis for their reappraisal. Beliefs, values and traditions can become part of social and historical memory and be passed on through the generations even when personal involvement in the events and habits that are galvanized by them is relatively absent. Thus unfavorably evaluated historical events and eras can be regarded as anomalous rather than as evidence that a 'national tradition' is invalid (e.g. that there has always been a Czech tradition of liberal democracy despite periods of fascism and communism). Similarly, if a Czech repeatedly observes that other Czech individuals do not live up to the national traditions of being highly cultured and educated, the tradition is not discarded because it belongs to the 'Czech nation', which is not conceptualized as a collectivity of heterogeneous individuals but as an indivisible entity. Rather, an *individual's* failure to match the ideal is scrutinized, thus leading to the negative self-images of the Czech character that arise from the observational and experiential processes composing lived experience.

Certainly, an individual retains autonomy in relation to collective norms because one *can* assess one's own circumstances and formulate strategies that run counter to certain cultural values. There exists a universal human ability to do this, in spite of the fact that what is considered psychologically, financially or materially beneficial to one's



own aims is also highly contingent upon one's cultural environment and the internalization of one's own social position (Wimmer 2002: 27). Yet, the historical embeddedness of cultural symbols, values, myths and memories that bolster 'the nation' has the power to sustain a bond between an individual and certain collective norms even when the individual simultaneously identifies with other 'groups' (Nedelsky 2009). Cultural values that are markers of 'belonging to the Czech nation' are not strictly deterministic, but they certainly inform an individual's actions, perceptions and interpretations of things even when the boundary markers of other 'groups' to which an individual belongs are operating concurrently with 'national' markers. In terms of Czechs' self-evaluations, both 'lived' and 'perceived' experience encompass stages of the cultural process, ranging from one's internalized cognitive schemes to the operation of social closure. Whether one's evaluation of other Czechs is based on 'real' or mediated experience, the inclination to interpret given stimuli as 'negative' or 'positive' must be of cultural significance and 'rewarding' in some way on the level of the collective negotiation of meaning; if they were not, they would not be retained as part of cultural compromises which proceed on a daily basis.

The tension between the Czech Revivalists' advancement of the individual autonomy of citizens on the one hand (as a way to combat tyranny and cultural collectivism), and their belief in the Czech nation as a naturally occurring, rights-bearing entity on the other, is clearly seen in the post-Velvet Revolution rhetoric of Václav Havel. Havel rallied against the notion that 'cognizance of 'being Czech' is tacit' and is rooted in an implicit awareness of a collective history.<sup>74</sup> He considered the concept of "the

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<sup>74</sup> Macura 1993: 11.

Czech lot” (Pynsent 1994: 3) to be an “imperceptible embryo of moral nihilism” (Havel 1990: 84, in *ibid*: 9) because according to this sort of thinking, one can evade personal responsibility for one’s actions by explaining that he or she is ‘just like that’ due to his or her ‘Czechness’. One’s ‘identity’ is, according to Havel, not something naturally given but is the sum of one’s personal responsibilities. Havel’s suspicion of Czech collectivism largely follows from his opposition to a regime that systematically destroyed individual ‘identity’ in exchange for an international Soviet one (*ibid*: viii). On the other hand, Havel’s belief in “humanist and democratic traditions” that have been “slumbering in the unconsciousness of Czechs and Slovaks...and have quietly transmitted themselves from generation to generation” (Havel 1990: 14, in *ibid*: 6) and the resurgence of images symbolic of ‘Czech democracy’ (e.g. national martyrs like Jan Hus and St. Wenceslas), suggest that Czechs have considered themselves to be involved in a process of nation-building since 1989. While often seen as the dominant nationality in interwar Czechoslovakia (as compared to Slovaks and Hungarians), prior to 1989 the Czechs still had little chance to develop a collective Czech identity (Fawn 2001). Images of ‘Czechness’ have seldom been made explicit except during times of crisis (e.g. the 1969 self-immolation of Jan Palach in front of a statue of Jan Hus following Soviet occupation; chants of “Masaryk” and “freedom” during the 1989 demonstrations in St. Wenceslas Square) or during times when the implicit ‘Czech way’ of doing things has been threatened by those who are thought of as the ‘Other’ (Holy 1996). The ‘Czech martyr complex’ itself represents an expression of collectivism, as martyrs sacrifice themselves (and their individual identities) for the sake of a greater, shared cause (Pynsent 1994).

In the midst of the post-1989 revival and crystallization of Czech national identity, Holy (1996) found that for many Czech individuals, ‘being Czech’ is superordinate to other statuses, but being born in the Czech lands or speaking the Czech language is not enough ‘to be Czech’; a Czech is a Czech by virtue of his or her socialization in a Czech family, Czech schools and Czech environments. According to this tautological process, even Romani individuals who are born in the Czech lands, grow up in the Czech lands, and speak Czech as their first language can never ‘be Czech’ or ‘become Czech’ – not because ‘Gypsiness’ is carried “in one’s blood”, but because they have different “customs and traditions” that influence how they are socialized (ibid: 64-65). If Wimmer’s (2002) approach to culture is applied to this scenario, one could say that Holy’s informants imply that ‘Gypsiness’ and ‘Czechness’ are immutable identities because their inception is located within culturally specific, personally formative socialization processes. Once an individual’s *habitus* is developed according to his or her social position and surrounding cultural environment, his or her identity as ‘a Gypsy’ or ‘a Czech’ is something that cannot be changed because the cognitive schemes that channel his or her perceptions and interpretations of the world are already ‘set’ along fundamentally different pathways of thinking.

In both popular and official spheres in the Czech Republic, the established precedent of frequently speaking about the ‘Roma/Gypsy question’ in ethnically neutral terms does not mean that ‘Gypsiness’ is thought of differently than ‘Czechness’ – as a foundational, historically based and collectively shared ‘identity’. Pavel Bratinka’s (1997) government report on Czech Roma highlights this point. While he states that “the primary cause of the problem...is the inadequate adaptation of a substantial part of [the

Romani] community to the rules and values which the rest of society considers as a matter of course”, that “what we are dealing with is not the problem of nationality politics but social problems”, and that “it would be discriminatory to categorize an entire nationality as having a set of socioeconomic problems that are not...shared universally by citizens of Roma descent”, he adds that there are “historically originating handicaps” (e.g. “weak interest in education and qualification”, “low levels of knowledge of the Czech language” and “weak consciousness of the need to be concerned about the future”) that are *unique to the Roma*<sup>75</sup> (in Nedelsky 2009: 251-252). A similar mode of thinking is evidenced by a 2003 report on the “coexistence of Roma and non-Roma”. It found that 79% of Czech respondents would not want a Romani neighbor, with only “heavy alcoholics” (86%) and drug users (85%) being considered more undesirable. In terms of what Roma could do to improve their coexistence with Czechs, the top answers were: “adapt to the norms of majority society”, show “respectable behavior”, “work”, “educate themselves”, “improve morality” and “abide by the laws/ decrease criminality”. They identify the main problems of the Roma as so-called social problems, which would seem to connote that they stem from choice or weakness rather than some sort of primordial ‘Gypsiness’. These *socially* undesirable traits, which interestingly, are the converse of positively evaluated Czech ‘national’ characteristics (e.g. being educated, industrious and moral) are assigned to Roma collectively rather being based on the conduct of Romani individuals. Considering an entire ethnic group to be almost as undesirable as alcoholics and drug users demonstrates hostility towards ‘the Roma’ as an indivisible *entity*. This can be interpreted in two ways: 1) the negative traits that a Czech survey respondent

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<sup>75</sup> My emphasis.

assigns to 'the Roma' are generalizations of their 'lived experience'. Observations and events involving Romani individuals are processed through a filter of cultural relevancy and confirm already established generalizations. Undesirable behaviors displayed by Romani individuals are deemed to be characteristic of 'the Roma' as a coherent group, or 2) Romani individuals with whom a Czech person has had contact and who have demonstrated 'positive' characteristics (i.e. those that match normative Czech values) are evaluated as being *exceptions*. 'Negative' traits are not rejected because they are *collectively* carried by 'the Roma', but 'positive' traits are either disregarded as anomalous or they are not even taken into consideration because it is not culturally beneficial or satisfying for the Czech observer to do so.

What all this suggests is the following: even when Romani individuals exhibit markers of 'normative' cultural patterns whose meaning is negotiated and reinforced as significant during socialization processes within the Czech family, school or workplace, it does not mean that they are considered to 'be Czech'. They are still considered to be Romani or 'Gypsy' because 'Gypsiness' is interpreted collectively rather than individually. Negative images of 'the Roma' with which a Czech person is familiar, but which are generated by mediated accounts rather than by actual lived experience, cannot be re-evaluated. Even when individual Czechs have no personal experience of these traits or little experience with Roma at all, disliked aspects of 'Gypsiness' continue to be part of social and historical memory because it is of cultural significance to many Czechs. 'Gypsiness' holds cultural relevancy because many facets of it are thought of as being antithetical to positive facets of 'Czechness'. Even when a Romani person displays cultural cues that do not stimulate a Czech individual's cognitive ethnic / national

classification schemes, for many Czechs ‘a Gypsy will always remain a Gypsy’ because it is important that a Gypsy be what a Czech is not. What a Gypsy is not, a Czech ‘is’ (or should be). Negative traits *collectively* assigned to the Roma or positive traits *collectively* associated with the ‘Czech nation’ are both ‘myths’ because they are not true or false; for the Czech individual who does the assigning, the traits are “narrative expressions of concern for the society of which [one] is a member...[because] it seeks to establish a value which will help individuals orientate themselves” (Pynsent 1994: 43). As implied manifestations of collective experience, myths not only bind a group historically and morally, they codify responsibility and act as sources of authority during the never-ending negotiation of cultural meaning and reinforcement of cultural boundaries.

### **III. The ‘Trap of Ethnicity’**

Social and historical knowledge, which is embodied in myth, narrative and collective memory, informs different aspects of the cultural process. Thus far in this chapter, I have tried to provide a history of the various ways in which ‘the Roma’ have been conceptualized and I have given a sketch of the historical experiences of Czech and Slovak Roma, with a particular focus on the communist and post-communist years. Using different levels of the cultural process as a guide, I have outlined probable ways in which Czechs experience and interpret ‘negative’/non-normative and ‘positive’/‘normative’ cultural cues and values that are exhibited by other Czech individuals. I have also suggested ways how Czech individuals may perceive and interpret ‘normative’ and ‘non-normative’ cultural cues that are displayed by Romani individuals.

But how does culture ‘work’ for Romani individuals like Alžběta and Zdeňka, about whom this thesis is written? How are the cultural processes of Czech individuals relevant to those of Romani individuals? In fact, the social and historical experiences of Roma in the Czech lands, as well as the aforementioned cultural classification schemes and their modes of operation, *do* tie into the ways in which Romani individuals like Alžběta and Zdeňka perceive and make sense of their social worlds through their engagement with narrative on the individual, familial and local levels. Their social perspectivities, and the routinized networks of meaning and role repertoires on which these perspectivities are based, are not only informed by their social positions and the caches of culturally shared symbolic forms with which they are confronted on a daily basis, but are also contingent upon their perspectives on the perspectives of others (Hannerz 1992; Rapport 1997). Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s predictions about how Czech individuals generally perceive the attitudes and actions of Roma, and perhaps even their interpretations of how Czech individuals interpret the behavior of other Czechs, in some cases influence how they participate in their sociocultural environment. As they try to enact their own individual agency, their behaviors are shaped in part by how they think they are viewed differently than Czech individuals through a ‘Czech gaze’. Naturally, the ‘Czech angle’ of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s social perspectivities does not influence every thought, interpretation or action they make – far from it. Nevertheless, as part of a minority group that tends to be evaluated as objectionable or ‘abnormal’ by members of the Czech majority population, the relational nature of contemporary Romani individuals’ ‘identity construction’ is often discussed as being particularly fraught with difficulties. For example, Blénesi (2002:203) identifies the “identity issues” of Central and Eastern

European Roma as being perhaps the most complicated in the world due to their double evaluation by Romani and non-Romani individuals. While such double evaluation is undoubtedly characteristic of most ethnic or national minority groups, what is cited as especially unique in the Romani case is that evaluation coming from the ‘inside’ – from other Romani individuals – is confounded by their “schizophrenic” cultural identity (ibid: 206; Hübschmannová 1986, in Lacková 1999: 5). The Roma’s loss of *Romipen*, in addition to their incomplete integration into Czech majority society, has meant that the perspectives that Romani individuals have on their social lives is “unclarified” (Gina 1998, in Blénesi 2002: 204). Their consequent lack of assuredness on how is the ‘best’, most ‘advantageous’ or most ‘positively evaluated’ way to conduct themselves leads to various outcomes such as: 1) the concealment or denial of Romani ‘identity’ traits under certain circumstances (“negative identity”) (Castells 2007, in Blénesi 2002: 204), 2) the reinterpretation of ‘negative’ features as ‘positive’ (“resistance identity”) (ibid: 205), 3) the rationalization and acceptance of the majority population’s attitudes towards Roma (“legitimizing identity”), 4) and the creation of ‘new’ group characteristics that will redefine how they are evaluated by the mainstream and ameliorate their social position (“project identity”). For Hübschmannová, the loss of *Romipen*, as well as its concealment (i.e. the aforementioned “negative identity”), has been the most troubling to observe and the most debilitating to Roma themselves. The “protective mimicry of *gádžo* ways” that Romani individuals such as Ilona Lacková – the first female Romani member of the Czechoslovak communist party – adopt in order to experience equal civic opportunities has been mostly unrewarding. History has not only taught Romani individuals to regard promises of equality as bogus (a disappointment which has entered the Roma’s collective



memory and manifests itself either in feelings of apathy or mistrust), but has also taught them that even if they relinquish all aspects of their ‘Gypsiness’ – any cultural symbols that will trigger non-Romani individuals to associate them with subjective qualities like messiness, dirtiness and cunning – they will be identified as ‘Gypsy’ all the same (Hübschmannová 1986, in Lacková 1999: 5).

As I have suggested above, one reason for the ‘indelibility’ of ‘Gypsiness’ is explained in part by the ascription of collective guilt to Roma by non-Romani persons, as well as by its cultural significance to many Czech persons during processes of social closure. Another contributing factor could be the exposure of Romani individuals to what Hübschmannová calls the “superficial parts” or the “trappings” of *gádžo* culture. Such cultural images, sounds and actions are primarily transmitted through “people at the edge of *gádžo* society who do not typically convey the most cultivated of what the Czech language and culture have to offer” (ibid: 8). If Romani individuals display cultural signals that, in the minds of many Czechs, are associated with lower socioeconomic statuses or a lack of *kulturnost* (Cz. culture, in the sense of refinement or cultivation), or if they exhibit cultural cues that are not correlated with lower socioeconomic status but which are badly ‘performed’, their ‘Gypsiness’ is reinforced in the minds of their evaluators. As a consequence of some Romani individuals’ discernable lack of proficiency at the conveyance of cultural cues and values which are deemed as ‘positive’ or ‘cultured’ Czech traits, the *gádžo* part of their “bicultural personality” is rife with “inferiority complexes” (ibid). Even Roma who have ‘mastered’ these norms (whether they are genuinely valued or are simply well-performed affectations) – Roma who have ‘made it’ – never “lose the anxiety they have in front of *gádže*”. As Lacková goes on to

explain, “they’re afraid that they’re behaving somehow inappropriately, that they won’t understand what the *gádže* are talking about, that they’ll say something stupid, that they’ll make a laughing stock of themselves, and that the *gádže* will laugh about them behind their backs” (1999: 134).

A final roadblock against the veritable possibility for Roma to be seen as ‘non-ethnic’ individuals – to be interpreted with little regard to their assumed ‘negative’ group traits – is a simple ‘objective’ reason: darker pigmentation. Outside of specific social contexts, darker skin color is neither an inferior nor a superior trait, but it can become subjectively ‘valued’ if it is conflated with some other characteristic. Not only is darker pigmentation (a continuous trait) ‘coded’ as being an ethnic/national cue (a primarily discontinuous trait since one is usually interpreted as being either X or Y), it has also become a ‘cue’ for social and cultural traits that have nothing to do with the original classification (Tajfel 1981: 132; Ross and Nisbett 1991).

For Alžběta and Zdeňka, the ‘trap of ethnicity’ – their unavoidable classification as ‘Gypsy’ based on the color of their skin, and the conflation of their *individual* embodiment of Romani sociality with negatively valued *group* stereotypes – is especially profound since the enactment of their personal agency within the family sphere is strongly linked to their expressed desire for their children to achieve educational and material ‘success’ as it is defined according to ‘normative’ Czech cultural values. In the face of *a priori* and *a posteriori* rejection, antagonism and skepticism – in a world where ethnicity is not only salient but *over*-salient – how is it that these women strive to achieve and maintain a sense of personal integrity, psychological security and power? It is now

that we must turn to their individual narratives for an in-depth exploration of these questions.

### Chapter Three - Romani Sociality and the Salience of Ethnicity in Skála

*When I was working in Prague, I was afraid. It was a lonely time and it was a completely different time than now. Now it's easier, but I have bad memories of that. Natašo, it's too bad that I didn't meet you then because I was alone at that time. I know what loneliness is, so this is why I am always saying to you: "Don't be alone."*

*But I understand that you want to be young, and that you are not yet moving towards having a family. I had a family, so I wasn't alone for most of my life. But this is our Romani mentality – that we must not be alone. U nás, to be alone means death. You see for yourself that Roma are not sitting down alone outside. They must be grouped together. This is what Czechs aren't able to understand. We...I can't sit in my garden alone. I won't be like that.*

*You are probably thinking, "What is it with these Roma?" [laughing] It's because we have a perpetuating mentality. Unlike us, you are not in the habit of being among a lot of people. But I am. I am not in the habit of [lowers voice to whisper] being quiet when I speak. That pains me. When someone in my family is speaking quietly, I'll yell, "Why are you speaking like that? Are you ill?" And then we begin to scream and argue! Right? [laughing]*

*Sometimes my grandchildren say to me, "Babi! Be quiet!" And I say, "But I am being quiet!" And they say, "No, you're yelling!" And I say, "I'm not yelling! No! I refuse to be quiet!" But when I am not yelling, they say to me, "What's wrong with you?" – Alžběta*

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*I have a re-occurring problem. When I go out somewhere, I know how to dress myself very well. These other Romani women are not so well-dressed. Maybe some of them wear pretty clothes but they are wearing bad shoes or have bad haircuts. Maybe they are wearing cheap makeup and jewelry. Not me. When I go out, I look decent. Everyone notices me. The other women's shoes are dirty, but with me, everything is glistening and clean. I don't wear perfume. I don't wear a lot of rouge. I am clean and natural. Because I present myself in this way, when I go out, people say, "You're no Romka. Why are you all proper like that?" These men find me entertaining because I speak Czech very, very well. So these guys always say to me, "You're very clever!" and then they run away from me!  
– Alžběta*

## I. Introduction

The Romani saying – Rom with Rom, *gádžo* with *gádžo* – is never something that I heard any Roma in Skála say, yet its presence can be felt in almost any exclamations, explanations, discussions or narratives about relations between Roma and Czechs, whether the speaker is a Czech or Romani individual himself. Sometimes it seems to imply that ‘Gypsiness’ is some sort of internal essence or primordial identity (Zdeňka’s mother Karolina: “We’re different because we’re Roma.”; Czech blogger:<sup>76</sup> “Honor is foreign to *cikáni*...that is their deep emotion and insatiable desire”). Sometimes it is described as an *unfortunate but consciously-made choice* (Zdeňka: “Now if I go to the post office or into town for an hour or so, I’ve had enough of being around Czechs for the day”; Czech member of Skála’s city council, speaking to Alžběta and Věra: “Our children are afraid to come down here to the community center, but it’s really more of a Romani club, isn’t it?). Often it something about which people seem relatively *unreflective*, in terms of its existence as a daily social reality (Alžběta: “Why do we think that Czechs *should* act any better around us Gypsies? Nowadays, if Czechs and Roma are in the same pub and there is only one table and they have to share it, it is a big shock to both. This is because they don’t work together, they don’t go to school together and they never interact with each other”; Sixth/seventh grade teacher at the predominately Romani-attended *speciální škola*: “People who don’t live in the Czech Republic hear about the poverty and unemployment of Roma, and they just assume that Czechs are prejudiced. But there is no discrimination against Roma here!”). At times, it is thought of as a *disappearing phenomenon* that should be revitalized (Zdeňka: “The Czechs said to

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<sup>76</sup> From Skála’s internet discussion forum.

the Roma, “Be like us,” so now Roma have some bad Czech habits that they didn’t have in the past”), and at other times it is framed as a *question to be answered* (Alžběta: “What do you think *Natašo* ? Do you think Czechs and Roma should intermarry?”; Czech professor at Charles University: “So you are doing research about Gypsies? I guess you have seen how we Czechs are all xenophobes?”)

The introductory monologues by Alžběta, as well as the different ways in which both Czech and Romani persons interpret proximity and distance between their respective ‘groups’, are reflective of different stages of the cultural processes in which these individuals engage. The socioeconomic classes, educational levels, first languages and household structures that have characterized the daily lives of Czech and Romani individuals in the present and the past have a bearing on the internalized culture and networks of meaning that are activated during day-to-day cognition and interpretation, the cultural compromises in which they participate and the ethnic/national boundaries that they mark through various acts of differentiation. In particular, as members of a minority that is at once disadvantaged, disliked and feared, Romani individuals’ recognition of their ethnic group identity in socially defined terms alternates between proud affirmation of their Romani origins, their self-alignment with the ‘ways’ of the Czechs, their conferment of ‘negative’ cultural features (as they are judged by non-Roma) with positive interpretations, and their engagement in behaviors that serve to alienate them from Czechs *and* other Roma (Tajfel 1981).

In this chapter, Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s individual narratives about relations between Roma and Czechs *dříve* and *ted’* – before and after 1989 – will be presented. Their individual narratives are strikingly similar and are contributions to a local,

collectively constructed narrative about how relations between Czechs and Roma, and relations between Roma themselves, have evolved (or as Alžběta and Zdeňka see it, have *devolved*) since the end of communism. This local narrative illustrates their cognizance of negative media propagated about Roma in the Czech Republic, official and unofficial discussions about their widely-shared contemporary experiences and communist past, and the uncertainty of their future as fully-fledged and non-excluded members of mainstream society. This collective narrative, in which the ‘golden age of communism’ – an era to which they assign all positive aspects comprising Romani sociality – and contemporary democratic society in the Czech Republic – a time of cultural decline, assimilative pressure, social pathology and racially/ethnically-based inequality – are juxtaposed, is indicative of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s mutual engagement in the production and reproduction of a cultural compromise. Their agreement on the ‘truth’ of certain ideas, the accuracy of various social phenomena and the reasons why things ‘are the way they are’ is reflective of their mutual recognition of their validity and their shared wish to have certain persons in their social surroundings consider their viewpoints acceptable. These women’s narratives about relations between Roma and Czechs past and present parallel each other because they are composed of ideas, beliefs and social experiences that continue to ring true to both women. As Romani persons, they continue to be *interpreted* through ethnically framed discourses that are *not of their own making* (Somers 1994), yet they also *interpret themselves* through the ongoing creation of ethnically framed narratives that *are of their own making*. The situational influences, psychological motivations, emotional reasons and inferential errors that tie into their construal of themselves and others in terms of group memberships – the why, when, where and how

of ethnic salience – will be surmised through their narrative descriptions of their past, present and future social lives. Since the cultural significance of these narratives must not be rendered without regard to the influence of social factors that are currently relevant to these women, an investigation of the intricacies of ethnic salience must not gloss over the reality that the experiences that are lived by an individual and later verbally communicated to other individuals are bound up with present day social and cultural factors. For this reason, it is useful to start this chapter with Alžběta's and Zdeňka's recollections about their childhoods. These memories act as a foundation for many of the conversational refrains that are woven throughout their narratives and are explored in the different, thematically organized chapters of this thesis.

In this chapter, I will present some additional empirical observations on the time I spent in Skála's special school as a volunteer English teacher. As a social environment in which power is routinely contested between members of the predominately Czech faculty and older male Romani pupils, my experiences provide at least a small window into the ways that these young men embody their own visions of masculinity and assert themselves as persons who are disillusioned with more 'normative' cultural values that are either unrealistic or impossible for them to realize within their present-day social circumstances.



## II. Beginnings

### i. Alžběta's childhood

*For the most part, the memories of childhood that I have in my head are about when my family came here. I was seven years old when we arrived,<sup>77</sup> and for me it was something very big and very interesting. There were a lot of people – and unknown people! For me, it was a very big town and I didn't understand anything because I had been in Slovakia and I was primarily speaking Romanes and Slovak. We followed after my father because he came here for work. He wrote us a letter saying, "I'm ready for you now."*

*I had been living in an osada in Eastern Slovakia. There were perhaps eleven villages that had flooded there.<sup>78</sup> We lived in one such village and we had to leave, so they paid us money. With this money, we eventually bought a building in Okraj.*

*The town was full of Germans, so I didn't understand them. They were very nice – they weren't fascists. There was a lot of abandoned furniture because those Germans who had been forced out had left their things behind, so they brought over a bed and other furniture for us because they knew we were from Slovakia and they saw that we had been sleeping on the floor. They saw that we had nothing. Then they left and came back with more and more. They were giving us everything. They were very psychic to know that we had nothing, but my mother didn't want any of it because they were Germans. She couldn't accept the idea that they were actually kind. They were saying that my mother was terribly proud because she wouldn't accept any of it.<sup>79</sup> Yes, and actually we were proud like that. My mother and other Roma back then were different from how they are today. They believed that the Germans were mean, and so they didn't want anything from them. My mother couldn't understand why they wouldn't want us to sleep on the ground. She was afraid because she believed that the Germans would come back.<sup>80</sup>*

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<sup>77</sup> The late 1950s (~1957-1958)

<sup>78</sup> In Ilona Lacková's autobiography (1999:178), she speaks of a Romani settlement in the Prešov region of Slovakia whose population was relocated to the Czech Moravian town of Třinec sometime in the 1950s due to flooding. Třinec is located near the Polish border and is approximately 150 km away from Skála. Given that Alžběta told me that her family migrated to the Czech Republic from the Prešov region in the late 1950s, and that the name of the Romani dialect that her mother spoke is quite similar to the name of the village in which Lacková grew up (Velký Šariš), it is possible that they migrated from the same flooded settlement of which Lacková speaks.

<sup>79</sup> As part of Czechoslovakia's German-speaking Sudetenland, Skála's prewar German population numbered 90% of the town's total. The majority was expelled soon after 1945. The remaining Germans had likely been anti-fascist partisans during the war.

<sup>80</sup> As Lacková (ibid:133) explains in 1950 to a Slovak military commander who is irritated with crying Romani mothers coming to the gates of the army barracks and trying to give their sons food, "These

*My mother was haunted by the war. She said, "Be glad that we are living here and that there isn't any war." She had experienced what hunger was, what misery was. Here, people who didn't work were locked up as criminals. My mother couldn't understand why these people didn't want to work because she was always afraid that someday there wouldn't be any work. When there was food on the table, she would cry, and we children would ask her, "Why are you crying?" She would say, "Because I am glad that we have food!" When there was the war in Vietnam, many times I said to myself that I was glad I lived here. When there was the war between France and Algeria, children brought money to school for Algeria. I was glad that I was living here because I never experienced any violence. During communism, there were no skinheads. None! Automatically there was work for everyone and everyone had to work. There was justice. There was jistota. If you worked, you had food and a roof over your head. Today you don't get anything. Today there isn't any jistota. You won't get work. Now there are only the rich and the poor, but during communism there was a type of balance because everyone was more in the middle. No one knew what drugs were. Roma didn't take pills. My mother didn't give us pills when we were sick. She treated us herself.*

*For me, it was also strange how few people were living here on Živá Street. There were only three or four families. But people were so kind! They never said anything to me like, "Hey cigán!" No, there was nothing like that. Children listened to their parents. It was very nice.*

*We lived on Živá Street for twelve years. After that my father got a flat through his job at the textile factory. He was a laborer there, and during communism, the factories would often give accommodation to the workers and their families. My mother lived in that flat until she died. Almost everyone in Skála worked at the textile factory. Also, a lot of the men did work in canalization or building up the highways. No one ever stayed at home. Everyone had work and everyone was working. People didn't have a reason to be mean to us because my father worked, and he and the men with whom he worked liked each other. People would come to our flat and we would invite them in. Even when something bad happened, there was still something good that happened. The bad came with the good.*

*I had a wonderful childhood. My mother had thirteen children, but before the war four of them died and then after the war three more died. So after I was born, there were six of us. I had a brother who was twelve years older than me, and my sister Eliška was eighteen years older than me. Thus, I had it very good because I was the youngest! The youngest and the oldest always have it good. Mother and father were old when I was a little girl, so they gave me everything they had. Mother and father really loved me.*

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women are illiterate... and most of them don't believe the war is absolutely over and done with. They keep on thinking it's in hiding somewhere and that it can come back at any time."

*My family really stuck together, and my siblings looked after me because my mother and father worked a lot. Eliška was like my mother because she was the oldest. U nás Romové it is the responsibility of the oldest sibling to look after the younger ones. When Eliška began her own family, the next oldest sibling took over. That's how it worked. My mother looked after me, but my sisters also had to help out.*

*My parents were very, very proper people. They were always teaching us about housekeeping and budgeting. They always taught us to be thinking ahead. Not like it is today – no, no, no! They taught us to always think about tomorrow.*

*I can't complain. Father never beat us. Mother had to do this a little because father only yelled. He would say things like, "You just wait! Tomorrow I'll kill you!" and "Now I'll give it to you!" [laughing] But he never did. We all lived very well. We were happy and we held together as a family. Not like today. It was always like, "My brother still isn't here" or "My sister still isn't here" and so we would wait for them if we were out and about in town. And as we got older and started our own families, we all stayed in Skála because we had come here together as one family. Unlike today, families pulled together. We ate very basic food, but it was healthy! We cooked for mother and father – not like today. It was nice, so I reminisce about it a lot.*

*My sister Pavlina was always more of a proper girl whereas I was a tomboy. I was always wearing trousers and getting short haircuts. I remember how Pavlina had this skirt that she wanted to wear to a dance. I took the skirt from the wardrobe and I put it on and hid in the shadows. My sister was getting ready for the dance, and so she went to the wardrobe to get the skirt. She yelled to mother, "I can't find my skirt! Where is it?" My mother looked and my sister looked, and finally mother said, "I can't see it. You'll just have to wear a different one." In the morning my mother realized what I had done and she said, "So you had it the whole time?" And she laughed a lot about the joke I had played. I was very smart to play a joke like that! Such things happened with my sister many times. I was with Pavlina a lot. We were happy when we were small and we were washing dishes. My brother was always going to one dance or another.*

*When I started going to school, it was such an experience that I will never forget it. It is for this reason that at our organization<sup>81</sup> we really help children in their přípravný ročník (Cz. preparatory year) at school.<sup>82</sup> For such children, when they*

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<sup>81</sup> Since 1994, their branch of a nation-wide educational program has been functional in *mateřské školy* (Cz. preschools), and since 1996 in *základní školy* (Cz. elementary schools). It is an educational program that stresses the individual access of a student to school success.

<sup>82</sup> The *přípravný ročník* is a relatively new addition to the Czech educational system. It is similar to kindergarten and mostly is targeted towards children who have not attended preschool (*mateřská škola*) and are therefore not 'socialized' for school. *De facto*, this usually means Romani children. Instead of being set up at mainstream elementary they are mostly found within special schools. Consequently, many children who participate in the *přípravný ročník* are streamed straight in the special education track (G. Albert, personal communication).

*start to attend school, it is a big shock for them. We especially work with children for this přípravný ročník.*

*What I remember about the first grade is that it was a terrible catastrophe. I didn't understand anything, and both my mother and father were illiterate. In my opinion, the teacher who was there when I started to go to school was really stupid. She didn't understand my questions, and she couldn't see that my family didn't speak Czech at home and that my parents didn't know how to read or write. Sometimes Czech and Slovak are mutually intelligible languages, but I didn't speak that Bratislava Slovak, that pretty Slovak. My mother was a Romka and she spoke Šariština<sup>83</sup>, a dialect of Slovak that is similar to Polish. That's why I understand Polish so well! But it is completely different than that pretty Bratislava Slovak. I don't know how to explain the difference to you. I guess it might be like the difference between English in Texas and English in New York? My mother didn't speak Romanes because she grew up in a village where it wasn't spoken, but that's what my father preferred to speak. He was a míšeneč (Cz. mixed-blood), half-Romani and half-Polish. His mother was Polish and his father was a Rom, but he was raised by his aunt because one day when he was little and his aunt took him and her own son out as she was doing her shopping, their whole village was bombarded by the Germans. Everything was gone and everyone else in the family in Poland died.<sup>84</sup> Then they moved to Slovakia, but father rarely spoke anything other than Romanes. He only spoke another language when he was in the company of others. Otherwise it was always that old Romanes. My mother tried to learn Czech, but not my father.*

*So it didn't go well for me at school. For example, when we had to write a dictation of Czech language, everything on my paper was marked in red. Red mistakes everywhere. Mistakes, mistakes, mistakes! And then my teacher told all the children that I had a "red sea". I went home and I asked my mother, "Is the sea red?" She said, "No. It's blue." I said to my mother, "The teacher told me that I have a red sea." My mother didn't understand it either. So she just said, "No it isn't."*

*When I went back to school the next day, I asked the teacher, "Why did you say that I have a red sea?" And she said, "Ha, ha, ha!" and "Mistakes, mistakes, mistakes!" Then the children began to laugh at me and I didn't want to go to school anymore. It was awful. I was always crying and my mother didn't understand what was going on with me. My mother was very kind to me because she had me really late in life. She was forty-four years old when I was born and she was fifty-one when I began to go to school. So she said to me, "Don't go to school then. They're mean. Don't go back." But I wanted to learn. I wanted to know something.*

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<sup>83</sup> Šariština is a dialect spoken in the Prešov region of Slovakia. For a map of Slovakian dialects, please refer to <http://www.pitt.edu/%7Earmata/dialects.htm>

<sup>84</sup> Likely land artillery during World War I.

*Another teacher came by the room one day and she asked that mean teacher, "Why is that girl crying?" All the kids had stayed away from me and hadn't befriended me because I was making so many mistakes and they didn't understand me. I cried and I asked her, "Why do I have a red sea but the other kids don't? My mother doesn't understand Czech. I can't do this!" Then I cried even more. She said to me, "Don't cry. Wait here for me." She went to that mean teacher and she said – I heard her because she didn't close the door – "Why are you so stupid? Why are you telling a little girl that she has a red sea? Why? Why didn't you ask her why she doesn't understand? Why didn't you ask her how it is at home? Don't you know anything? Now she is mentally exhausted!" Yes, that one teacher was really tough. In the fourth grade she actually slapped me. In those days, the teachers had punishments, like making you kneel on your hands and knees. Or they would pull your hair or ears. Or they slapped you.*

*From that point on, the nice teacher would come for me and she would communicate with me constantly so that I would learn. So it came gradually, but I still had a lot of big problems. For instance, I didn't understand the difference between the long and short "y," and I couldn't hear čárky (Cz. accents).<sup>85</sup>*

*Later I made friends – both boys and girls. Later on, I also had another really kind teacher. He said, "Hmm. The long and short "y" is difficult, but you must learn it! Czech grammar is very complicated." But he added, "That doesn't matter. You just have to read a lot so you will hear the differences." So, he helped me a lot.*

*There were some German students at school, but very few. The Czechs swore at the Germans. However, they liked being with us Roma because they were different and we were different too. Like I said, there were only a few German and Romani families on Živá Street. The whole street was empty and everyone was afraid to live here because they were waiting for the Germans to return. I played outside with the German kids, and we pretended that we were partisans in the war [laughing]. There were Slovaks, Hungarians and Russians living here too. We were the same and we were equal. It was good. I am very glad to think about those friends. I had two German girls as friends, Gerda and Mia. They were such super girls. It was a very fine childhood.*

*In the sixth grade, I had a different teacher. That year we were always doing arithmetic and it wasn't going well for me. And that nice teacher from before who had helped me with pronunciation came by and asked the sixth grade teacher, "Why are you always giving them arithmetic to do? It isn't useful!" He called the teacher names, and then he said, "Why don't you just teach them addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division? They will need that for life." So, that nice teacher would come by and help us with addition and subtraction instead of arithmetic. I was happy to try to learn it. That nice teacher saw what would and*

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<sup>85</sup> The čárka is an acute accent (´) that is used to mark long vowels in the Czech alphabet. Short vowels aren't marked.

wouldn't be useful for me. He knew that I would never need algebra, but that I would need to know how to add or subtract when paying for something or getting my paycheck.

He was wonderful – but strict too. He educated me because he knew how to teach well. I always listened to him. He taught me about Czech history and he taught me to love literature. He showed us films and we did theatre. He also helped me to make more friends. He would say, “Alžběto! Come here and help me with this!” The other students saw how involved I was in everything, and then they began to talk to me more and more.

What I am trying to say is that a lot of a student's success depends on the teacher and how he explains things to the children. That teacher immediately showed me things in a way I could understand, so I learned. He also told me that I was a good friend and that I was an equal. When he spoke, he demonstrated that he really believed this. Similarly, that nice teacher who helped me to learn to speak Czech when I was crying tried to find what was good in me. Then she showed the other children. She saw that I was learning to embroider well, that I was good at gardening, and that I could sing well. As I learned to sing better and better, I came into my own. I also learned how to sketch, at least a little bit. She would say to the other children, “Look! Look how well Alžběta is sketching.” Then the children would come and look. I gradually made friends this way.

I finished school at the end of the seventh grade, around 1965. I was fifteen years old. When you were fifteen, you had to go work. Even if I had had good grades, I wouldn't have been allowed to continue going to school because it was against the law. There was a rule that said that you had to go to school through the eighth grade. I only went through the seventh grade because I had started school late, only after my family had moved to Skála. Then I had to repeat the first grade because I didn't understand anything, and it was good that I repeated the first grade because I learned how to speak! But because I had to repeat that first year, I couldn't do a year in addition.

That nice teacher – the old one – he said to me, “So, I guess you've been referred to go work now?” I said, “Yes. I'd like to be a hairstylist, but my mom won't allow me.” Even if I had been able to continue going to school, my mother wouldn't have allowed me to study. I wanted to be a hairstylist, but she wouldn't allow me to go and get certification for that because u nás, people used to think that a Romani girl who lived away from her mother was a bad girl, an easy girl. My mother and my brothers said I wasn't allowed. I had to stay at home so that they could see that I was decent.

That teacher said to me, “I'll remember you for my whole life. Don't be ashamed that you can't go on to the gymnázium<sup>86</sup> because you have intelligence and you

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<sup>86</sup> Secondary school (UK) or high school (US) equivalent.

*have perception. Don't be ashamed because you will see that life is terribly long. I know that for myself. You are a clever girl and above all you are a human being. None of our own portraits are ever completely perfect. No one knows everything. We are all learning."*

*Then he asked me, "What do you want?" And I said, "To be smart." He said, "But you are smart!" Then I said to him, "I will have children someday, and my children will be very, very smart!" [laughing] He laughed and said, "I believe that you will keep your promise." And I did keep it! I always knew that my daughter would study at the gymnazium. Věra went beyond that – she went to the vysoká škola (Cz. college) and then on to the university. Then she got a Master's! I have great joy about that. My children proved themselves and I accomplished what I promised.*

*I'll always remember that conversation with him, that promise I made. I think about it a lot. He was a wonderful and smart person. Maybe he was like this because he wasn't from a wealthy family. They were common folk. His mother and father were farmers. Maybe when he began to study the other students also laughed at him because he was so common. Maybe this happened to him and he didn't want the same thing to happen to me.*

*So I had a very calm life during childhood. Some speak about the golden age of communism. And yes, there were some things about communism that were bad. For instance, someone who was very smart wouldn't be allowed to study because he wasn't a communist. That wasn't fair. Or maybe a student had a brother who was living in a western state, so this student wasn't allowed to study. But then there might be a student whose father was wealthy, and so he was allowed to study. And why? These were bad things.*

*But on the other hand Natašo, I wasn't afraid to go and sit outside in the evening. People were happy, and most importantly, they weren't mean! They weren't mean like today. A mother, father and their children stuck together more. Today a brother and sister might kill each other. Family doesn't mean anything. Today I see these young people, and they bother you and they steal from you. When I was young, we stole apples and pears. Yes I admit we stole such things, but we never stole money or killed someone in order to get drugs. It wasn't like that before. Today, everything in the world is fast. Quickly, quickly, quickly! Young people don't respect the family. They don't respect anyone. They don't respect anything. It isn't good. I don't like this type of world, so I am glad that I had such a beautiful childhood. I had everything I needed.*

## ii. Zdeňka's Childhood

*I had a quite a nice childhood, but I also had a lot of pain. My mother was a good person, and my father was too, but father was always on my mother about things. He gave her a very hard time. So in this way, I would have liked to have had a different childhood. But only somewhat different, you know? I also would have liked to be shuffled differently between my siblings in terms of our order. One sister is twelve years older, one brother is ten years older, and the other brother is eight years older. And then there is me. I also have a sister six years younger than myself. My older sister and I chatted with each other a lot - not like it is with my daughters Erika and Adela. Erika doesn't sit and talk with her younger sister. She wouldn't. She doesn't try to help her sister out.*

*My siblings, my friends and I would go out to farms, you know where there are cows and goats. We went out there for cherries, and then we would buy them and eat them. When we returned home, however, we always saw how much our mother was toiling away and how she was getting beat by our father. We cried a lot. It was terrible, like it is for me now. I am getting the same thing from my husband. Just like my husband, my father wouldn't allow my mother to go out, and she wasn't allowed to smoke in front of him. Ah! I don't want to talk about it.*

*But my father wasn't bad! Some of my favorite memories are of my father. He was kind, but he was really terrible to my mother, you know? Father was good with us children, and he really loved us, but with mother he was just awful. My mother was only fifteen when she married him. Then they came to Skála from Slovakia because there was work here. My mother had a lot of suffering her whole life because of him. Once she was pregnant with twins, but they died in her the ninth month of pregnancy because my father killed them. When mother and father went out to the pub, he would get really jealous of the other men. They didn't like it when my parents came to the pub because there would always be fighting. And then, when they came home from the pub, we were afraid that there would be more beating. He was really jealous because he loved her a lot. Now it has been ten years since his death. I miss him.*

*I came from a poor family, but I still had a very good upbringing. My mother and father raised me well. I learned well. I went to school. I didn't steal. I am raising my children in this way too.*

*My father did work in canalization. Like mining. He was a very hard worker. In fact, he was recognized as the best worker in the region. My mother worked at the textile factory, sewing gloves, towels, sheets and covers. Sometimes she worked eight hours, or even twelve or sixteen hours. She was doing a lot, and as a young girl, I had to clean and cook. I was ten years old and I had to do that because my mother was tired. In that respect, I didn't have a nice childhood. But my school years were nice. U nás, my older sister looked after us a lot. My sister was*



*already like a little mother. She took me to school, she prepared things and she bathed me because mother had to work from the evening until the morning. Or she went there at two in the morning and then came home at eleven o'clock.*

*My brothers and sisters went to work at the age of sixteen. One of my brothers was in the army for two years. Everyone was always working. We never knew what hunger was, but in the past, we didn't have the type of food selection that is available today. Of course, it was because of communism. There weren't any bananas. There were queues for things. Yes Miloš! [speaking to her son] We didn't have such things! And what do you have? Chocolate every day! We didn't have those things before. We didn't know what they were. But my mother baked buchty (Cz. Buns) and made cocoa – things like that! I still cook a lot, and I am teaching my children to cook as well. When I was a child, my siblings and I went home for lunch and for snacks. When we had some extra money, we would go to the mlékárna (Cz. dairy shop) or the buffet in the morning. My sister and I would get some cocoa and some type of dessert, or rolls with cheese and salami. Then we would head to school. When we came home from school, we had to do our homework. Then we had to clean, make the beds...everything! I had to do my homework because the director of the school was a friend of my mother. As I've been telling you, it used to be different. People liked each other. They weren't mean to each other like they are now.*

*We always had a nice time at Christmas. Father bought us presents, and we all looked forward to the holidays. Before, it was very different than it is now. Now everything is hurried – quickly, quickly, quickly! Before it wasn't like that. Before, people liked each other. Do you understand? They really helped each other a lot. There were many Roma in Skála but they didn't all live on Živá Street like today. Instead, a lot of them lived in the Workers' House.<sup>87</sup> Almost all the Roma lived there, and they really stuck together. Everyone. They were very kind people, and they really liked each other. If one person made some buchty or some dessert, then they would give some to everyone else. Now it isn't like this. Now people only think about themselves. People think like this: "That guy is wealthy. He has this and that, but I don't have anything." Or else they think to themselves: "If you don't have anything, then I can't have fun with you."*

*Before, both Roma and Czechs lived on Živá Street. Everyone got along very well. Even ten years ago, it wasn't as bad as it is now. The Czech children played with our children. We all grilled out together. We never had bad words with each other. It was simply perfect.*

*During my childhood years, we went to roasts a lot, like for čarodějnice.<sup>88</sup> When we were little girls, Věra, Ludmila and I played outside and we went fishing. We*

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<sup>87</sup> Today this residential area is renamed, but it is still predominately inhabited by Roma. This locality was also identified by the Czech government as a socially excluded Romani locality.

<sup>88</sup> "Burning of the witches" is a Czech holiday celebrated on 31 April. It is the day on which the winter is ceremonially brought to an end. In pagan times, the Slavs made an effigy of Morana, the goddess of nature,

*had parties and we played cassettes. We really liked The Beatles and ABBA. We had a beautiful childhood. Our childhood is....it's a history for us. I really like Věra because we grew up together. We were very good friends. All us girls helped each other out a lot. If one girl didn't have something – like a shirt, for example – then another girl would loan it to her. If one girl had something nice, she would loan it to the others, and then it was always returned to her.*

*During the weekends in the autumn, my family would go to the woods and camp out in tents. My father would cook us very good food. And in the summer, my father would build us a swimming pool out of wood – like a crate – and then we would bathe in it! I truly don't understand my husband because he doesn't do these sorts of things for our children.*

*And all year, we would go to the movies. It only cost 1 Kč. We would go to the movies at 6 pm with mother and father, or I would just go with my brothers and sisters on Saturday afternoon. We would buy some sweets. It was perfect! We had everything. We only saw foreign films, and when we heard that an American film would be playing, it was like, "Hey! Let's go! An American movie is here!" We would look forward to it the whole week. Today, our children don't even know what the cinema is. They don't even know where they would go to find one! And the cinemas today don't have fairytales for the children to watch, like we did. In the movies, it's just murder, murder, murder. There is only criminality. That's all there is on television. It's one criminal after another. During my childhood, it wasn't like that. They showed us beautiful Italian films, beautiful movies with people falling in love. All we would see is a kiss, and then they erased the rest. They couldn't show us that other stuff. Father and mother marveled at it anyway. This was completely normal.*

*Before, you had to dress up for zábavy (Cz. parties, festivities). My father had nice clothes that he would wear. My mother had pretty dresses. That isn't how it is now. Now a woman wears jeans and a swimsuit when she goes out. That isn't nice. A woman should dress well when she is out in society. She should be nice and neat. Not like how it is now, with these short things and t-shirts. If I go out, I spruce myself up. When I first got married, I was thin and I had some nice clothes. I would wear them out, not just jeans, like I am some frajerka.<sup>89</sup> [laughing] Prosím tě!<sup>90</sup> But now, it is normal.*

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death and winter. They would burn the effigy and then dump it into the river so that winter would symbolically be done away with and the arrival of spring would come. With the advent of Christianity, the holiday changed. Witches were believed to control the weather, and it was thought that if a winter was long, it was because the local witch exerting a punishment on the town. *Čarodějnice* is a day to honor the witches so that spring will come. In present day, huge bonfires are made in town squares and are set aflame at dusk. Kids dress up as witches and roast sausages. There is singing and partying. An effigy of a witch is thrown into the bonfire. When the sky gets dark, people look into the sky in order to see if there is a witch floating above their heads.

<sup>89</sup> A *frajer* (masc.) or a *frajerka* (fem.) means something like a “cool” guy or girl or a “hot shot.”

<sup>90</sup> A common phrase in Czech conversation. Literally it means “I ask you,” but usually it connotes something like, “Oh please!”, “Whatever!”, or “I never!”

*Before, a cigánka had to wash things by hand. Now she uses an automatic washer. We didn't know what an automatic washer was at that time. During communism, we Roma didn't have baths or warm water at home. Mother would warm the water on the stove, and we had to bathe like that every day. When we got up for school in the morning, we often couldn't shower. Czechs had warm water. If some Rom had warm water at home, it was because he was living in a panelák, and that was really something!*

*Now everything is easier – which is better, I know – but this nation is meaner. Children have brand name shoes and this and that. Before we didn't have these labels. We didn't know what labels were. The quality of food was better. Now when you buy meat, it isn't very nice because they make the cows grow faster and faster. During communism the meat was beautiful!*

*What I remember about school is that for the first few years, I didn't want to go! Father gave me 10 Kč each morning, but back then, 10 Kč wasn't a coin – it was paper. That was a lot of money during communism. Father gave that to me, but instead of going to school, I would go to the buffet and eat. I would stay there from 9am until 2pm, and then I would go home! [laughing] Finally, the teacher asked my mother, “Why is your daughter not coming to school? Is she ill?” My mother said, “No. She's been going to school everyday.” The teacher said, “Well she hasn't been coming here since the 14th of this month” Then my mother asked me, “Zdeňko, are you going to school?” I said yes. So then my mother waited for me to leave for school one morning. She watched and watched, and then she saw me go to the buffet. She came in and said, “Aha! So you're here!” And I said, “Mother no! I don't want to go!” She told me, “Get out of here and go to school.”*

*After that, I went to school, but I was afraid. There was a teacher there that was always hitting us. One time she went after me and slapped me, and then I wet my pants. There used to be mean teachers. They weren't like these nice teachers today. Some were very mean. You had to listen, listen, listen. Nowadays, the kids act crazy in school, but before we couldn't behave like that.*

*The first grade was nice, but after that I went to the zvláštní škola. I received ones<sup>91</sup> when I was at the základní škola, but because I didn't want to go to school for those fourteen days I spent in the buffet, it was all over for me. Otherwise I would have kept going to the normal základní škola. But at the zvláštní škola, I learned anyway. I was the only one in the first grade there, and I received excellent teaching. Then, the zvláštní škola didn't just have Romani students. It was full of Czechs too.*

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<sup>91</sup> The conventional grading system used in Czech secondary schools is: 1 (*jednička*) *výborně* (excellent); 2 (*dvojka*) *velmi dobře* (very good); 3 (*trojka*) *dobře* (good); (*Čtyřka*) *vyhověl* (pass); (*pětka*) *nevyhověl* (unsatisfactory/fail). <http://www.euroeducation.net/prof/czechco.htm>

*In school, we Roma were getting honors in many things! Everywhere we went, we won first place. We also exercised a lot, playing basketball, volleyball and other sports. We Romani girls went to dancing and singing competitions as a city ensemble in Prague, Hradec Králové, Brno and Ostrava. I also entered into art exhibitions, and I would always get first or second place because I drew very well. I drew pictures of the town or trees.*

*At one singing competition in Ostrava, this girl Katka fell down and was too injured to sing. She could sing a wider range of notes than me. There were a couple of directors there, and they said, "So Zdeňko, you're going to sing as a soprano today." And I said, "But I can't!" They said that I would do it anyway. I said, "No, I'm not going up there! I'm afraid." But everything was okay. And then I sang the song, "Ave Maria" alone. Afterwards, the director came and said, "That was gorgeous!" I was completely red because I was blushing! I got a sewing machine and gloves as a gift.*

*At one of the competitions in Ostrava, when we Romani girls were very young, they made spaghetti for us at the hotel where we were staying. We had never seen spaghetti before! [laughing] We said to each other, "What is this?" The waiter had to explain to us that it was Italian food. We spilled it all over the floor because we didn't know how to eat it! Another time, when we were in Hradec Králové, I ate something bad and I was vomiting a lot. I had to stay in the hospital for one week, and when I came home, my father was crying because he was happy that I was back.*

*In the fifth grade I fell in love with my teacher because he was handsome and young. I was always telling my mother and father how much I liked him. He taught us sports. He knew how much we liked him, but we were still young girls! It was a childish love. From the sixth grade to the end of the eighth grade, I really liked it. We had a really good teacher.*

*When I was fifteen, we had a school-leaving ceremony, and that was nice. We were crying, and the director of the school was crying too because we students had done so much during our attendance. She was afraid that she wouldn't have children like us in the next generation. The last time I saw her, she was quite old, and I already had children of my own. She asked me, "Zdeňko, do you remember when you left school?" and I said yes. She said that there weren't girls like us again, like our generation. The teachers always had joy that we were there. They had great happiness towards us because we never did anything shameful.*

*Yes, these sorts of things I remember. And before, Romani children learned about čistota (Cz. purity) and about how they should behave. There was a week-long tabor where we learned about such things. We girls always won first place for Skála during cleanliness and hygiene competitions. Ask Věra! We went on free excursions to lots of different towns because it was like this during communism.*

*We had friends all over. There was real přátelství (Cz, friendship). This was the type of childhood that we used to have.*

### **III. Czechs and Roma, *Dřívě* and *Ted*'**

Alžběta's and Zdeňka's location of their personal agency within 'the family' of the present day, and the family's central position within the complex of Romani sociality past and present, is on the surface of things perplexing. In their narratives, the comparisons they draw between the type of family in which they were raised and the type of families in which their children and grandchildren have grown up communicate that they don't seem to consider today's family dynamic to be based on any source of security, certainty, empathy or support. They do not have an overly idealized view of their childhood experiences; for Zdeňka in particular, her family household was subsumed by her father's drinking and his abusiveness, and throughout this thesis, Zdeňka's narratives about relationships between men and women and the occurrence of domestic abuse are very much set within a generational framework. She reflects on her mother's and sister's experiences (as well as her past thoughts *about* their experiences) in relation to her own troubled relationship with her husband. Her attempts to *prevent* abuse from re-occurring in her children's marriages, however, are a primary manifestation of the enactment of what little agency she feels she can realistically exercise within the one realm she has some influence – the household. Alžběta's desire to become skilled in a profession (and as we will later see, her freedom of choice in marriage) was hampered by her family's interest in safeguarding her (and therefore their) honor and reputation. Like Zdeňka, she has similarly funneled her efforts towards her children and their educational

success. In the family sphere, there is the opportunity (even if it is a restricted opportunity) to affect change.

It is not irrelevant that within their family oriented narratives, they connect *their* interest in education and ‘decent’ behavior with that of their children’s potential successes. First, their narratives show that for both women, their memories of the school years and their childhood family environments are imbued with feelings of nostalgia, warmth, happiness, joviality and relative liberty. They both acknowledge their difficulties in school (e.g. mean teachers, confusion), but the educational realm is also an area where they felt recognized ‘as individuals’ by their teachers, who brought out “what was good in [them]”. It is through school activities that they gained recognition for their unique personal talents and forged friendships with girls with whom they could relate. Especially from the perspective of the present, their childhood years were a time when many of their teachers, friends, siblings *and* family members appreciated them and demonstrated their affection through actions; relationships in general were ‘untainted’ by factors that they would later become more acquainted with as adults: money, sex, envy, prejudice and restricted autonomy.

Second, school and family are areas in which Romani performance is (and has been) overwhelmingly perceived as negative within popular and official Czech discourse. During the communist period, there was an inextricable connection between scientific discourse on ‘Gypsy pathology’ and opinions about ‘the Gypsy family’. The ‘backward’ values that Romani children learned by virtue of their socialization within ‘deviant’ families – and even the relative darkness of their skin – were argued to be within reach of social manipulation; if a Romani individual chose not to try to lighten their skin through

‘proper personal hygiene’ habits or avoid pathological behavior (e.g. alcoholism, criminality, unhealthiness), it was a result of the poor habits they learned during their upbringing in Romani households. As such, the failings of Romani children were evaluated as being manifestations of the Romani mother’s inadequacies – her inability to responsibly run the family, her poor education, her having too many children, and her indifference to her children’s behavior and education once she had borne them. As Zdeňka’s mother Karolina recalls:

*When my children went to school, the teacher asked, “Why are you not teaching that child Czech ways and only Gypsy ways? And I said, “Look Miss. I’m a cigánka. I don’t want my children to forget their own language, but I’m teaching them Czech so that they can understand what is going on here.” But now, for these Romani kids, everything is čeština, čeština, čeština (Cz. Czech language). Alžběta has gone to seminars and talked about how our children don’t know anything cigánský anymore.*

In official discourse, all Roma were declared to be in need of *převýchova* (Cz. re-upbringing), but Romani fathers were largely spared the same type of agency as mothers. Of course, this has a basis in ‘normative’ ideas of gender in communist Czechoslovakia. Traditional gender roles for were not to be sacrificed, thus according to mainstream practice, responsibility for domestic work and childcare continued to fall squarely on the shoulders of women (Věšínová-Kalivodová 2005).<sup>92</sup> The ‘double burden’ of labor at work and home did not affect traditional ideas about the division of labor in the home, and in some cases this enhanced female responsibility to such an extent that they ceased to rely on men or even need them in domestic sphere (Ashwin and Lytkina 2004).

Especially during the 1960s and 1970s, pronatalist policies assisted and encouraged

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<sup>92</sup> The first Czech women’s movement of the mid-nineteenth century was developed primarily to inspire women to raise male ‘nation builders’ through their roles as mothers and educators of future generations.

women in the fulfillment of their multiple roles (e.g. through mother's benefits, childcare, subsidized baby supplies), however in the years directly after 1989, Czech feminists proposed that in addition to widespread apathy towards any '-isms' or social movements and an interest in 'human' problems as opposed to gendered problems (i.e. 'Why speak of women's problems alone? Feminism is a petty concern and a bourgeois endeavor'), one of the reasons that 'feminism' was so unpopular with many Czech men *and women* was because women wanted nothing more than to retreat into the private sphere and enjoy 'real' equality rather than being treated 'like men' and having to 'do it all' (Havelková 1993, 1995; Heitlinger 1993; Šiklová 1993; Čermáková 1995; True 2003).

Despite the pronatalist policies oriented towards the Czechoslovak population as a whole, the regime's interest in a 'quality' and 'quantity' population meant that the ascription of guilt to Romani mothers for the 'deviancy' of their children ultimately led in some cases to their sterilization without informed consent by Czech and Slovak doctors (Sokolová 2002: 224, 233-234, 244-245).<sup>93</sup> In other socialist countries like Hungary, there was similar rhetoric; Roma were discussed as being 'nature's children'. Having never really 'grown up', they had to be 'raised' out of the strata of their dysfunctional lives so that their backward traditions would not continue (Stewart 1999: 31-34). Today, Czech social workers in Skála describe their local projects with Roma in quite similar language: their clients need assistance with becoming 'socialized'.

Outside of official circles in communist Czechoslovakia, Roma were discussed almost exclusively in ethnically neutral language, therefore Alžběta's and Zdeňka's awareness of a history of such discourse is likely limited or absent. Nevertheless, as

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<sup>93</sup> See Sokolova (2002, Chapter 6) for an indepth discussion of the sterilization phenomenon.



children they experienced the effects of ethnically based discrimination in practice. The fact that Zdeňka was moved to a special school for missing fourteen days of school, while Alžběta (who could not speak or understand Czech) remained in the regular *základní škola*, is most likely a simple function of time. By the time Zdeňka was of school age, the practice of channeling Romani pupils into special schools was well underway. She and her classmates' attendance at camps where they won awards for 'cleanliness' and 'hygiene' is also rather circumspect. Regardless of whether they are consciously aware that there were social policies directed towards Roma during the communist period and that a significant proportion of this official discourse has translated directly into popular contemporary discourse, they *are* aware that when it comes to educational achievement and 'decency', more often than not, their children and grandchildren initially will be evaluated not as individuals, but in terms of their group membership as 'Gypsies' who are assumed to be 'indecent', grubby, stupid and disinterested in school. They predict that this will happen even when a *Rom(ka)* has, figuratively speaking, jumped through hoops to prove his or her worthiness of courtesy and respect as an *individual* human being. Zdeňka's pride about her childhood friend Věra's attainment of 'normative' standards of success is tempered by the insinuation of helplessness or apathy – of whether it is worth struggling against endemic barriers in order to achieve mainstream ideas of 'success' when it will still be discounted and ignored.

*Look. Věra is a Romka. A teacher. She moves in Czech circles, but they give her dirty looks. If she would be a Czech, then everything would be fine, good, okay. But because she is a Romka, she is looked at in this way – even though she has a Master's degree and they don't. She is better than them, but all the same they will always think she is a dirty cigánka. Even if she would be a doktorka they would think this! You can wear gold, but to everyone you will always be a dirty cigánka. A Czech will be good and you'll be dirty. This is racism.*

*Věra's daughter Světlana is smart. She has nicer clothes than most Czech girls, but they will still grumble about her behind her back. They'll still think she is a dirty cigánka because she has things that they don't have. It's not any different for her than it is for her mother.*

*A cigánka is a human being. I am a human being. I have flesh just as you have flesh. A cigánka loves just as you love. She sings the same as you sing. But actually, she has a different culture.*

*Czech children swear at my daughter when she is at school. Before, when we were around Czechs, they didn't say such things. Now they don't know about us because they don't speak with us.*

*Three days ago, Miloš and I had a meeting with the mother of a Czech boy in his class. She was sitting there, and I was sitting here, and she said to me, "How is it that my son was sitting with your son, a Gypsy?" And why shouldn't he? Why shouldn't he sit near her son? My son can earn only ones at school, and that Czech child can have fives, but because he's a Czech, there won't be problems for him. That's the way it is. You can't teach your children how the system works either. We're striving as best we can for our children, so that we can give them the tools. But all the same, it will not be good for them.*

Zdeňka's sensitivity to the ways that skin tone affects the manner with which a Romani person will be dealt in many social contexts, as well as her awareness that fair skin has traditionally carried a higher subjective value of 'beauty' according to mainstream ideas about attractiveness,<sup>94</sup> has been heightened to such an extent that she once openly lamented to me about how she didn't understand why her daughters Zlata and Erika had become so "black" since they had been so "white" as babies.<sup>95</sup> She went on to say about her other daughter:

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<sup>94</sup> Throughout her life history, Ilona Lacková frequently brings up her relatively darker complexion compared to other Romani girls, and during reported speech in her life history, she describes her husband as often referring to her as 'blackie'. Hübschmannová (1986: 8-9, in *ibid*) notes how incredible it seemed to her that Ilona, despite her lifelong investment of energy into Romani causes, still applied skin lightening cream and at times would even deny that she was a *Romka*.

<sup>95</sup> According to Zdeňka, this is one reason that she has always tried to drink a lot of milk when she has been pregnant – because it will make a baby be "light, with fat and rosy cheeks".

*Adela is lucky because she is white. It's only because her skin is white that the teacher behaves differently towards her. Her friend Vanessa is very dark, and because the teacher sees that, she acts differently towards her. If there is a white Rom and a dark Rom, the teacher thinks that they white Rom will behave better than the dark one.*

Alžběta never gave any indication that she felt it would be preferable to have lighter skin, although on more than a few occasions she associated her skin color with a great sense of fear about the possibility of being attacked by a skinhead.

*Am I dirty? I am not. I have always worked. I have educated children. They have more education than many Czechs – both school directors and professors! Nonetheless, when I go out to another town, some kids might kill me because I am black. They don't know anything about my family, but they'll kill me because of the color of my skin.*

Behar (1993: 8-9) describes the 'Indianness' that her indigenous Mexican informant Esperanza invokes during her conversations with *gringos* to be based on her sociohistorical understanding of 'the Indians' as a conquered people whose racial/class distinctions have developed in concert with white-skin privilege since the European conquest of Mexico. Esperanza claims that "we here are Indians", yet as someone who, has been "de-Indianized" due to her use of Spanish language and her loss of her of her "once Tlaxcalan" identity, in Behar's words: "...so embedded is her sense of racial and class domination that she has asked me if I am not embarrassed to be seen with her."

With the exception of the terms "de-Indianized" and "once Tlaxcalan identity" (both of which communicate a feeling of cultural totality), if 'the Indians' and 'Indianness' were replaced with 'the Roma' and 'Gypsiness', Behar's synopsis would be rather applicable here. For all the power and authority with which she carried herself

around Živá Street as an older *Romka*— shoulders back, chin up and voice booming— in the weeks preceding my mother’s visit to Skála from the States, Alžběta asked me several times, “Will your mother be scared to stay here? You’re asking me why I say this *Natašo*? Well because we are all Blacks around here!” Being classified as a “dirty *cigánka*” on the condition of ‘being black’ is not something that Alžběta, Zdeňka or Věra, feel has *as much* to do with Czech people’s interpretation of them as literally ‘dirty’ or unhygienic<sup>96</sup> as with their assumption that it is a characteristic trait of ‘the Gypsies’ to be morally ‘dirty’ – lazy, ignorant, inarticulate and many other ‘bad’ traits. Alžběta says that she is not ‘dirty’ or a ‘*cigánka*’ because she has been consistently employed since the age of fifteen and has raised two professionally successfully and Master’s educated daughters. Světlana isn’t ‘dirty’ or a ‘*cigánka*’ because she is smart(er) and more well-dressed than her Czech schoolmates. Věra isn’t ‘dirty’ or a ‘*cigánka*’ because she has more education than her colleagues and (has enough money to buy)<sup>97</sup> gold jewelry to wear.

In their narratives, Alžběta and Zdeňka indentify the subjective values that they consider to be communicated *when a Czech person* addresses them with the appellation *cigánka* as opposed to *Romka*. A *Romka* possesses authority, strength and pride; she is a representative of a people that is every bit as ‘cultural’ as the Czech people who have their own *kulturnost* that is worthy of veneration. A *cigánka*, however, is someone who

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<sup>96</sup> Only a few rare occasions did any Roma in Skála show concern that I might think of them as ‘unclean’, such as one time when a family I was visiting ran out of toilet paper, or another time when given a glass of water that had a smudge on the rim.

<sup>97</sup> Contrary to Zdeňka’s idea that wearing gold jewelry should convey a higher status to Czech people, it is more often the case that Czech people consider this to be a ‘Gypsy’ habit of adornment. Roma in Skála (especially men) tend to wear heavy, gold chains with or without pendants, and women who wear gold tend to wear multiple rings at one time. In addition to my ‘unfeminine’ clothing and limited wardrobe, it was my complete lack of gold jewelry that made Alžběta’s son Alex draw the conclusion that I must be quite ‘poor’ and therefore an unsuitable candidate for an outing to the disco in Okraj.

has a ‘low’ culture and who is classified and stereotyped according to any of the uncomplimentary traits that have been listed throughout this thesis thus far. On the other hand, I heard Alžběta and Zdeňka refer to others as *cigáni* – not in a insulting way, but as if to signify their authenticity, or that they have a ‘salt of the earth’ sort of quality that doesn’t preclude them from screw-ups, embarrassment, stupidity or hardships. They are being ‘themselves’; they aren’t being *falešný* (Cz. false), an adjective Alžběta and Zdeňka both used to describe ‘the Czechs’ as ‘a people’. Amongst Roma, the word ‘*cigán*’ needn’t communicate the various manifestations of moral ‘dirtiness’ that Czechs stereotypically associate with Roma as an indivisible collective. The informal manner in which I heard adult Roma refer to other as ‘*cigán*’ bore shades of similarity to the way in which I heard male Romani *and* Czech youths in the oldest classroom at Skála’s special school call each other “nigger”; in this case, it conveyed a feeling of equality in the sense that they all were similarly dedicated to rebelling against the school’s rules and regulations (e.g. standing up slowly and slouching when a teacher enters the room, wearing their street shoes in the school building, eating in the classroom). Tellingly, during one English lesson, after my weak hold over classroom order had deteriorated so significantly that I finally gave up, sat down behind the teacher’s desk and decided to chat with these students, when I remarked to them about how their behavior was so *úplně jiné* (Cz. completely different) from the students I taught at a nearby vocational training school, one of the boys suggested, “They’re *hodný* (Cz. good, well-behaved), right?” As Zdeňka explained to me when I asked her about the use of these appellations between Roma,

*I don't know how to explain it, but if I hear a Czech person say "cigán", it hurts me. It's like in America I think. Black people call each other "nigger", but because they are black, it doesn't hurt their feelings. But if a white person says it, then it is racist. Here they say "cigán" on television all the time. If a Gypsy steals or murders someone, they always show it, but they don't show all the other murders and thefts done by white people. Why? So they'll think that Gypsies steal and murder more often than Czechs. But Czechs steal everyday!*

These narrative excerpts underline how very culturally constructed 'blackness' can be. Lemon (2000: 61-79) describes in detail how the subjective cues attached to skin complexion are not only culturally constructed but sufficiently context-dependent to allow the existence of numerous interpretations of 'blackness' in post-Soviet Russia. The sudden visibility of darker skinned bazaar vendors from the Caucasus led to the Russian population's association of 'blackness' with characteristics of the new free market: unpredictability, anonymity and the relaxation of social boundaries. A Russian could become 'black' or 'Gypsy' by engaging in trade activities. 'Authentic' Gypsies, whose skill at horse trading, music or dancing had traditionally been explained as being 'in their genes' or 'in their blood' were suddenly confronted with being associated with a new meaning of 'blackness' if they could not successfully demonstrate their 'Gypsiness' in the established way that the non-Roma expected of them. The indexation of foreign conceptualizations of 'blackness' by younger Roma, most specifically those found within the pop culture of African American youth, permitted the alteration of the racial hierarchies existing in their local and national socialcultural environments.

In Skála, the indexation by Romani youth of various images and behaviors that are commonly associated with African American or black hip hop and rap culture – racial/ethnic 'slang', music, clothing and manner of physical comportment – is not a

straightforward example of “resistance identity” (Bleseni 2002: 203) because while to a certain extent, they are trying to adopt certain traits that were once interpreted as ‘negative’ by whites (and were later seen as ‘positive’ by many white American youths due to their ‘re-coding’ by African Americans who transformed these cultural traits into a source of pride and beauty) as a way to build a positive self-image, they were originally interpreted as ‘negative’ by *American* ‘whites’ not Czechs. Moreover, unlike Roma in post-Soviet Russia who indexed African American ‘blackness’ at a time when America could have been seen as ‘better’ than Russia (in terms of their standard of living), Romani youth index American ‘blackness’ at a time when America is no longer as likely to be perceived as ‘better’ by Czechs. I found anti-American graffiti on more than one abandoned building in Skála. From the perspective of members of the local Czech population, the most visible components of ‘blackness’ that many Romani youths have indexed are closer to what Hübschmannová (1986: 8, in Lacková 1999) described as the “superficial trappings” of culture – those that are not necessarily the best on offer. However, it is more likely that these Romani teens have knowingly adopted cultural aspects that are negatively evaluated; it is their awareness that these behaviors, images and materials are regarded as ‘bad’ or ‘scary’ by the mainstream that fuels their interest in them. Whether these boys’ enthusiastic claims that they sniff glue, smoke pot, watch pornographic films or make weekend trips to brothels on the Czech-German border are true, false or exaggerated, their social knowledge informs them that these behaviors aren’t likely to be evaluated as ‘positive’ – whether they are interacting with Czechs or with adult Roma who find such habits embarrassing (since they are aware that Roma are evaluated collectively), morally depraved and destructive.

In his study of Puerto Rican crack dealers in Harlem, Bourgois (1995: 174) identifies the school as the “quintessential early socializing institution of mainstream society in the inner city” because within this environment, symbolic parameters of social power are enforced – for example, witnessing teachers speaking to their immigrant parents as if they are children. While their parents frequently point to the bad influences of their children’s age mates as the source of their adult children’s present-day criminal activity, Bourgois argues that there is both a powerful economic and gender-based imperative for young men to become involved in theft and drug dealing: not only is it a form of rebellion against their parents (who they come to see as objects of ridicule) and their teachers (who they see as exemplars of an antagonistic power structure), they also see the illegal drug sector as protective niche that shields them from having to face their socially and economically superfluous position relative to mainstream society. As children, the incomes of their immigrant parents were too small to provide them with items that suburban, middle-class children take for granted (e.g. candy, trainers, comic books), thus the “economic logic of stealing from wealthy neighbors is melded into a street culture identity” (196). Deprived of the forms of masculinity that their fathers and grandfathers embodied as family patriarchs and breadwinners, the gang rape of young women has become an aspect of school age male bonding. Thus, as one of Bourgois’ adult male informants explains, he can derive a positive self-image from his subversive form of dress –

“I was trying to look for an image, and it was like, black. We wear kangos, earrings, jewelry; we wear leather blazers, straight legs and shit, leather pants, big radios, and shit like that. We be smoking cheeba; drinking brew; hanging out on the Deuce; just being wild; being black; rapping on the mike, shit like that” (194).



– but he and his friend later reflect on their violence against women during their adolescent years in terms of their own internalized sense of impotence (212):

A: “We used to talk to each other, that these women are living fucked up, because they want to hang out with us. And what the fuck we got to offer? Nothing! We used to wonder.”

B: “We don’t be doing nothing! Bitch be stupid to go with a nigga’ like us.”

In Skála, the permeability of school boundaries to the mutual antagonisms, frustrations, and tensions between Czechs and Roma in other social spheres leads to a similar scenario. Neither teachers nor students are very successful at leaving their external ‘baggage’ at the school entrance, thus the commonplace power differential that is supposed to exist between teachers and pupils – that teachers lead and students follow, teachers talk and students listen – has the potential to become distorted. These teachers may consider it part of their job to not only teach grammar and mathematics, but also to train students to be responsible and ‘decent’ individuals, yet their Romani students have an awareness, even from the outset of their educational years, of the critical opinions that many of their teachers have of ‘the Roma’. As a classroom assistant and English teacher at the special school, faculty members often spoke to me about their Romani pupils as if we were chatting in the teacher’s lunchroom rather than standing right in front of them. The “strange” sound of Romanes and the “*velký problem*” (Cz. big problem) that Romani parents pose to teachers – their lack of regard for their children’s nutrition, inability to budget their money, lack of interest in their children’s schoolwork, receipt of social benefits and purchase of alcohol and cigarettes – were all things that were openly told to

me in front of attentive Romani children (who were referred to as *cigáni* and *černoši* just as often as they were called *Romové*).

The boys with whom I had the most interaction in the ninth grade classroom had low expectations of what their academic performance should be; more specifically, they know the type of results that their teachers *assume* they will deliver – poor quality work, disinterest and a lack of initiative to learn – but they also clearly know what their teachers *would prefer* their performance to be like – improvement, being curious about learning and being engaged in class activities. They know that teachers anticipate their ongoing disobedience and aggression, a fact I came to grips with when the school director asked me whether I would “be afraid” to be alone in the classroom (a query that was asked *in front of* the boys I was supposed to be afraid of). While I strove for a form of classroom interaction that could permit me to get to know them as individuals rather than as pupils, as Věra had predicted: “That won’t work with them. They don’t understand a teacher who wants to be their friend. They don’t know how to act around you”. Drawing attention to female sexuality in various forms – whether through non-physical forms of aggression, tactual flirtation, verbal innuendo or feigned coyness – was something I experienced during most of my interactions with Romani men, regardless of their age and marital status or the nature of situational contexts in which we were involved. In these untested waters, the male pupils repeatedly drew attention to what my status as a single young woman in a position of quasi-authority represented to them: my worthiness as a recipient of sexually charged and hostility tinged questions, most often dealing with the female anatomy.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> For example, asking what the English words for ‘penis’ and ‘vagina’ are, if I have *vlasý dole* (Cz. hair ‘down below’) and asking me if I like *broskve* (Cz. peaches) (i.e. slang for cunnilingus)

During a recorded conversation with Alžběta and her friend Eva<sup>99</sup> about their thoughts on contemporary relations between Romani men and women, I described to them my experiences with the young men in the special school. They attribute their behavior to the overall loss of the traditional male family role since 1989. Societal changes and cultural deterioration have fostered feelings of frustration, apathy, anger and powerlessness in Romani men who feel like they no longer have a purpose or a way to attain certain ideas about masculinity that wear of past cultural importance.

*Alžběta: Before, marriage was a responsibility. My husband had a responsibility to teach me things. A husband had to work and he had to live with his family. The wife raised the children. There were standards and rules. Sometimes people did bad things, but there was a tradition.*

*Yes, sometimes a man had other women, but he still returned to his wife because he was a husband. It wasn't like it is today...It wasn't like he came home and still wasn't a gentleman to his wife and children. He didn't come home and not give his family money. There weren't automaty. There wasn't anything like that. These men brought money home and gave it to their wives. It was tradition that a man had to strive to make money for his wife, and his wife had to cook and clean. During communism, everyone had to go to work, women too, so we had to do the cooking and cleaning on top of our jobs. We women did everything, but it was still a beautiful time.*

*Eva: And for us women, it used to be tougher because we didn't have the household conveniences that we have now, but we still had it good because there is a terribly big difference between men now and men in the past. In the past they*

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<sup>99</sup> Eva, a resident of Živá Street who is of approximately the same age as Alžběta, had an affair for several years with Zdeňka's husband Petr. At another point in this interview, she points to the difficulty of being a widow in the present-day Czech Republic. She says, "I am a widow like Alžběta. As older women, it is hard for us because when a woman is alone – when her husband dies –there is not enough help for pensioners – for people in their fifties. The government forgets about us, and because there is no work available, older women have to *hunt for a man* or live with their children." Alžběta and Zdeňka also mention the lack of options for impoverished Romani women in other parts of their narratives. They have sympathy for prostitutes and women who take lovers because they say that in both scenarios, most of the time women do this in order to better ensure their own survival as well as the survival of their children. Zdeňka repeatedly refers to Petr's bestowal of gifts and money upon his lovers, which in conjunction with Eva's focus on the monetary hardships of older women, brings up the possibility that Eva's decision to become Petr's mistress was based on financial hardship.

*were kind. They were decent, you know? It was a different generation. Drugs, pot, smoking and such things – they just didn't exist. We didn't know what they were.*

*Today, a woman gets up in the morning, the children go to school, she'll sit down, have some coffee, smoke some cigarettes, and that's it. Later she'll cook something easy. The children come home. The parents don't ask their children any questions because it doesn't matter to them. In the past, young people had to show respect to their elders, but now their families just allow them to be vulgar. The current generation is something awful, but it really has a lot to do with if their parents allow them. But this isn't only the case for us Roma. It's happening everywhere, with Czech parents too.*

*Alžběta: When the state only gives benefits to Roma instead of work, there is no reason for them to be motivated. They think, "I'm not going to work, so I'll just sit here and watch DVDs, smoke or sleep." It's bad when there is no work because one's mindset is different. And then Czechs only think that Gypsies don't want to work. They want to! There just isn't any work available! And when there is work available, they don't give it to the whites, not to us Roma.*

*During communism everyone worked, so we Roma had money. On the weekends, boys and girls went to parties and had fun. We played the guitar and sang around bonfires. We went out to pubs and restaurants and talked. Today if Romani teenagers go to a pub, they are told to get out. But for most Roma this isn't even possible because they don't have any money to go out and have fun! When there was work, a man had money and he bought things for his girlfriend. He was a gentleman. Not anymore. Today he looks for drugs to sell. Girls look for boys who have money from drugs. They hunt for them. When some new guys move to Skála, all the girls move in them like a pack of hyenas because they think, "if they aren't from Skála, they must have some money." Everything is about money.*

*Boys hang out mostly with other boys because they are looking for drugs and stuff. They are resigned; they don't care if they can't be gentleman. It's like Harlem here. They don't know what happiness is. They don't know the happiness that comes from going out and having fun. This isn't living.*

*When boys and girls meet each other, they meet each other outside or they just go to each other's flats to have sex because there is nowhere else to go and nothing else to do. Before, sex came AFTER the wedding, but nowadays young people live together first. Today there isn't any wedding because they already have children and if they get married, their **sociální dávky** will be lower.*

*Eva: Today their only way to have fun is to take drugs, drink and have sex. With today's young people, it isn't about love. This is my personal opinion. And today, the way it goes with sex is that for a while there is one person, and then for a while there is a different person. There is no fidelity. Today, girls don't know*

*what love is. Boys don't know what love is either. They want to have love, these girls and boys, but they don't know how.*

They describe marriage – as it existed *dříve* – as an economic dyad in which work was divided along gender lines. By performing their respective husbandly and wifely duties, spouses helped their spouses to survive, thereby achieving a feeling of being a ‘complete’ or ‘real’ man or woman. Marriage, in this sense, was a “service to one’s spouse” (McClusky 2001: 41). Within this system of interdependence, however, gender relations were hierarchical and uncomplimentary between the private and public sphere. Akin to gendered division of labor in the mainstream population, women were still the primary providers of childcare and household management, and despite near-universal employment, a man still held sway over the division of money between family members and the ways it was put to use. Moreover, during the communist period, both men and women had an almost mandatory ‘public’ role to fill in the workplace and a mutual desire to ‘retreat’ to the private sphere of the household, but a woman still had more expectations to meet there. Today, the continuation of Romani men’s relatively greater *public* autonomy (in terms of their freedom of action in the social realm without fear of shaming one’s family), women’s almost sole responsibility for childrearing and household labor, and men’s ability to exert control over the distribution of financial resources (if employed, but sometimes even if unemployed) means that women often complain that their husbands spend money that could be used for more pressing requirements.

However, even if men can exert control over the *how* funds are used as a result of residual patriarchal values, Romani women have a relatively more public role in terms of

the acquisition of *socialni davky* by virtue of their capacity to have children (and therefore acquire more *mateřské dávky* (Cz. mother's benefits) and/or *dětské dávky* (children's benefits)). Women are also aware that men are limited financial providers due to widespread unemployment, and therefore kin networks and state welfare can sometimes provide greater security for women than can marriage (Stack 1974). While it isn't quite accurate to say that young Romani women and teenage girls bear children as a way to make a living, they recognize that there are financial benefits associated with children. By bearing children at an earlier age, it is possible to counteract not only downward mobility and the closing up of professional and educational opportunities, but also to achieve what is seen as an integral (and for some, even non-negotiable) aspect of being a Romani woman: motherhood (Durst 2002; Scheffel 2005). As a culturally mediated money distribution system, social welfare influences the perceptions and interpretations that Czech clerks and Romani applicants have of one another during their interactions at Skála's labor office (Dvořáková 2009). Like the school environment is for young Romani men, the labor office constitutes an arena where Romani women can 'do violence' against institutions of power. Although Romani women struggle for recognition as human beings without regard to their Romani group membership, at the labor office, where clerks control access to sought-after resources and discursively (and often hostilely) bring applicants' moral 'dirtiness' or 'Gypsiness' to the fore, Romani women strive to reposition themselves against *gádže* figures of authority by 'fighting back' in a way that, although ethnically marked, confers them with a sense of power: by speaking disparagingly of clerks in Romanes. Speaking Romanes is a cultural act that enables an individual to mark ethnic boundaries – to distinguish between Romani 'insiders' and

Czech ‘outsiders’. At the same time as Romani language is something that ‘the Roma’ can claim as ‘theirs’, it also garners a certain degree of recognition from Czechs that Roma do ‘have culture’ because language, culture and *národ* have been so intimately linked in the popular consciousness since the years of the Czech National Revival (Pynsent 1994; Holy 1996). In the following excerpt from a recorded discussion with Zdeňka and her mother Karolina, their interchangeability is highlighted.

*Natasha: Do you think that today it is different for young people? For example, I asked Erika, “What is Romani culture?” And she said, “I don’t know, but we have our own culture.”*

*Karolina: She isn’t familiar with it. Today these kids speak Czech.*

*Zdeňka: Every generation is getting worse and worse. If only Roma would hold on to their culture! Now our children don’t even know how to speak Romanes! And why not? It’s the language of our nation! I mostly speak Czech, but my mother tried speaking Romanes with me. It’s only thanks to her that I know any of the language because I mostly spoke Czech with both of my parents. When I’m speaking Romanes with my kids, they start to laugh! Now Roma maybe only speak a little Romanes in the home. Or for example, if Alžběta comes by for a visit, then I’ll speak a little with her. She speaks it very quickly though, so I have a hard time understanding her. That’s bad!. Czechs hold on to their culture, so Roma also must do so. I try to teach my kids at every opportunity. I’ll tell them what a word is in Romanes, and then how it is in Czech.*

Alžběta and Zdeňka routinely and resolutely place the blame for the contemporary woes of the Roma on the shoulders of the Czech population and the Czech state. The loss of ‘Romani culture’ through assimilation, the introduction of various social vices that Roma were previously unfamiliar with (e.g. drugs, promiscuity, pornography, violence, abject poverty), the appropriation of a ‘Czech mindset’ about social life instead of honoring the value of previous Romani social patterns, the trap of helplessness and

apathy in which many Roma now find themselves, and an overall lack of intervention on behalf of anti-Roma discrimination are perceived as being the fault of ‘the Czechs’ as a collective and non-divisible entity. This is not to say that Alžběta and Zdeňka do not assign some responsibility to Romani individuals themselves for the widespread dilemmas that a significant proportion of the population face. Their narratives about their own lives do not suggest that they go through life on an autopilot setting, and they most certainly do not think of themselves as operating in this manner, so they award other individuals the same capability to ruminate. Besides considering many of the choices and behaviors of Roma they know (sometimes including their own family members) to be morally bankrupt and destructive to themselves and those around them, their interpretations of these people’s actions do not imply that Romani people are mindless robots who go through life without deliberation and consideration of their actions. They consider a person’s *lack of will* to make responsible and ethical choices, as well as his decision to be apathetic, reckless, indecent or selfish, as ultimately his fault, but the fact that the options available to him as he proceeds through daily life are severely restricted (if not absent completely) is *not* his fault. It is on this point that they direct responsibility towards the non-Romani population, on both official (i.e. state government, local government, clerks, teachers) and lower (fellow residents in Skála, the non-Romani population of the Czech Republic) levels. Zdeňka’s analysis of the Czech population is as follows:

*You want to know what I think about the Czechs? In my opinion, the Czech nation is false. It’s mean and stupid. Some Czechs are kind, but during communism the Czechs were nicer. Now that we have democracy, they are only looking out for themselves. I just don’t understand these Czechs, and they don’t understand Roma*



*at all. Yes, some of these Czechs understand us, but very few. I was among Czech people when I was still employed, and I understood some of them.*

*The Czechs said to the Roma: "Be like us." And so, the Roma now have some Czech habits that they didn't have in the past. Before, the Roma didn't know what it meant to take drugs. Roma didn't know what it meant to take the lives of their own children. We weren't familiar with the idea of a man sleeping with another man, or a woman sleeping with a man other than her husband. That didn't exist for us. We assimilated and we regret it. We weren't familiar with these things. The Roma learned these things from the Czechs and that's the truth! In the past, a Rom lived within the boundaries of his family - his wife, child, mother and father. But not now! Few Roma would do that. It's because the Czechs have always been telling us, "You should be like us!" And so it has come to pass.*

*But you know what? We Roma made the buildings, the bridges, the canals..... Our grandmothers and grandfathers made them. When the war ended, the Gypsies were sent from Slovakia to the Czech lands to do building and digging. It was first and foremost the Roma who slaved away. Czechs didn't want to do that work. No way! I am not a racist, but I never have good experiences with Czechs. If you try to speak nicely with them, they just ignore you. I see they way things are and the way they work.*

*When a Romka is a prostitute, why does she do it? It's only because she wants her children to have something to eat. She does it so that her family can survive, so that she can have some money. And who taught this to the Roma? The Czechs. A Romka didn't know what it meant to be a prostitute. In the time of our grandmothers, if a girl went out to tramp around like a prostitute, they would have killed her, or at least that's what my grandmother told me.*

*In the past, when a Rom didn't have anything to eat and another Rom did, that hungry Rom came and took something. Now he wouldn't do that. But when someone visits, at least we still try to give him some food. Even poor a Rom would offer bread and water. Czechs just try to put it aside and hide it.*

*Today, Roma would help each other if they could, but now they know what hunger is. I know what hunger is, just like how it was during the war. When I was a little girl, my grandmother spoke about how it was during the war. They were freezing because they were hiding in the woods. They weren't eating anything, or else they were eating roots. Mothers didn't have any milk to give their babies, so they drank cold water instead.*

*Before, all the Czechs were envious of Roma. Czechs moved among us and saw how we held together as one. They said, "Why isn't it like that for us Czechs? You Roma all like each other." But it isn't like that anymore because the Roma have learned from the Czechs. That's the truth. Anyone will tell you that. Alžběta will tell you the same thing: we learned these things from the Czechs.*

*Before, when we went out for čarodějnice, the Czechs went out with us as well. Before Czechs didn't know what it meant to opékat (Cz. grill out, roast), but they were around us and learned it from us. That's the truth as well. They also have seen other things, such as how Romani women used to wear long skirts. Now the Czechs do that, even though it was our fashion. Before, when a Czech girl saw that you had black hair, she swore at you. Now Czech women dye their hair black, and Gypsy women dye their hair blond! The Czechs taught us that. Did Czechs make halušky<sup>100</sup> before? No, they didn't. It was our food. So you see, the Czechs learned things from Roma too. Just as we learned things from them, they learned things from us.*

Despite the fact that before the start of democracy, Romani and Czech people learned from one another, mutually adopted certain habits and traits and should therefore be more similar to one another now than before their contact with each other during the communist period, Zdeňka argues the opposite – that there is now a mutual lack of understanding between both groups. Zdeňka interprets the traits that the Roma have picked up from their contact with Czechs as being almost entirely negative, while the traits that Czechs have learned the Roma are positive (e.g. generosity and cohesiveness), and at worst innocuous (e.g. learning how to make *halušky*). Alžběta, however, specifically acknowledges the benevolence and trust that Czech individuals showed her during the communist period. Because of her age, Zdeňka has less experience spending time with Czechs in the workplace. Alžběta, on the other hand, had twenty years of such contact, and almost twenty additional years after the transition to democracy. She emphasizes that her contact with Czech colleagues taught her ‘Czech ways’ that have helped her survive tough times and increase her children’s successes and their

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<sup>100</sup> *Halušky* are thick, soft noodles or dumplings that are common in Central and Eastern European cuisine. They are made with wheat flour or potatoes. Usually, flour is mixed with water and egg to form a batter. Potatoes are finely grated and mixed in the batter, or they are omitted completely. They are often served with meat or vegetable stews. In Slovakia, potato dumplings are made with sheep’s cheese and bacon. Similarly, *cigánské halušky* are made with sour cream, bacon and *tvaroh* (curd or cottage cheese).

preparedness for adult life. Her recollections of her friendships with Czech friends are directly correlated with her assertion that it is the *dearth* of contact between Czechs and Roma (rather than their contact) that is particularly problematic. Lack of exposure to one another in the workplace and in the schools – something that has been exacerbated in the past twenty years, prevents them from being able to form opinions about each other as *individuals* rather than as anonymous persons who are ‘representative’ of their respective *groups*.

*During communism, there was purity. You went to school, and when you finished you knew that you would have work. People were sent to prison if they didn't work. Why? If you didn't want to work, why should you eat? It was fair. And when the criminal returned, he had to be given a flat and a job because if he didn't have a flat and a job, then he would steal, and then again there would be a problem. I think it was very smart. A person had rights.*

*After the Revolution, a crisis began. Now everyone believes that they are free to take anything they want. Before it wasn't like this. Most Czechs believe that Roma don't want to work. Nowadays, people are mean because they think that to get anything from the state, one should be working. A Czech will say, "I am not a racist, but we are not hiring Gypsies because they don't want to work." But on the other hand, what about when a Czech says that he isn't working? There are racists at the labor office, so when a Gypsy goes to the labor office, he won't get the job but the Czech person will. What can a Rom do? All he can do is go to the labor office! It should be equal. For us Roma, this is the way it goes. Then Roma learn to steal, they get caught and then they go to prison. I can conclude this as a basic analysis.*

*Czechs weren't so mean to us before because we worked and we went to school together. They were used to us so skin color didn't matter to them. They were with us at work so they couldn't say that we were lazy. Now we aren't working so they aren't used to being around us anymore. And now, for the most part, we are not going to work and the government is giving us benefits. Because Czechs often have little for themselves, they see it as a crisis that the state gives money to the Roma. Thus they hate us. Before, they couldn't hate us because we were working.*

*Before, you couldn't just go to the labor office and say, "I'm not working. Give me money!" They would have told you, "Why? Go and get a job! How is it that you aren't working?" There were only a few people who would have asked for assistance, and such people would have been very ashamed because it meant that*

*your family wasn't giving you any money and that you weren't giving your family any money. We watched films from the West, and in these movies sometimes people would say, "On no! I don't have work!" And we couldn't understand that – how it was possible! We didn't understand why they never locked up people who weren't working.*

*The communists cared about us, you see? The regime was good to us Roma. It isn't true what the Czechs say, that communism was bad. Well some of it was, but it wasn't anything like it is now. People liked and understood each other. There were values – human values. Today there are not. Today, if one doesn't have money, if one doesn't have designer labels, then one isn't "in". Today, someone gets fifteen years in prison whether he steals a mobile phone or he kills someone. How is a person equal to a phone? Human life is worth more.*

*When we came here, we had nothing. Those communists helped us a lot. My father had work, my mother and brothers had work. People were so gentle, and they really wanted to help each other. People were really like this. My mother always said, "Be glad that there isn't war. Be glad that we don't have to run away. Be glad that we have somewhere to sleep." So our mother really taught us well, so that we would value these things. I knew that in the morning I would get up and go to work, and that on the tenth day I would receive a paycheck. I knew that no one would steal from me. There was certainty. Everyone had certainty. Now you don't have that. You can be self-employed and not have any certainty.*

*What we have here nowadays is capitalism. Communism is gorgeous; it isn't a bad thing. Lenin preached well. It is only the people that did it badly. There were wealthy people in the Party, but they couldn't flaunt their wealth. They couldn't show off to people. The communist years were nice, but now we are not allowed to think this way. Democracy isn't a bad thing either, but people haven't done things well. Get it? Theory is better than reality. Of course some communists did bad things. But at least there weren't any beggars. No one had to steal. Everyone was able to live as a human being.*

*I haven't studied politics. I didn't learn it in school. But I know that it is worse now with this freedom we supposedly have. We live in a democracy, so I have the right go out in public and say "Prezident do prdele."<sup>101</sup> Fine. But what can I buy with that? Can I fill my stomach with freedom of speech? No. Today I understand why those communists didn't allow capitalism. I declare myself on behalf of the communists!*

*Sure, there weren't bananas and there were no oranges to buy at Christmas. But are you hungry for something that you've never had? We had plums and apples and we were happy with that. There was butter, there was other food. Sometimes we went out into town in our work uniforms. There weren't such nice dresses or*

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<sup>101</sup> Something close to "Fuck the President."

*pretty shoes, there weren't jeans, but that's how we lived. It was simply different. I am not saying that everything was good because it wasn't, but NOW what is there? There are the rich and the poor. There are castes. Before, there was a middle ground and I was in the middle. I don't know. I would return to communism immediately.*

*After the revolution, it wasn't a good time. Anyone will say that. At the time I was waiting and waiting for change, and I was very disappointed because I saw that what was developing wasn't a democracy. It is capitalism, strict capitalism. Everyone was crying, "America" and "The West!" But I was disappointed. All of a sudden, there was no system. Everyone was allowed to do everything and I saw that there were very mean people. I went to the square to boycott the democracy because I had believed that there would be work. Everyone thought that the highways and everything would be nice. But that isn't what happened. All of a sudden there were skinheads here,<sup>102</sup> and it was bad because Skála is an isolated place. After the revolution, the Czechs became conceited and said that Gypsies are garbage, The government didn't do anything to stop it.*

*The communists used to show us footage about how in the West – in America, France and Canada - there was racism, and how here there were no such problems. Well, there was racism here! It was here! But a person couldn't just go and say "Heil Hitler". A communist was a fair person, someone who wasn't supposed to care about skin color. The communists simply banned its expression. Then after the Revolution, people began to show their discrimination. Before, there was nothing bad said about Roma on television. No, no, no! The media has done us a lot of harm because all you hear is, "Look! These Roma don't work. Look! Look at how these Roma live!" It's only, "The Roma are bad! The Roma are bad!" And some of these Czechs don't have work either, but they complain about how the Gypsies don't work!*

*Of course there was racism against Roma even before television existed and even before World War Two, but they weren't as worried about us because they had their own system of living and we had our own system. My parents and my grandparents lived according to their own system, and they didn't have any disruptions. The Roma could travel with their horses and wagons. In Slovakia, my mother and I didn't experience any racism, and even though racism existed, it wasn't the same. People weren't foul-mouthed towards us because they simply didn't care!*

*You know what? The Czechs didn't like the Slovaks either. They didn't like them, and now that the Slovaks have their own country, Czechs want to have a pure Czech nation. Because the Gypsies have stayed here, they resent us.*

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<sup>102</sup> In the mid-1990s many Roma living on Živá Street got into a physical altercation with skinheads right outside Alžběta's building. Tomáš and some other men had to be taken to the hospital due to knife wounds.

*You know what was the worst after the revolution? I'll tell you - bezradnost (Cz. helplessness). You couldn't do anything. That's what it was and that's what it is now. You are powerless because you see things to buy but you don't have any money to buy them. Now there is a big selection, there is anything that you could ever want, but so what? That's worse than communism. You see how it is for people because you are living here. People only have enough for basic things like flour, sugar and oil. Nothing more.*

*Now it is a little better I would say, but eight or even ten years after the Revolution, it was bad. And today, people are still idiots. People who know me don't greet me, even though we were friends before. It was fantastic before, and so I am saying that we have to work together. When we work together - black, yellow, white, whatever - we see the work everyone does. It is the same with school. When Czech and Gypsy children are in the same school, they have to sit next to each other at one desk. Now, Czech pupils aren't used to blacks. Ježíš! One of the boys in my building, Honza, he's in the first grade at school. He's a fine boy but he's never been in the same school as any blacks. Maybe one or two Gypsies in the whole school! It was a big shock for him! It used to be that each classroom had one or two Gypsies, and that there were just as many whites in the zvláštní škola as blacks. It happened very gradually that more and more Roma were sent to the zvláštní škola. In my generation, everyone went to the základní škola. Today no Roma go to the základní škola, or maybe one or two. When we went to school there, we didn't have any problems. We weren't seen as crazy Gypsies or anything. But gradually these kids started being sent to the zvláštní škola. Actually, first they started by sending Roma to a school building which wasn't the speciální or the zvláštní škola at the time, but it was only Roma that were going to school there. It was a terrible mistake.*

*Now, for the past ten years, all Roma have been going to the speciální škola. I believe that most students don't belong there at all. At the speciální škola, there are only mean children who are rude and teachers who are apathetic. There isn't anyone good or intelligent there, and if there would be anyone intelligent there, they wouldn't stay. Everyone at the speciální škola needs to be mean and impudent, just so they can persevere. I think that the speciální škola is a place of preparation for criminals – for criminals and druggies! Today, students aren't afraid of the teachers and the teachers don't tell students that they aren't allowed to do certain things. I really hate the fact that there is only the speciální škola and the základní škola because there are no Roma at the základní škola, and all that intelligence just stays there. In my opinion, the speciální škola is supposed to be for the mentally handicapped, not for normal children. All we can expect is that a student at the speciální škola will just stop going to school, and then he'll just become mean. I've seen it happen. And it's a pity, a very big pity.*

*I came out of the Revolution better than most of the other Roma because unlike them, I never gave up. They weren't as strong. During communism, I was strong. I got good work in a kitchen because one of my friends worked there and she said*

to me, "You should work here too. You need the money." She knew I had a little girl. So she trained me. She saw that I worked hard. Later I went to school in Okraj for a quick course in being a chef. Again, my friend at the kitchen saw that I enjoyed the work, so then I cooked a lot at that kitchen. By then I had all my children, but they were very young. They were going to school, but in the first grade or around that age. But I wasn't at home with them. If you weren't working like these Gypsies today, you didn't get an apartment for yourself. If you weren't working, then you were bad! No girl would want a man like that – a man who wouldn't be able to have a flat.

My husband had good work too. He worked at the train station, so my children had free tickets to school. It was very good because we didn't have enough money for the train. In all, we had three jobs because I went to clean in the textile factory as well. I was always thinking ahead. I didn't want my children to be forced to take out loans for their weddings or skiing trips. We gave our children money for books and everyone had a little something to spend. My mother taught me that you always care for your children. I was thinking a little bit ahead all the time, so that there would be a present in a box for each of the children for birthdays and at Christmas. Three presents – one for each child. When my husband and I were both working, we saved money for the children. Then when my children got engaged, they each had 18,000 Kč saved up. At the age of eighteen, they each had a foundation.

I learned to do this because I had many Czech friends. They taught me that I had to save money for the future. I soaked up a lot of things from them, and this is why I am telling you that it is really bad when blacks and whites don't work together. When we work together we learn about each other, and when we aren't working together, then we can't take away any knowledge about each other. They took parts of our culture and we took parts of theirs. Why? Because that's human.

One of my friends was so nice that when I didn't have a television, she offered to loan me some money so I could buy one. I took the money because there was certainty during communism. She saw that I was good, so she gave it to me. Another kamarádka (Cz. female friend) gave me an ottoman. When I was at her place, I complimented her ottoman and I said that it was nice. She already had another one, so she gave it to me. She said to me, "Don't give me any money now. I will take it from you later. You'll be paying me for it in the future." My colleagues were good people.

They helped me a lot and I learned a lot. Today a lot of Roma say, "Ah! So today I know that I have something, but tomorrow maybe I won't have anything!" But at all times we must remember that tomorrow is another day. We can't just live for today. When my husband and I started out together, I didn't have anything saved up! For three or four years we were acquiring things and putting money away. It happened slowly. I taught my girls to economize. So what I am really saying is that although I took after my mother and father, and they taught me to always think about tomorrow,

*the Czechs also gave me a lot. Today people don't give each other loans, but these women did because they were great friends. I also gave them loans, and they paid me back later. It was normal. No one ever said, "Oh, she's just a cigánka." But today, when a Czech woman is the friend of a Gypsy woman, Czech people don't like it.*

*After the Revolution, everyone had to go out and look for new work. I was cleaning for maybe one year after 1989 because I lost my job at the kitchen. Then we opened our pub, so I was an entrepreneur. Then later we bought this building with a loan. But after the Revolution, it was really bad because people didn't have any money to spend at the pub. It was idle. We closed the pub in 1996 -1997, when my husband became very ill. He went for treatment, but only what I could pay for. I went to work again so that I could make money for my granddaughters' přípravný ročník at school and because we were still paying for the building. For five years I hardly saw the outdoors because I was always working, working, working. But after everything was paid for, I quit. After that, I worked as a classroom assistant in school, but I only had a minimal salary. I only had enough for survival. And then I opened the community center with my daughters. My last job was when I was working as a social worker in Prague.*

*I had to work constantly – we all did – but at least during communism I wasn't afraid to go outside in the evenings. I knew that I could go into a pub with my husband without anyone swearing at us. What more could I have wanted? I saw that my children could go to school and I saw that they could study, so why shouldn't I have been happy?*

#### **IV. Cultural Compromise, Temporal Orientation and the 'Public' and 'Private' Self**

In this chapter, the ways in which various cultural components become markers of social boundaries between Roma and Czechs, and the ways that intergroup behaviors proceed along ethnic lines of interpretation in different types of social contexts, have been presented. The use of Romani language and Gypsy versus Romani appellations, 'blackness', and ideas about motherhood – just to name a few – acquire different subjective valuations that are both culturally constructed and context dependent. It is not enough to say that certain traits and behaviors that Romani individuals demonstrate are interpreted by others through ethnic 'glasses', because in certain contexts, the same traits might not necessarily cue the same sort of ethnic interpretation, and in other cases, they



might not be perceived as being 'ethnic' at all. For example, Romani boys' mode of dress, manner of physical comportment, use of certain designations, and expressed interest in hip hop music could be perceived as 'black' traits, 'Gypsy' traits or class-based traits depending on the interpreter (e.g. an adult Rom, a Czech teacher, a Czech adolescent) and the location where the interpretation takes place (e.g. on Živá Street, in the classroom, at the disco, in the supermarket). Situations where ethnicity *does* become salient, however, are those in which certain stimuli have acquired great emotional significance to the individuals involved. In particular, rare or unusual events and 'extreme' individuals (e.g. the 'negative behavior' of a member of a 'negative' group) can become over-represented in one's social memory and judgment because they are more accessible to memory retrieval (Nisbett and Ross 1980; Tajfel 1981).

The linkages that Alžběta and Zdeňka make between their educational experiences and their childhood memories of family and friendship with the circumstances that their children and grandchildren now face are important because, especially from the standpoint of the present day, these were years of greater personal freedom, unadulterated friendship, affectionate and cohesive relations with parents and siblings, and recognition from Czech authority figures that they were liked and respected as *individuals* who had their own strengths and talents. Nevertheless, both of these spheres of life were also areas of childhood trauma: Alžběta's feelings of confusion, loneliness and trauma when she started school, her disappointment in not being able to continue her education or professional training due to both the rules of the educational system and the cultural notions of her family, and Zdeňka's exposure to her parents' abusive relationship. It is the fact that they both have such indelible memories of

happiness *and* disappointment during these times in their lives, that the ‘performance’ of ‘the Roma’ in the educational and family realms is overwhelmingly disparaged by members of the Czech mainstream as ‘pathological’ or ‘indecent’ (and is therefore indicative of the failings of the mother), and that the private sphere is a place of relatively greater autonomy that has made these women focus on their children’s attainment of success (as it is defined according to normative cultural ideas and values), despite their keen awareness that systemic obstacles and societal prejudices will accompany them on every step of the process. It is striking that communism – a sociopolitical ideology that according to the opinion of many Czechs today, strove to obliterate individual ‘identity’ – is a system that Alžběta and Zdeňka regard as having fostered their social existence *as individuals* due to its official denial of ethnicity. Their experiences in Czech society have informed them that being seen as a Rom and being evaluated as an individual cannot occur in tandem.

The ‘ethnic trap’ that Alžběta, Zdeňka and their family members face should seemingly make their efforts to ‘make it’ a psychologically unrewarding process, for even if ‘success’ is achieved – indeed, even if one *surpasses* mainstream defined standards of ‘success’ (e.g. Věra) – the moral ‘cleanliness’ of the achiever is always an area of suspicion and an object of never-ending scrutiny. The indelibility of the badge of ‘Gypsiness’ – of moral ‘dirtiness’ – is often so extreme for Romani individuals that their perceived social deviancy almost borders on being an ‘internal essence’ rather than being identified as a manifestation of their moral weakness or cultural inferiority. It is nearly impossible for a non-Czech to become ‘Czech’ – to become socially, culturally or morally ‘un-dirty’.

How then does it happen that Alžběta and Zdeňka remain committed to this cultural compromise? It could be argued that they consent to its legitimacy in different ways. In her ethnographic study of London prostitutes, Day (1999) suggests that the majority of these women embody society within their own persons by dividing themselves into a ‘public self’ and a ‘private self’. The ‘public self’ is focused on their entrepreneurship in the present; their involvement in sex work is viewed and discussed not as a long-term ‘way of life’ but as an activity that is distant from their ‘inner’ selves and their ‘true’ values about their family lives. The ‘private self’ is focused on the past and future because these are the temporal frames that intertwined with their ideas about motherhood, domesticity and committed romantic love within the institution of marriage. Their work in the present is performed so that they can invest into their dreams of future domestic bliss, so the cultural relevance of these ‘private’ values is very real to these women. Nevertheless, for many, these aspects of their ‘true selves are difficult to realize in practice. It is often easier to spend than save, since through the immediate consumption of their earnings, their friendships and romantic relationships cannot become tainted by financial matters. Children are ‘wanted’ according to their dreams of motherhood, yet it is the ability to conceive children rather than having them that proves that their involvement in sex work has not destroyed their ‘future’ selves. For those women who do manage to realize their ‘true’ selves, they often find that the household is lonely; their houses are not ‘homes’ because they are devoid of the personal relationships that are key to the domestic ideal. For women whose ‘future’ selves are no longer appealing, they often find their activities as ‘public’ or ‘present’ selves much more rewarding.

Some prostitutes, however, manage to achieve a sense of unity between their ‘public’ and ‘private’ selves in the form of a “valorized individual” (150). The boundaries between work and home are much more fuzzy, with some clients becoming ‘regulars’ or even boyfriends. Some women work from their homes. Some have children and invest money into their long-term success, while other money is spent on personal ‘luxuries’ that also are investments into their future public and private selves (e.g. fertility treatments (private) and cosmetic surgery (public)). The balance between all sectors of life is seen as a series of achievements.

For Alžběta and Zdeňka, the cultural ideas of educational qualification, steady employment in a skilled trade or a white-collar job sector and a mother-father nuclear household – issues of importance on which they can exert a greater influence in the private sphere – remain powerful and important for the reasons already stated in this subsection. Alžběta has already attained the success of scholastic achievement and professional qualification through her daughters and her granddaughters (who are all well on their way to graduating from the *gymnazium* and pursuing further educational or professional qualifications). Alžběta herself has become a businesswoman through ownership of a few properties on Živá Street and she has a public face attached to her involvement in educational initiatives for children. However, her ‘public’ self is also involved with Romani cultural festivals and the management of a community center that is viewed as an ethnically oriented association by many Czechs in Skála. Thus even if her public self is oriented towards activities that have a great deal of overlap with the goals of her ‘private’ self – goals that have been highly informed by ‘normative’ Czech cultural values (e.g. the importance of preparedness for school, involvement with quite ‘cultural’

events (music, dance), individual initiative, creativity and ingenuity (entrepreneurship and financial know-how)) – the ‘trap of ethnicity’ almost ensures that her actions in both spheres (which are both greatly influenced by mainstream ideas), will still be interpreted through ‘Gypsy’ goggles – as behaviors that should be approached with circumspection.

For Zdeňka, on the other hand, the ‘normative’ cultural values that inform her ‘private’/future-oriented self have yet to be actualized. Their cultural significance to her is likely no less strong than is their significance to Alžběta, as is evidenced by all three of her younger children’s attendance at the *základní škola* or the *přípravný ročník* as well as her narrative engagement on the topics of school and family. However, her thoughts about ‘the future’ are often listlessly expressed. They are things she would like for her children, but they are cognitively allocated in the future and are considerably influenced by her own past experiences – both joyful and traumatic. Her ‘public’ self is informed by present requirements. Saving is nearly impossible when having enough money to meet her family’s needs is a daily uncertainty. Chances are taken when they arise, whether this means she and her children steal small (and completely unessential) items from Skála’s thrift store or she spends unexpectedly acquired sources of income on getting her teeth fixed. Like other similarly socioeconomically positioned women, her relationship with her husband is complicated by the distribution of income. The void left by her husband’s sexual, emotional and financial estrangement is filled by more authentic relationships with her children. The dream of conjugal bliss is shattered for her, but holding on to the idea of her children having a different future is a source of hope. Little signs of her children’s ‘success’ not only connect her with the joys of the past but also with the future

– something that she can imagine as she likes and that is a matter that is not within her complete control.

## Chapter Four - The Romani Family as a Location for Personal Agency

### I. Introduction

#### i. The *Kurva*, the Son and the Rash

“Look *Natašo!* Look! Look at this rash on my arms! And all because I thought Alex was talking to that *kurva* again! His *žena!* I thought she was here!” Alžběta thrust her reddened arms across the entryway of her apartment, the sleeves of her bathrobe rolled up as far as possible so that I could take in the full extent of her aggravated skin condition. I was shocked at the accelerated pace at which her completely psychosomatic response had developed in the wake of a misunderstanding that had happened earlier in the day. Alžběta’s son Alex had received a phone call to the community center office’s phone number from a woman. When Alex had dropped by the office earlier in the morning, he had asked me to go and fetch him from his mother’s flat when a call came through for him. As requested, I ran up to Alžběta’s place when the expected call occurred. I poked my head into their living room and said:

“Alex! There is a *žena* on the phone for you.”

A great deal of confusion ensued from that sentence. Alex’s sisters Ludmila and Věra gasped. Alžběta sprang up from the couch and shrieked at her son, “What? That *kurva!* *Ne, ne, ne!*” A look of disaster came over Alex’s face before he buried his head in his hands. Alžběta started yelling at him so fast that I couldn’t understand anything that was coming out of her mouth. I stood in the doorway, puzzled about why that sentence had caused such a strong reaction. As Alex walked past me to run and get his call, he said over his shoulder, “*Ne mami!* It isn’t like that! It isn’t her.”

In the Czech language, the word *žena* can mean a woman/female, or it can mean *manželka* (Cz. wife). At this point in time, I was not aware that *žena* could mean “wife”, thus when I ran up to tell Alex about his phone call, Alžběta had interpreted my statement to mean that Alex’s Czech wife (in fact ex-wife) was waiting to speak with him. I would only find out her real name much later – Ivanka (a word that Alžběta only seemed able to vocalize with much effort and a look of utter revulsion). In conversation, Alžběta only called Ivanka three things: a *kurva* (Cz. whore), a *čubka* (Cz. slut), or *ta žena* (Cz. that wife).

Alžběta unrolled her sleeves and turned around to walk back into her apartment, and I took this to mean that I was supposed to follow her. As her state of agitation propelled her into kitchen cleaning mode, I sat on the sofa and said tentatively, “So, you don’t like her?”

“That *kurva? Ne!*” Alžběta roared. “It’s because of her that Alex was in prison. It’s because of her that he became a *kriminál!*” She put her arms out in front of her and crossed them at the wrist, as if she was handcuffed. “When we still had our pub, he got into a big fight with these other men. Like from the mafia! He got involved in some bad things because his *žena* was always asking for more and more money – for clothes, for *kosmetika*, for the *solarium*. For her, it was only the best labels, only the top *kvalita*. He worked all the time to try to please her, but did she work? Never! She never worked. She didn’t even cook for her children. She never cleaned. Alex’s sisters and I did that. All she did was spend time putting on makeup and things like that. Because he never had enough money for her, he would ask me for money. All the time he was asking me for money. He said it was for his kids but I knew better. It was for that *kurva!* And he’s still doing it now! That’s why we argue all the time. He’s still in love with her. I just don’t understand why, after all she’s



done to him. That *kurva* wanted to come to Aleš's funeral! I told Alex, 'No! I will not have her at my husband's funeral! If I see her there, there is going to be a fight.'" Alžběta picked up the empty wine bottle on the table and pretend as if she was going to break it on the coffee table. "I told him that I would kill her if I saw her there. I didn't want to have a heart attack at my own husband's funeral!"

Puzzled, I asked, "But if Ivanka is so terrible, why is Alex still in love with her?" Alžběta threw up her arms and gave me an exasperated look. "You know why *Natašo*? Because she's smart and he's an idiot. All she has to do is this." Alžběta batted her eyelashes, patted my arm, and adopted a coy expression on her face. "He'll stay at her place for a while, when she wants to sleep with him. Then after a few days, when she gets tired of him, she kicks him out." Alžběta paused. "But mostly *Natašo*, it's because he is lonely. Sometimes he'll come home drunk and in tears when his *žena* tells him to go away. He'll cry and say, 'Why doesn't she love me *mami*? Why can't I just find a good woman, someone decent and clever like my sisters?' If he could just find a nice woman, someone that would be faithful and would cook and clean for him, I know he would change. Because he doesn't want just sex!" Alžběta patted her chest, right over her heart. "He wants to be in love. And he is a *dobrý člověk* (Cz. good person). He wasn't always like this, so unreliable, so selfish, drinking all the time. He used to be such a kind and decent boy before that *kurva žena*. I remember when he was a teenager, he used to walk with me in town, with his arm in mine. He would point to things in the store windows and say, 'Look *mami*! Look at that! You should buy that makeup so you'll be pretty. I'll get it for you.'"

Alžběta paused and looked over at Alex's 13-year old son Ruda as he was unrolling his sleeping bag and arranging pillows on the fold out couch. For the past several months

he had been living at his grandmother's instead of with his mother and sister in the neighboring town of Hráz. Although she and Aleš had been the primary caretakers of their granddaughter Světlana during her formative years, Alžběta approached her 'adoption' of Ruda in a very different way. Despite the companionship she derived from her grandson's presence, she resented that he was living with her as a result of Alex's abdication of parental duty. Lowering her voice so Ruda wouldn't hear, she said, "I feel sorry for him because he is such a nice boy. He is always looking out for his cousin Lucie when they are playing outside. He pretends that he isn't hungry because he doesn't want to take too much food from me. He is always asking Světlana and me, 'Do you mind that I am staying here with you? Do you mind that I am sleeping here all the time?'" He knows that his mother and father act crazy. He sees how superficial his mother and sister Vendula are, that's why he likes staying here with me. But it's not good for him because he goes to school in Hráz. He has to get up very early in order to get the bus and get to school on time, and the cold air in the mornings isn't good for his asthma. You see all the steps he has to walk up in order to get to the bus stop! And you heard how sick Ruda was a few weeks ago, when he had to stay in the hospital for bronchitis. As Ruda was lying here in bed and having trouble breathing, Alex and I got into a terrible fight. I said to Alex, 'I am not Ruda's mother! Why is he here? His mother should be caring for him, not ME.' Alex told me that I should take Ruda to the hospital, and I said to him, "No! *You* need to take him to the hospital!" I said, 'You and your *žena* are both the same. You only think of yourselves. You don't take any responsibility. You aren't parents. You deserve each other.' Finally I..." Alžběta made a smacking motion on her cheek. "Then he ran away."

Alžběta shook her head and concluded with a refrain familiar to many of her prior frustrated orations about her son. “I fear that things are not going to end well for Alex, just as it was for his father. I have problems with all my children, but with Alex it is the worst. Of course my son works. All my children work. I work. He knows that it is his responsibility if he wants to give his *žena* money, yet he still asks me all the time! But what can I do? He doesn’t give – he only takes and takes and takes.”

## ii. The Individual and Cultural Compromise within ‘the Romani Family’: a Departure

Within the body of literature on Roma in the Czech lands and Slovakia, ‘the family’ – in both its extended and nuclear forms – tends to be a key conceptual framework with which to discuss Romani culture and tradition (Mann 2001; Davidová 2004, Ch.2, Davidová 2009; Jakoubek 2004; Jakoubek and Hirt 2004; Budilová 2006). Within tracts on the structural and functional nature of family, extended family, kin groups, patriarchy and matriarchy, marriage patterns and residential arrangements in Slovakian *osady* and Czech urban localities, one is often introduced to Romani terms like *famel’ija* and *fajta*.<sup>103</sup> One reads that in the *osada*, when a *čhaj* (Rom. girl) becomes a *bori* (Rom. daughter-in-law), she is brought to her husband’s family’s house, subjected to a series of stringent tests by her mother-in-law, and eventually compelled to run back to her parents’ house after a high degree of exhaustion (Lacková 1999). One reads about the importance of family membership to a Rom’s sense of ‘identity’ and belonging. One is confronted with adages such as *Odazeno mardo, so achila coro, oda mek goreder, so hino korkorol* (Rom. Terrible

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<sup>103</sup> *Famel’ija* encompasses kin within three to five generations of all kinsmen and kinswomen. *Famel’ija* has a horizontal dimension whereas *fajta* has a vertical dimension, including the lines of both mother (*fajta pal e daj*) and father (*fajta pal o dad*) (Jakoubek 2004: 102).

is one who is poor, still worse is one who is alone).<sup>104</sup> How much more adamant a statement about the Romani family can one expect to find than, “In the Romani *osada*, a person is no one without the family”? (Jakoubek 2004: 118).<sup>105</sup>

In a sense, I follow in the footsteps of this tradition because the main argument upon which this thesis is based attests to the importance of the family as both a functional and conceptual aspect of Romani sociality. In addition to their relations with Romani individuals external to the family unit, their self-identification with a Romani ethnic group separate from (but existing within) the Czech nation-state and ongoing contact with members of the Czech majority population, the main current of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s sense of sociality runs through their families. The actions they take within the private, domestic realm as well as their use of the narrative of ‘the Romani family’ both constitute forms of personal agency for these women. As mothers, the energy they invest into their children in the present is informed by their memories— both positive and negative – of their own childhood family dynamics and school experiences, normative cultural ideas about educational success and social ‘decency’, traditional family forms and gender roles, and the importance of happy children, maternal affection and family cohesiveness to ‘the Romani family’. As I suggested at the end of the previous chapter, the cultural compromise to which Alžběta and Zdeňka consent is of equally strong cultural and emotional salience to both women, yet they must consent to its legitimacy in different ways by virtue of their different life circumstances. Their allocation of the idealized Romani family and idealized other aspects of Romani social life to the communist past – family cohesiveness, male

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<sup>104</sup> Cited by Jakoubek 2004: 119. My English translation taken from the Czech translation of the Romanes. Original source: Hübschmannová, M. 2002. *O Romech, na co jste se chtěli zeptat*, manuál pro obce (About Roma, what you wanted to ask about, a manual for municipalities). Prague. (Eds. H. Frištenská and P. Víšek).

<sup>105</sup> Translated from Czech.

responsibility, generosity towards those in need, tolerance and respect from Czechs, and social equality – is based upon their similar feelings about the uncertainty about the futures that they, their children and their grandchildren face in the democratic Czech Republic. However, while the cultural ideas that inform Alžběta’s strategies and actions have garnered her and her children a concrete measure of financial success and social standing, Zdeňka has yet to see her alignment with Czech values come to any fruition. Both women are beleaguered by the ‘trap of ethnicity’ – by the knowledge that the motivations for their actions (no matter how innocuous) and the veracity of their achievements (no matter how outstanding) will be critiqued – but for Zdeňka, since dreams she has for her children are cognitively ascribed to the future and are informed by the past, they have yet to be tarnished by the current contingencies of ‘real life’. Alžběta interfaces with her cultural beliefs and the socioeconomic circumstances of her life simultaneously, thus as a social actor, her enactment of personal agency is much less ‘divided’. Their participation in a seemingly psychologically unbeneficial process – their agreement on the significance of the aforementioned cultural ideas – *is* emotionally rewarding, yet Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s use of the narrative of the family as a form of personal agency is not quite exemplary of a common cultural approach to Romani social life because of their different engagement with it as a source of cultural legitimacy. The focus of this thesis’ ethnography must be set on a greater micro-level. In other words, *how exactly* has Alžběta seen her psychological acquiescence to this cultural compromise through to a tangible level of fruition? *What actions* does Zdeňka take as she maintains a sort of equilibrium between the equally demanding material exigencies of the present and the positive sense of self that derives from her psychological investment in this future-oriented cultural compromise?

I began this chapter with an ethnographic sketch of Alžběta's and Alex's mother-son relationship because it is now time to turn our attention towards the specific and unique ways in which this cultural compromise 'works' on an individual level. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's narratives about their families illustrate how their enactment of personal agency in the domestic sphere is an ongoing balancing act of negotiation and renegotiation with the cultural materials that are available and relevant to them. In this chapter, their enactment of personal agency in the domestic family sphere through various means – attempts to exert control over the actions of their sons- and daughters-in-law and their husbands, the allocation of marital advice to their children, and the investment of temporal, financial, physical and mental energy into children and grandchildren – will be explored through their individual narratives about the family. Within these narratives, the salience of ethnicity with regard to their family-oriented actions and beliefs will also be discussed.

Finally, the 'individuality' of one's actions will be taken into consideration. While Alžběta and Zdeňka may regard their children as vehicles by which they can achieve change, validation and redemption, their children's 'successes' or 'failures' are not viewed as personal possessions. Alžběta or Zdeňka consider these actions to belong neither to themselves nor to the children or grandchildren that were the actual achievers or perpetrators. The actions of one family member belong to the family as a whole because Alžběta's and Zdeňka's experiences have taught them that for better or worse, it is the sum rather than the parts whose evaluation carries more weight in the complex of Romani sociality. Evaluations of a Romani person originate from the 'inside' and the 'outside' – from Romani individuals and from Czechs – and both tend to be ascribed on a collective rather than an individual basis. By association, the actions of a Romani individual belong to

the family unit. There is a strongly gendered dimension to individual-cum-collective negative evaluations, and Alžběta's and Zdeňka's cognizance of the palpability of this phenomenon will be evidenced throughout their narratives in this chapter and the following chapter.

## **II. Motherhood**

### **i. "In love, everyone is foolish..." The Enactment of Individual Agency through the Bestowal of Advice to Children Regarding Marriage and Partnership**

Alex was not the sole recipient of Alžběta's strong influence on the married lives of her offspring. To be sure, in comparison to Alžběta's relationship with Alex and Ivanka, her relationships with Věra and Ludmila, and with her sons-in-law Tomáš and Jakub seemed to be relatively harmonious. Her daughters (both in their mid-thirties) had households of their own, were steadily employed, had their own incomes as full-time teachers, and devoted almost all of their hours outside of their jobs and their own home lives to the operation of Skála's community center. Jakub and Tomáš were both steadily employed as bricklayers and window installers, and when they were not out working on assignments they were frequently doing odd jobs for Alžběta around her building (albeit with a good deal of grumbling under their breaths when she expressed her dissatisfaction with their work) or silently hanging about the community center office, seemingly content to let their wives and children take center stage.

Given the daily presence of Alžběta in her daughter's lives, it could almost be said that Tomáš and Jakub were married not only to their wives, but also to their mother-in-law. Ludmila's and Věra's maternal safety net, in addition to their strong educational qualifications and their relative financial independence from their husbands, meant that

Tomáš and Jakub had a constant sense of awareness that should they incur the ire of Alžběta, it would not only be felt directly through verbal censure but also indirectly via her influence on her daughters' actions within their marriages. For example, as a gambling addict, Jakub augmented his wife's already elevated stress levels in the wake of her father's death by continually stealing money from her so that he could play the *automaty*.

Moreover, he had started to drink more and more, and Ludmila had expressed to her mother that Jakub was becoming increasingly aggressive towards her and her daughters Mariana and Jarmila. Alžběta's and Ludmila's joint teasing of Jakub about his gambling in front of other family members resulted in his complete avoidance of Alžběta's property for several months. After I noted his sudden absence, Alžběta identified her anger towards her son-in-law as the reason. "I told Ludmila that she should divorce him," Alžběta said with respect to her daughter's troubled marriage, "but she doesn't want to. She said that they must stay together for the children's sake. Well what can I do about it? Her husband lies. I told her that she can stay here with me if she wants to." Ludmila repeatedly refused her mother's attempts to give her money despite the financial strain her husband's gambling had put her under. Eventually, Ludmila did take her mother's advice and filed for divorce.

As for Věra's husband Tomáš, more than once Alžběta had complimented her son-in-law by stating that he was "quite different" than Jakub; not only did he work tirelessly so that his children would have "even nicer clothes and shoes than the Czech students" with whom they went to school (e.g. extremely high-tech-looking Nike running shoes, Baby Phat tracksuits), he also spent all his time outside of work devoting attention to his children. Physically, Tomáš's appearance matched his descriptions as a hardworking husband and father. Although he was in his mid-thirties just like Věra, he looked to be ten to fifteen



years older. The perpetual bags under his eyes suggested that he never got a good night's sleep. He moved about his mother-in-law's building with a resigned expression on his face, as if he was stuck on some sort of sluggish autopilot setting. His lethargic nature and overall silence were the polar opposite of his wife Věra's sharp, thundering voice and rapid and assertive gait.

I generally heard women say very little that was complimentary about the opposite sex; most often their comments were reflective of a collective cognitive dissonance between their ideas of what the conduct of men *should* be like and their views on the inherently negative aspects of men's natures. After several months of hearing various Roma in Skála attest only to Tomáš's dedication as a father and responsibility as a husband, during one of our recording sessions I asked Alžběta if she thought that Věra was lucky to have found such a 'good man' or if she was just shrewd enough to discern that he possessed certain qualities that would make him a reliable life partner. Alžběta quickly diminished the authenticity of Tomáš's publically lauded qualities:

*Oh, Věra was smart. But she wasn't smart to fall in love with him. In love, you can't be smart. In love, everyone is foolish. Anyone who says that you can be smart about love is lying. You must develop a system in marriage that will work, so that you can be happy. No one is perfect in love or marriage. No one. Věra had problems with Tomáš in the beginning, but she listened to me. I could see him differently than the man she fell in love with.*

*To begin with, I really didn't want her to be with him because of his family. I said to her, "End it." There were arguments, but she was pregnant. Then she had the baby and I said to her, "You have a mother and a father. You don't have to put up with Tomáš, so don't go home to him." I said to Věra, "You know me. I will put an end to it because I would never want you to be in a bad situation. What kind of guy goes to festivals in Okraj and leaves you behind at home so that he can have his fun?"*

*When she went back to their flat with little Světlana, Tomáš wasn't there. So I told her, "Now dress up nicely and go out to a party. Don't stay at home! You are not*

*a nun. Go!” She did, and then he found out about it and he went back home to her. After that, maybe they argued a few times, but she gave him a system. Tomáš wasn’t so good. That’s a lie. She had to work on it with him. She told me, “Mami, it was good that I listened to you.” She had seen how it was with her father and me, and she wanted the same type of father for her children. Aleš didn’t go out and amuse himself. He didn’t go anywhere. He washed diapers, he got up with the kids, he worked...he did everything.*

*Tomáš was always running home to his mother. I said to him, “Světlana is three years old now. Why don’t you just live at your mother’s if you are always going over there anyway? We aren’t giving you or your family anything at our house anymore.” His family was always here, and they wanted us to drink with them. We didn’t like it because we were working on the building. We would say to them, “Come and help out! Our hands and knees hurt.” But they just wanted to come here and sit around. I didn’t want to cook for them. I said, “No! Nothing! Here we have work to do. Why should I make food for you when you give us nothing in return?”*

*I told Věra, “Look – do this. This is what will work!” So she went to their flat in Okraj and she told him, “Just go away.” Tomáš asked why, and she said, “Go visit your mother or something. I don’t care!” So he left, but he immediately came back and said, “Why are you sending me away? Do you have another man?” Věra said, “No. But just leave! I am not going to forbid you from going home to your mother.” I told my daughter, “You’re doing well. Yes, do that!” Then Tomáš stopped going home so often. There are also some things I know about him that I don’t want to talk about.*

*Natašo, I’ve only told you about this because I know that you won’t tell people here about it. Tomáš isn’t the way that people think. Věra listened to me, she trusted me, and then there was peace. It’s because she told him, “Enough.” Even now, Věra will say to him, “You don’t like it? Why don’t you leave? I am not going to suffer because of you.” When she has problems with him, she’ll come to me and I’ll tell her what I think about the way things are going. I’ll say, “No, that’s not right, but this here – this is as it should be.”*

*There is a balance between them – you know, he is so much calmer than Věra and she is the dominant one in the relationship. Men will do as much as you allow them. You have to make a noose. You have to be afraid of surrendering to them. Only then will it break even. When she sees that Tomáš is starting to be mean, she’ll just fly herself over to me. And when that happens, I don’t want to see Tomáš. In my marriage, I had too many worries and I didn’t have anywhere to go. But she does have a place to go to when she is having problems.*

*Věra is terribly smart, and she shows Tomáš that she regards herself highly. She’ll say to me, “He isn’t more than me just because he is a man. He shows me the money he earns, but I earn more. I am a woman, and I have to wash, clean,*

*cook...I have two jobs, and then I have to come home and do everything else. He has one job, but will he do things for me? I have my own worth. I am a human being. Mami, I don't want to fall into the same situation that you had."*

Alžběta's ongoing bestowal of marital advice to Věra not only demonstrates her interest in exerting a certain degree of control over the nature of her family's relationship with that of her son-in-law's, it also clearly shows how both of their reflections on Aleš's performance as a father and husband tie into their own ideas of how Věra's marriage should most optimally function. Throughout my acquaintance with Alžběta, she repeatedly framed the egalitarian approach of her husband towards the provision of childcare and domestic labor, as well as his unwavering romantic and sexual fidelity, as being extremely rare for a Romani man. It was his unusual industriousness as a father and his empathy towards the laboriousness of his wife's daily activities that made his downward descent into alcoholism and physical abusiveness after he lost his job in the beginning years of post-communist economic restructuring particularly devastating to Alžběta. In order to prevent her daughter's emotional and financial entrapment in a similar marital situation after detecting certain 'warning signs' in Tomáš's newlywed behavior, Alžběta took action. Besides already having expended a great deal of energy into insuring that her daughter would pursue higher levels of education than she had been able to pursue herself, she made clear to Věra that she would always have an 'escape' route at her disposal. While Alžběta's narrative about her school experiences suggests that it was her love of learning and her wish to have clever children (rather than a desire for her to daughters to have a higher chance of financial independence from men) that fuelled her investment in Věra's educational achievements, as she once said in reference to Věra's developed sense of worth

and authority in her marriage: “For women to have an education is a big plus!” Věra herself was aware of the severe imbalance of power between her mother and father in the later years of their marriage, and her cognizance of that fact encouraged her to take her mother’s advice on how to ‘make a noose’ – how to make clear in the early stages of marriage what she would and would not tolerate. In accordance with complimentary Czech and Romani notions of what a wife’s duties have traditionally been around the house, Věra grudgingly (yet proudly) accepts her ‘double burden’ of career woman and homemaker, content with the knowledge that her educational achievements, relative financial independence and maternal safety net all provide her with sufficient leveraging power to maintain a relatively well-functioning and harmonious marriage.

Zdeňka similarly stresses the importance of ‘developing a system’ with one’s husband in the early stages of marriage, a belief which is informed by various past occurrences that she witnessed as a child within her own family and by issues she has dealt with during her own marriage to Petr. As her narrative below will show, she is trying to use her own marital disappointments as templates for what her children – both male and female – should avoid in their own future relationships. Unlike Alžběta and Věra, her developed awareness of what she didn’t want in marriage did not prevent its (re)occurrence in her own.

On the ninth birthday of her son Miloš, I made a visit to Zdeňka’s so that I could give him a gift – a small wooden dinosaur to glue together. From the time I had spent volunteering at the community center, I had seen that he enjoyed painting with watercolors, and the dinosaur kit came with a small paint set with which he could decorate it after it had been constructed. Although it hadn’t escaped my attention that Zdeňka’s children had

almost no toys to call their own, the extreme joy that Miloš derived from the gift was only put into complete context after he ran out of the kitchen and Zdeňka said, “My husband didn’t do anything for his birthday. That *hajzl!*<sup>106</sup> With a look of confusion, I asked, “What is a *hajzl?*” Laughing, she considered it for a moment before she replied, “Well...It isn’t good!”

As she sat down with two cups of tea, she continued, “I just don’t understand Petr. My father was a much better father to us than my husband is to his own children. Petr just wants to be free. He only wants to do things for himself. He doesn’t consider anyone else. He doesn’t consider those he cause pains. My father did a lot for us when I was growing up. All he did was work, work, work all the time, on Saturday and Sunday too, just so he could provide a better life for us. He beat my mother, and of course that was bad, but he had a good relationship with her. Sometimes, yes, it was okay. For a while he would love her and buy her things. He would help her and protect her. But then there would be times when he would beat her horribly. One day he would beat her, and two days later he would buy her something – like a necklace or ring – because he felt guilty. I don’t know why. It comes down to one’s temperament I guess, one’s character. It’s because of their father that I am teaching my children to be fair and kind to their own husbands and wives. Because of their father, they understand that when they will have their own families, they must care for their children. At the same time, it makes me nervous because their father is also setting an example for them – a bad example. My husband’s brain is turned off and he doesn’t consider the things he does. I am alone with my children so I am trying to set a good example for them myself.”

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<sup>106</sup> *Hajzl* is a Czech vulgarity for toilet (shithouse), so in this sense, Zdeňka probably is calling her husband a shit (i.e. creep).

I wondered what Zdeňka had anticipated her married life would be like given that in her conversations with me, she often made a link between the physical abuse she experienced with Petr and the frequent violence her father directed towards her mother. A few weeks later during one of our recording sessions, I asked her about what her expectations of marriage had been:

*Zdeňka: I believed that, one and two, we would help each other out. I know that every couple argues; every couple has problems. But there also has to be a balance. One day he'll be right, and the next day I'll be right. It's like when I talk to you Natašo. Maybe sometimes we have the same opinion but sometimes we don't. Sometimes you say "no", so I also say "no" because I see your perspective. I say, "Yes, you're right". In marriage, it is the same. One person must put their head down and say, "Yes, you're right. Okay". But in my marriage, I am always the one who says, "Yes, you're right. Fine." I do it because when I was growing up, my parents were always arguing. I don't want my children to see their father and me arguing.*

*Natasha: How was it with Petr's parents then?*

*Zdeňka: Oh, it was good! Excellent. They raised eleven children together. In his home, everyone helped each other out. It was fine.*

*Natasha: So if they had a good marriage, why do you think Petr treats you and your children so badly?*

*Zdeňka: Well, as they say, in every family there is a black sheep. I think Petr really is that black sheep. But it is also because they spoiled him; they allowed him to do anything he wanted. His father also had two or three lovers, so he so he saw this as he was growing up. But you know, my brothers saw my father beat my mother and they have never treated their wives in the same way. They are dedicated to their wives and treat them well. They did the opposite of their father.*

*You see Natašo, what matters the most is that the man wants to be a good husband. When you are dating a guy and you are close to one another – like, if you know you are going to be a mother – after you tell him that you're pregnant, he must decide if he will take you or not. He must tell you if it agreeable to him that the two of you will form a family together. When you establish a family, it is a serious thing – a very serious thing. Some men don't want a family even though they have already been with you. After I became pregnant with Erika, Petr and I weren't together. He was beating me, so I decided to leave him. I went home to my parents, but they wouldn't give me a key to the house. My father said, "No, I*

*don't want you here." He told my mother, "Don't give the key to her." It was only after I told them that Petr had left me that they let me come home. I was in my fifth month with Erika by the time that Petr came looking for me. I said to him, "Are we going to build a life together or not?" He said yes, so I went back to him.*

*Natašo, everything depends on you, the woman. Everything depends on how you form your family. I formed my family very badly. I love my children and they have a flat to live in, but there's never any fun. There is never the type of enjoyment that there should be because it is hard for me. Since Petr moved out, I have cried and cried and cried because I want my children to have their father at home. It can't be only the mother or only the father. I can only do so much. Petr needs to do more for his children, so that they will have an education, clean clothes, a good upbringing – so that they will have everything they need. Yes, in a family everything depends on the woman, but nowadays it also depends a lot on the guy whether the family functions well. When a husband is kind to his wife, it works. With my mother and father, it didn't work well. Father loved us, but he also drank a lot and beat my mother. She had a great deal of stress because of him, and as a result she began to drink too. It just didn't work well in our family.*

*When I was sixteen years old, my older sister started a family. I saw that things were not going well with her husband, and I became scared because I didn't want the type of life that my sister was having. I watched it and thought, "No! I don't want that!" But you see, I wound up in the same situation. Actually, I have it worse than my sister because her husband improved himself. Now he helps her with everything and he loves her. But in the beginning of my sister's marriage, her husband wasn't faithful and he also did drugs. She broke it off with him because his addiction got so bad. They didn't see each other for three months, and then they were apart for another six months because her husband was in drug rehab. Because she hadn't been in contact with him, she didn't know that he was trying to get better. When he finished his treatment, he came to me and asked, "Where is your sister?" I said, "Why should I tell you?" He explained where had been and said, "Zdeňko, I was very stupid, but now I am sorted out. I am not drinking. I am not taking any drugs." I didn't believe that he would stay clean, but now look at him! He is the best father. Now my sister has a good husband. They have a little boy and little girl together. She has a good life.*

*A lot depends on whether or not your husband will make changes for the better. Petr has left me several times, and he always returns – yet he never changes! My life never gets any better as far as he is concerned. It is hard for me to live with the fact that my children don't have a father, but on the other hand, because he is gone my children and I have some peace. You know? Calm. [laughing] I can't say that I will not be with Petr again. I don't know. Maybe he'll be back today. Maybe he'll come home tomorrow. I never know!*

*It is a very difficult to form a family in such a way that you know that your children will have a good upbringing. You are learning throughout your whole*

*life, so you don't know if you are doing things right. Still, you must try to make things work. You have to make some effort. In one family, maybe it is the wife and not the husband who is creating problems. In another family, maybe the husband is addicted to gambling. In another family, the father might beat his children. Or maybe he gambles and drinks, but he never cheats on his wife. Or maybe a husband has lovers but he never drinks! With Petr, it is everything together. He drinks, he cheats on me, he beats me, he doesn't give any money to me or to his children and he doesn't pay any attention to his children. It is a lot for me.*

*Yes, Petr's father had lovers, but he still loved his wife and children. He gave his wife money and he never beat her. It worked. And when Petr's mother finally got fed up with her husband sleeping with other women, she said, "Okay. That's enough. No more." And he said, "Okay. You're right." He stopped.*

*With Petr, it doesn't work. When he goes around with his lovers, I argue with him. I tell him to stop messing around so that his children won't cry. I try and try, but he does what he likes.*

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Věra and Zdeňka were exposed to similar types of father figures during their childhoods and young adulthoods; their fathers were hard-working co-financial providers, attentive and devoted to their children's well-being and wife batterers. Alžběta and Karolina had no other recourse to action than to cope with their husbands' drinking and violent behavior as best they could. During their courtships, neither Věra nor Zdeňka expected that they would meet with same similar circumstances from their husbands-to-be. Whether their belief that their marriages to Tomáš and Petr would be nothing like those of their mothers stemmed more from naïveté, an insufficient amount of knowledge about the various facets of their husbands' temperaments or the fact that their wish *not* to have the same type of marital relationship was so sincere that they didn't 'see' what they didn't want to see, neither Věra nor Zdeňka could claim that the destructive spousal dynamics they witnessed among members of their families were at all atypical. In their narratives, Alžběta and Zdeňka explicitly and implicitly communicate their awareness of



the prevalence of Romani men's physical abuse towards women, excessive consumption of alcohol, adulterous relationships with other women and lack of financial responsibility towards their wives and children. Like Stack (1974) found during her ethnographic study of impoverished women in a Midwestern black community called "The Flats" in 1960s America, Romani women speak of their men as being inherently 'bad' and imply that they are more 'evil' than women, primarily due to their natural inclination towards 'fooling around'. Also, a Romani male 'quality' that is commonly acknowledged by women is their tendency to be extremely jealous and paranoid about their wives' and girlfriends' movements outside of the household (Lacková 1999, Gulová et al. 2006). Zdeňka explains it this way: "[We] Romani women have difficult lives. A girl sees her father, and she thinks that with her boyfriend it will be better. They are optimistic that husbands will be different. Well, girls fall in love quickly..."

Yet it isn't just the young who are optimistic about the future when it comes to their romantic relationships with men. Even if Romani men are openly discussed by women as being generally 'bad', all the Romani women I got to know in Skála seem to be truly in love with the idea of 'true love'. No matter what their life experiences have been or *have yet* to be, in their minds, mutually reciprocated love between themselves and a man, involving passion, drama, romance, chivalry and emotional intimacy, seems to not only be an expectation but a *requirement*. This concept of *láska* is of course something that is culturally constructed, and as an idea that resonates positively with women, it persists overtime despite their social knowledge about how men are 'bad'. Even if many individual Romani women do not actually experience or witness this sort of love themselves, they experience it as a familiar, culturally relevant *idea*. The positive images

they have about *láska* are a sort of ‘perceived experience’ (Holy 1996) because their mediated accounts of romance lack any basis for its reappraisal. Individual Romani women’s ‘lived experience’ of love, which includes their indirect or direct exposure to male violence and jealousy, is appraised according to a filter of cultural relevancy. The phenomena that they observe or hear about seem to confirm their already-established ideas about how ‘Romani men are bad’. Of course, individual Romani women also have ‘lived experience’ of positive phenomena, as Alžběta and Zdeňka manifestly attest to in their narratives, but the idea or *ideal* of *láska* persists as a *collective* and culturally resonant idea among Romani women as a form of ‘perceived experience’. In this way, Zdeňka can concurrently speak of her father’s real ‘love’ for her mother at the same time that she can associate his physical abuse, jealousy and drinking with the widespread phenomena that make Romani women like herself have difficult lives. As will be shown in Chapter Five, at times the two can even be conflated (e.g. Love is when men are jealous, or love is when men buy gifts).

It is entirely possible that Věra’s and Zdeňka’s paths could have been much more similar if not for the fact that Věra could turn to her mother for support. When Zdeňka agreed to form a family with Petr, she realistically had no choice but to acquiesce to the situation. With no educational qualifications, employment or parental support on which she could rely, Zdeňka was relatively unable to leverage for the same amount of sovereignty that Věra could. Petr does not want to change himself for the benefit of his wife and children, thus her hands are tied when it comes to his behavior and its deleterious effects on her children. Zdeňka’s only means to enact her own agency with regard to this subject is to communicate to her children the ways in which they can have

happier relationships with their future spouses and can be better parents to their children than Zdeňka has been able to be and Petr has chosen to be. As she says here,

*You have to teach children not to steal. I don't want them to. I just want them to have a basic education. If they learn their basic education well, then they will want to study even farther, but if they don't learn well, then they won't want to. They have to want it for themselves. Yes, of course I would be glad if they would become more educated, if they would become doctors, or I don't know what. I would be a happy, happy mother! But they don't have to be smart. They don't have to be president of the Czech Republic. Mainly, I am trying to make sure that they will be considerate and kind. I am teaching them these basic things so that their marriages and families will work, so that they will be respectful, so that they will be pure, so that they will be everything that another person needs.*

In this sense, Zdeňka's agency is very anchored in the present. Her daily efforts to instill in her children the importance of such ideas as empathy, kindness, honesty, and overall 'decency' revolve around the notion of 'being what you do' without regard to other social or economic factors that are out of your control. Of course, as a mother, the actions she takes to try to ensure her children's 'decency' involve her participation in a form of social reproduction – a future-oriented process. Besides the fact that on a temporal scale, child rearing is a long-term if not life-long venture, a 'good' mother strives to teach her children to be 'good' adults *in the future*. Moreover, Zdeňka's beliefs about the types of adults her children should become are partially influenced by 'normative' Czech cultural ideas about what constitutes educational and professional achievement and acculturation to the 'Czech ways' of mainstream society, and these ideas are based on the necessity of long-term financial and emotional investment on the part of parents. They are also influenced by her own positive and negative childhood experiences. Whilst 'mothering', it is difficult to bracket off the present from the past and future, but as she teaches her children to be 'good' in the present (which will translate

into their likelihood of being ‘decent’ adults), she also is re-asserting *her own* ‘goodness’ in the present. She cannot ensure that her children’s futures will turn out in the way she hopes or that her children will not be ‘morally dirty’ adults, but in the present she can prove that she *is* a ‘good’ mother who is trying to rear ‘good’ future members society by *doing* ‘good’ motherly actions.

## **ii. When Children Don’t Listen**

The adage that “in every family there is a black sheep” is not only something that I heard Zdeňka apply to her husband. Zdeňka and Alžběta each label one of their children (Erika Kopecká and Alex Procházka, respectively) as ‘black sheep’– as the ones who refuse to fall in step along with their siblings. During my time in Skála, unlike his sister Věra (and to a lesser extent Ludmila) Alex maintained an aura of secrecy about his movements outside of his mother’s building. He often preferred not to top up his mobile phone so he would have an excuse for not returning his family members’ calls. He failed to pay rent for his apartment (directly across the hall from Alžběta) so many times that his mother finally removed the door handle and cut off his electric supply. He would agree to perform certain manual tasks or run errands for Alžběta at agreed upon times and then shirk his responsibilities with no explanation provided. “Well what can I do?” Alžběta would always say as she shrugged her shoulders in response to her son’s capriciousness.

During the first couple of months following Aleš’s death, before their mutual discord reached its crescendo and Alex disappeared from sight for almost nine months, Alžběta seemed resigned to the following complex of options: yelling at Alex until he

sped off in his car, launching into incensed rants about what she considered to be her son's most recent screw-ups, or experiencing various psychosomatic reactions to her stress (headaches, back pain, hives and rashes, insomnia and heart palpitations).

Alžběta's command over her son's alcohol infused, skirt-chasing lifestyle, his ongoing quasi-masochistic relationship with his ex-wife, and his insufficient demonstration of responsibility towards his parental and financial duties extended only as far as the walls of her apartment. Within the household, she could reprimand Alex at will and refuse his requests for money, but when he departed from her dominion, he could once again be his own master (at least as far as his salary in the window installation profession permitted). Before his several month-long desertion of social contact with his mother and sisters, Alex would often walk out of his mother's apartment and completely ignore her queries about where he was going, what he was doing and when he would return.

At the core of Alex's strained relationship with his mother was, in Alžběta's opinion, his erroneous belief that his mother loved his sisters more than him, as well as his inability to refuse Ivanka's feminine wiles (and her ancillary requests for money). "He thinks that I love Věra and Ludmila more because I offer them money yet refuse him. But that isn't true! The difference between Alex and his sisters is this: Alex takes from me but never gives anything back in return. His sisters are generous – for example, see those oranges over there?" Alžběta motioned to a crate on the kitchen table. "Věra bought those for me when she went to supermarket. She and Ludmila do these sorts of things just to be nice, and they don't expect or ask for anything in return. They just help out. They do what I ask."

Eighteen-year-old Erika Kopecká's 'black sheep' status also derived from the secrecy, lack of responsibility to her family, lying, false promises and selfishness that her mother considered her daughter to demonstrate on a continual basis. On one very rainy summer afternoon, as was typical of most of our recording sessions in her cramped, poorly lit and badly ventilated kitchen, Zdeňka and I were suddenly interrupted by the slamming of her front door and the appearance of her children in the kitchen's entryway. I covertly paused my recorder and slipped it under the table; I had already become adept at quickly hiding it out of sight from whoever was coming to visit. She was relatively comfortable with her children being aware of our work together, but she didn't want any visiting neighbors (e.g. Aunt Kamila) to find out about it, and most of all she was terrified that one day her husband would arrive without warning and find out. She let her children chat with me for a little while before she unexpectedly interjected, "Where is Erika?" Adela, Miloš and Zlata looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders. "We haven't seen her *mami*," Miloš answered. After checking the bedroom and living room and peeking her head out into the hallway, Zdeňka came back to the kitchen shaking her head and said, "Can you believe that? I asked her to go to the shop for some bread, but she just ran off with the money and didn't come back! She's going to get it when she comes home! You see what I mean *Natašo*? In every family there is a black sheep. For me, it's Erika!" Zdeňka smiled and said, "Children, we were having a conversation before you ran in here and interrupted us. Go watch some TV so we can talk some more."

*I've told Erika, "Why don't you leave? I don't need you. You don't try to find a job, you don't do what I ask, you stay out all evening and then come home in the morning, you steal..." Yes, this isn't the first time she has taken money from me. The last time I caught her. I said, "Ne, ne holčička (Cz. little girl). Get out! I*

*don't want you here. You have a suitcase. You have your things. You don't want to listen to me? Then why don't you leave? Please! Go ahead. If you want to live under my roof, you are going to listen to me. When you have your own place to live, then you can do as you like." I'm always saying to her, "Eriko, you must not do such things – stealing, having sex, drinking! You're an adult now, but you're still very young. You'll have to carry the repercussions for the rest of your life. When you have a nice husband someday and he hears about the things you did, won't you be ashamed?" And she said, "No, I don't think so. It's my business what I do." I said, "How it is your business? It isn't only your thing. It's my thing too. It's the disgrace of your whole family." I would like her to have a good life, but she just has an empty head; she doesn't care what I think. I was like that too, so I know how stupid she is being. Like take for example her having sex with these guys. She lost her virginity when she was seventeen and a half. I lost my virginity when I was eighteen-years-old, but at least I had a husband! I mean I was living with Petr. She doesn't understand that if today she would come home with a stomach and say, "Mami, I'm pregnant," but she wouldn't have a boyfriend, that she is the one who would be judged. In life, a woman always carries more shame than a man – always! I would be ashamed of her too. I would say, "You don't have a husband, you don't have a flat – you don't have anything! And you want a family?" For me, that is awful. One of my friends said to me, "My daughter has started to smoke. She's already started having sex. Isn't that disgraceful?" Yes, it is a disgrace – towards her mother and towards her father too. It also means that her mother didn't guard her properly. If a thirteen-year-old girl already knows what sex is, something is wrong there. She still has time to figure that out. She has her whole life ahead of her. Sometimes I see children out on the street until ten or eleven o'clock at night! Their parents should be ashamed because it means that they aren't looking out for their children.*

Given Erika's capriciousness, I wondered how Zdeňka could be so sure about her daughter's sexual activity. "How did you know she was having sex? Did she tell you?" Zdeňka smiled and leaned in as if she were about to divulge some esoteric wisdom. "No. I realized that she was no longer a virgin because she was behaving differently. She was always bathing, bathing, bathing. When she would come home, she would shower right away. I didn't like it. I said, 'What are you doing?' She said, 'I'm washing my clothes.' I said, 'Aha! A boy. So now you have a sex life, huh?' She denied it, but I know it's true."

The idea that Erika was the black sheep of the Kopecký children wasn't a stretch of the imagination; after all, amongst members of Skála's Romani population she was

regarded as a persistent perpetrator of theft. After several months of observing Zdeňka's children, however, I had become somewhat concerned about Adela. She appeared to be a rather depressed and moody ten-year-old. When she was playing outside or visiting the community center, it was almost inevitable that she would make one of the other children cry or vice versa. I hardly ever saw her laugh or smile. Even more remarkable to me was my sense that in comparison to the other Kopecký children, Adela was shown nearly zero affection by her mother. Zdeňka frequently lost her temper with all her children, sometimes for little or no good apparent reason; without warning she would scream at them, "Leave me alone!" or "Get lost!", which without fail would cause her younger children to shrink away as their faces collapsed into tears. However, when she was calm – cuddling Miloš and Zlata and calling them pet names – I felt a strange absence of warmth between Zdeňka and Adela, as if she didn't even see her daughter.

"What about Adela?" I asked. "Adela?" Zdeňka thought for a second. "No, I really believe Erika is that black sheep, but I am afraid that someday it will be Adela too because she doesn't listen to me. She watches Erika and then she copies what Erika does and says. It's not good."

"*Zdeňko*, I don't know....When I see your children together, Adela often appears to be sad. She doesn't smile very much."

"No, you may be right *Natašo*. I've sensed the same thing about Adela – that's why I worry about her. When she is around other children, she often gets angry and says stupid things to them. The children at the community center don't like her very much because she is mean to them. They complain to the teachers, 'Adela did this' and 'Adela did that', and then she'll come home in tears. When she's there, she does her homework



assignments alone, or Ludmila or Věra will help her. It hurts a mother to see this. It hurts me to see my daughter crying. And now the children have started being mean to Miloš too. They see that Petr isn't at home. They ask Miloš, 'Don't you have a daddy anymore?' Tears started flowing down Zdeňka's face. Having heard their mother's voice start to tremble, Zlata and Miloš entered the kitchen. "*Miloši,*" she said, "Go look for Erika. *Zlato,* leave your mother alone for a little bit."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you so much." Wiping her eyes, she said, "You know *Natašo,* it's very hard. You are here a lot, so you see how sometimes the kids want ice cream, but they don't understand why I can't buy them any. I know that I need to save that money for bread. I can't spend it on sweets. I try to explain to them why I can't give them money for these things. I do it so one day they will understand. The other children's parents give them a little money so they can buy some sweets after school. They say to Adela, 'You don't have any!' and then they turn to Miloš and Zlata and say, 'You don't have any either!' They say these sorts of things. It hurts me that I can't buy these things for my own children. Some of the children at the community center are rather mean. Věra's daughter Lucie said to Zlata, 'Your shoes are ugly! You don't have pretty shoes like me!' She's said things like that a couple of times. I've said to Věra, 'Your Lucie is a spoiled little girl.' The children use these differences against each other. They see that my children don't have a father at home, so they are arrogant about it. I don't want the other children to make fun of them. I want my children to be accepted – to be taken seriously."

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Both Alžběta and Zdeňka feel disappointment about many of the choices that Alex and Erika make on an ongoing basis, and much of their frustration about their children's unwillingness to follow (or even listen to) their advice stems from their motherly concern about their children's welfare in the present and the future. They fear that they will see certain dreaded phenomena manifest themselves once again (e.g. Alžběta's fear that Alex's drinking will lead him to the same destiny as his father and Zdeňka's concern that, like her, Erika will become a mother without any financial support or parental assistance from the father).

Although these mothers are similar with respect to their apprehension about their children's safety and their irritation with the problems that they cause, unlike Zdeňka, Alžběta does not frame Alex's failures in terms of how it may shame the family. His irresponsibility certainly causes aggravation for his sisters and brothers-in-law (who are also his work colleagues) and induces acute emotional turmoil and physical stress in his mother, but unlike Erika, the error of his ways is not termed as "*the disgrace* of [his] whole family". Zdeňka as well as Alžběta most often tie the reputation of their families to the conduct of its female members, especially in terms of Romani public opinion about the extensiveness of their sexual experience. Erika and Světlana are eighteen years old, and this is not considered a premature age to be engaging in sexual activity. It is the circumstances under which it is occurring that is a matter of importance to the girl's (and her family's) reputation. They believe that it is important for a sexually active young woman to be in a monogamous and committed relationship that is publicly acknowledged. Alžběta and Věra both tell Světlana that she should marry her boyfriend Radek and not 'just live with him' as they would like because in Alžběta's words,

“People here look at our family a lot, and people will think she is easy if she just continues to date him. It makes our family look bad.” The pressure she applies to Světlana is remarkable given that neither she nor Světlana’s parents have a good opinion of Radek, and because Alžběta was forced into an unhappy marriage herself as a sixteen-year-old due to her mother’s and brothers’ anxiety about their family’s reputation (see Ch. 4). Alžběta insists upon the idea of marriage because she doesn’t want people to label her granddaughter as a *kurva* (as she herself was mistakenly reputed to be). Even if this means that Světlana marries someone that Alžběta considers to be ‘beneath’ her granddaughter because he is less educated and untrustworthy, at least she will still be ‘decent’.

Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s consternation about the actions of their ‘black sheep’ is nourished by the *inconveniences* that their children’s activities cause them. For Alžběta in particular, she expects that her position as ‘mother’ (and more over as an *older* woman – a grandmother) should bestow her with a certain degree of respect from all her children. As my conversation with Eva and Alžběta in the previous chapter shows, their conceptualization of the ‘traditional Romani family’ (which they regard as being the norm even through the communist years) includes a father / husband who was the head of the house, and whose responsibility it was to be a (greater) financial provider and to instruct his wife about things. In other words, a married Romani man was a patriarch (Jakoubek 2004). Nevertheless, traditionally speaking, ‘the Romani mother’ has held a position of reverence due to the wisdom she has accrued. It is part of Romani social history and knowledge that the mother is especially revered and looked after by her sons, even to the point that sometimes a son will criticize and/or beat his wife in order to

demonstrate his solidarity with his mother and prove his true masculinity (i.e. ‘See mother? You have a real man as a son.’) (Bitu in Xhemaji 2000: 37). In fact, Alžběta’s frustration with her daughter-in-law’s materialistic habits, laziness as a housewife and disinterest as a mother led to Alex beating up his wife on a routine basis. During my conversations with Alžběta, she displayed no feelings of uneasiness about her son’s use of violence despite her own traumatic experiences with Alex’s father. The implication is that beating is okay if it is ‘deserved’, and it is ‘deserved’ if a woman does not fulfill her wifely duties in the domestic sphere (see Lacková 1999: 25).

Today, Alex takes his mother’s assistance for granted. Similarly to her initial feelings about the idle and predominately appropriating character of her son-in-law Tomáš’s family, Alex “only takes” (money, time, emotional energy) from his family but fails to give anything back in return. Similarly, Erika skirts around Zdeňka’s requests to *try* to find work, steals some of the little money that her family has for their basic needs, and has no interest in looking out for the well-being of Zlata, Adela or Miloš; often her ongoing residence at her mother’s is more of a drawback than a help. In no way is she the sort of ‘little mother’ to her younger siblings that Zdeňka’s older sister was to her. Alex and Erika are not ‘sticking’ together with their families. Strictly speaking, their independent thoughts and actions are not problematic in themselves, at least as far as their mother’s are concerned. On more than one occasion both women explicitly told me that their children were born with different personalities and wills of their own. This is why it is so important to have several children – in order to insure that a mother will have “at least one good child that will look after her in her old age”. It is the fact that Erika’s

and Alex's level of independence is not commensurate with their expectations of what they feel they have a right to claim from their mothers or families that is problematic.

If Erika causes her mother so much frustration, why doesn't Zdeňka kick her out as she has threatened to do? If Alžběta is so fed up with Alex's lack of parental responsibility, why doesn't she insist that Ruda go back to his mother? Wouldn't their children take them more seriously if they followed through on their ultimatums? Is this, in fact, evidence of these women's *lack* of agency in the family sphere? Perhaps yes, to a certain extent, but I suggest that 'changing' their children isn't actually the point of their admonishments. Certainly, a belief in respecting one's elders and one's parents is collectively regarded as valid by Roma. Showing regard for older Roma is an integral component of so-called 'Romani tradition' and 'the Romani family'. On the other hand, a child has a personality of his own, and it is up to the individual to change or not change his behavior. When Alžběta says, "Well, what can I do?" she is conceding that she cannot make Alex do what she wants. The *act* of expressing her disgust with his lack of respect for her is culturally significant because it is through her verbal admonishments that she is realizing her personal agency as a mother. As Stewart (1999: 39) writes in regard to Hungarian Rom, "All respect [is] personal, contextual and achieved, not in any sense ascribed". Coercing others doesn't necessarily work.

Eventually Alžběta *does* move from words to actions, and she punishes him by locking him out of his flat. Nevertheless, she still hopes he will come to his senses. In fact, approximately a year later, Alex suddenly reappeared at his mother's place. As Alžběta and I sat at her kitchen table and talked one evening, he emerged from her bathroom in a pair of pale blue pajamas. As he shuffled by looking depressed and

dejected, he plopped down in front of the television and out of our sights. Alžběta leaned in towards me and whispered, “His *žena* kicked him out! He came here last night. He was crying and he said to me, ‘Please *mami*! Please let me stay here! I’ll pay for everything!’” A week after that, as I spoke to Alžběta when she was applying her make-up and getting ready to go out dancing with her son, she walked over to the wardrobe and said, “Look! Look at these new clothes I bought for him! Nice, huh? His *žena* would never buy him anything like this.” In matching with the style of clothes popular with many Czech Romani men, they were quite colorful and flashy. “They’re nice, but where did his old clothes go?” I asked. “Oh his *žena* threw them out of the car,” she said.

In the months following Alex’s reappearance, his private and public image was one of an industrious son who kept his head down and threw himself into renovations for his mother’s properties. Even Alžběta was perplexed by his diligence. “Hmm. That’s strange,” she mused one day, as he walked out of her flat with a chandelier to install elsewhere. “He’s working very hard. I wonder why...”

### **iii. Czech Mothers and Gypsy Mothers**

“To give birth to a child isn’t the only thing,” Alžběta once said when we were discussing the pregnancies she had with her three children. “The child is yours and will be yours to look after. Even when it is an adult, it will still be your child. This never stops. He will be a father, but you will always see him as your child. You never stop thinking of him as your own.” Even when Alžběta and Zdeňka don’t consider the various things that members of their families do as reflecting badly on ‘the family’ as a whole, their narratives show that they turn much of their reflection inwards and interrogate

themselves on the quality of their performances as mothers based on the present actions of their children.

Their children's personalities are viewed in a rather biologically deterministic way; in particular, their children's *unfavorable* personality traits are a result of *špatné geny* (Cz. bad genes). "Miloš is immediately aware of what he is allowed to do and what he isn't allowed to do," Zdeňka said during one of our recordings about motherhood. "He knows what will make me angry, but the other children don't have the same awareness. I can say the same thing to both Adela and Miloš: 'Come here and help me do some laundry!' She'll say, 'No!' and whine and complain, but Miloš will say, 'Yes *mami!* I'll wash some socks.' They react very differently even though I speak to each of them the same." Like Miloš, Věra is admittedly Alžběta's favorite child because of her comparatively greater demonstrations of loyalty and her marked concern for her mother's welfare. "I love each of my children the same," Alžběta told me, "but Věra is my favorite child. Whereas Ludmila and Alex usually don't come up for dinner, Věra will almost always stop by after work, if only just for a little bit. But don't tell them that she is my favorite!"

Věra (and Ludmila after her) were Alžběta's favored children because of their apparent contentment with maintaining daily contact with their mother, satisfying her requests for assistance, and seeking out (or at the very least willingly listening to) her advice about how they should 'manage' their relationships with Jakub and Tomáš. Undoubtedly their constant involvement in work projects and family socializing with their mother caused a certain amount of strain with their husbands from time to time; Alžběta was no shrinking violet when it came to expressing her discontent with her

sons-in-law, whether it had to do with their parenting choices, their treatment of her daughters or the quality of their construction work on her residential properties.

Many of Stack's (1974) black female informants in The Flats describe their feelings of being 'controlled' by their relationships with close female kin members – that they are in a never-ending state of being obliged or in debt to someone. The widespread unemployment of men in The Flats necessitates that many women and men must consider the viability of their relationships in terms of the socioeconomic conditions that frame their lives, and for most women it is more profitable to remain a single mother with welfare and an extensive network of female kin to rely on. Female kin see marriage as too large a risk for a woman to take, not only because the long-term stability of a man's employment (if he has employment) is far from certain, but also because a woman's relationship with a male spouse compromises the durability of her kin group. Not only is it hard to please one's spouse and kin at the same time, but the life of a woman who marries revolves around her home, her job, her children and her husband. A woman's decision to marry signals her willingness to distance herself from the daily responsibilities that her kin network demands of her and her wish to break out of poverty.

Clearly, Alžběta's daughters are not impoverished, but they understandably have a desire to take a respite from the fulfillment of their mother's needs and wishes from time to time, as well as to create a bit of a buffer between their spouses and their mother. When this occurs, Alžběta interprets it as a rather grievous slight. She tearfully admitted her feelings of rejection to me one summer evening. She had invited me to join her in the garden so we could drink some wine and chat around an *ohelň* (Cz. bonfire). She was fond of building them on pleasant evenings, and her tenants would often join her in the



garden to smoke, drink a couple of beers or a few shots of *slivovice* (Cz. plum brandy) and roast sausages. This evening everyone else was busy so we quickly built a fire out of the magazines, books and board games that some rent absconders had left behind. “Yes, this is good!” Alžběta said as we angled our chairs (and our faces) away from the open windows of the building next door. “This way no one can hear us!”

As we sat there and pensively sipped the cheap wine, the composite sounds of the hum of people’s televisions, howling dogs in the distance, and the deafening roar of cars zooming down Živá Street seemed strikingly ‘silent’ compared to the typical daily symphony of noises that penetrated the thin windows of my flat during the summer months. “I don’t understand my children right now,” Alžběta said suddenly. “Věra and Ludmila rarely come upstairs to talk to me after they lock the office. They don’t even come up for ten minutes. They say they are too busy with work.” Alžběta put down her glass, hunched her back, fixed her eyes forward and rapidly moved her fingers as if she was typing robotically on a keyboard. “And then a few days ago, little Lucie asked me why I hadn’t gone with them to the *Hotel Praha* for lunch on Sunday.” With tears welling up in her eyes, Alžběta continued on with a cracking voice. “I said to Lucie, ‘What? Your mom and aunt didn’t tell me about it.’ Later when I mentioned it to my daughters, I said that I am not angry with them, but that I don’t understand why they didn’t let me know. I’m just confused. I don’t understand why they are always going to visit their father’s grave with bouquets of flowers when I am still here, when I am still alive! Why don’t they want to spend time with me instead? I’ve asked them, ‘Why are you more interested in spending time with death?’ Well you know what *Natašo*? My husband told me that this would happen one day. He said, ‘Our children are not as great

as you think. One day you'll remember what I told you, and you'll know that I was right.' At the time I said to him, 'Oh *prosím tě!*' But he was right!" As she dabbed her eyes, she said, "I don't know... Maybe I didn't do the right thing when I was raising them, by trying to do everything for them that I could. Even now, I try to give them everything. I cook all day so that they don't have to cook for themselves, yet lately they don't even want to come up for a little while to sit down, eat, have a conversation with me... You see how I try to do this for them *Natašo!* Yes, maybe I didn't do things right."

Alžběta's liberal investment of emotional, physical and financial resources into her children – at times to the detriment of her own mental health and corporal well-being – is not the only aspect of her maternal performance that she retrospectively and prospectively questions. She frames her contemplations about her parental choices in terms of their association with Czech or Romani 'styles' of childrearing, both of which she considers herself to have used. Alžběta perceives Czech and Romani approaches to childrearing as being dissimilar in terms of the magnitude of strictness, generosity, praise, and affection that parents give to their children. Through her application of a Czech/Romani binary to her parental track record, she not only reveals that the upbringings of her three children were far from identical, but that her motivations for parenting her children differently were stimulated by her changing opinions about whether the importance of certain ideas and goals to which she had previously aspired was worth the personal guilt of being a 'Czech mother'. The disparate ways in which she raised her children were not solely contingent upon the evolution of her priorities; they were also influenced by the gradual elevation of her and Aleš's financial position and confidence as parents.

During one of our life history sessions, I asked Alžběta to speak about her memories of pregnancy and being a young mother, and about how her thoughts about motherhood had changed over the years.

*When I was expecting Věra, I had fears about the delivery, but...I anticipated that I would immediately be full of such love for her. For me, it wasn't like how you see in movies, that all at once I loved my daughter. When it is the first child, it is a transition. I had a hard time.*

*For a long time you are just waiting and waiting for the baby to arrive. You are captive because you have this stomach that you are giving to the baby. The baby wants to be here with you and it fidgets a lot in your stomach. Then all at once it is reality. You must adjust very quickly. It isn't true that you are prepared and it's fantastic. No. A woman who says that isn't telling the truth. She would have to be an abnormal person, and I am speaking from experience. It's just that no mother wants to admit it because we would look like bad mothers. And many times you feel bad about it! But now I am a grandma, so I can speak about how I was feeling at the time. And anyone who says that a mother is bad if she feels this way also isn't right.*

*You must habituate yourself to the idea that there is a new person, that you must get up every morning, every evening and otherwise. A child changes your whole system. But then after two or three months...well, time gives you a lot. I am not saying that you don't love your child – you do! It's just that reality is different. You must care for a tiny little thing who doesn't know how to say what she wants. She doesn't know how to do anything, and you have to keep tabs on her. It used to be that when you gave birth to a child, the nurses looked after it for the first week...unless there was something wrong with the child, and then you might stay in the hospital for ten days or more. But usually for that first week, you only saw the baby for breastfeeding, and otherwise you didn't have much contact with it. They took care of everything during communism, and you thought that it would be the same when you came home from the hospital! But of course it wasn't. You realized that you had to look after the baby and you didn't know how.*

*And men are quite sluggish. They sleep with you, and then in the morning they go off to work. They are always afraid of what will happen with the child. You are always thinking the worst. I never slept. I had to get up and cook and clean. My husband would come home from work and then he would argue with me. The baby would sleep for a while and then I would fall asleep. Sometimes I would be sleeping when he came home and my husband wouldn't even acknowledge me. I was chagrined when this happened. And I was always left alone with the child during the day.*

*And one never forgets the first child! I remember how it was with Vera, how she cried and cried and I didn't know what was wrong with her. It was due to the fact that I had still been a smoker when I was pregnant with her. That nicotine really bothered her; later I quit. But yes, she cried and cried, and at 2 am my husband and I would take turns getting up to hold her. My husband was quite agitated by this because he had to get up to go to work. I was also agitated, and he knew that I needed more than two hours of sleep per night as well. And she was just like "bahhhh, bahhhh" all the time. One time my husband was almost ready to go in and muffle her with a pillow because he was at the end of his nerves. He was like, "Oh, she'll sleep!" and he went in with the pillow. Then all of a sudden there was silence. I went in after him and whispered, "You killed her!" But he was still standing, ready with the pillow in his hand so he couldn't have! We stood there watching Vera, and then she started making this snorting sound. [laughing] But that's how it was with Vera – constant crying that we had to deal with until it was time to get out of bed.*

*With Věra, I was afraid in general because there were so many times that I didn't have anything to give her; all our money went towards our rent. We lived terribly modestly. At one point, I was awfully thin. We didn't have enough money for me to eat well while I was pregnant, and I didn't want to take a second job so I only ate a little. I was constantly sick as a result. My family couldn't help me out either. My mother...well at that time she had problems because my sister had separated from her husband and she had three children. I saw that my mother already had a lot to deal with because she was looking after her grandchildren. She had a lot of irritations. And my husband didn't want to lend Věra to anyone. He loved her because he was an only child and he was happy that he had a child of his own. My husband didn't want financial assistance either. He wouldn't have allowed it. He didn't want to go back home to Slovakia and plead for money from his relatives and he didn't want me to either. If I had been the type of person to borrow money, he would have left me. He just wasn't the type who would want to do that. Sometimes at Christmas we had very little money so I would borrow 100 Kč or 200 Kč or a friend would loan me some things, but I didn't make a practice of it. It was very difficult. These aren't nice memories because I didn't know what awaited us. I often feared the worst, but I also tried to live life to the fullest. I'm glad because he worked for himself, and today you see where I am.*

*Being a mother became habit. With Ludmila it was an easier birth because I knew what to expect. We were afraid because we figured that we wouldn't be getting very much sleep again, but it was completely different from how it had been with Věra. There was such calm, except for the fact that Věra started misbehaving because she thought that we didn't love her anymore. She would go around hitting things. Then when Alex was born, it was also calm because the whole process was routine. Vera would rock Alex to sleep and things like that. Children always try to help out with the younger ones and it was the same with them.*

*Věra was born in 1971, Ludmila in 1972 and Alex in 1975. I had them one after the other, “bop, bop, bop”! My husband still wanted two more, but I said, “No! I don’t want any more!” And he said, “What about what I want?” I said, “No.” I only wanted three children, so that I could provide well for them and so that they could have an education. I was simply unyielding on this issue. When Věra was at the gymnazium, I became pregnant twice. Both times I got an abortion without telling Aleš. When he found out, he was so angry that he said he wanted a divorce. I said, “Yes, it’s better that we get a divorce. Let’s get one.” I asked my children what they thought, but they said they wanted their father and me to stay together.*

*I was really strict with Věra because she was the oldest and because I saw that she was smart. As a consequence, I didn’t excuse her for anything. Many times since then I have said to her, “I am sorry that I was such a mean mother.” She says, “You weren’t a mean mother.” But now that I am older, I see how these Romani mothers accept their children—even if they get threes and fours in school—I see how they kiss and hug their children, and I am so regretful because I didn’t do that with her. If she got a two in school, she wasn’t allowed to go outside and play. I would invite Věra’s teacher over for dinner so I could see every mistake that she made in her school assignments. Věra was very afraid when I would do this because she understood that I would know everything. Until she learned her mistakes, she wasn’t allowed to do anything else. I would slap her, and sometimes I would make her get down on her hands and knees. She had to look after her siblings, and when they had bad grades, she was the one who got the blame for it. I feel awful that when she was older, she wasn’t allowed to go to the disco...that she had to clean instead. Many times, when these memories come to me I see that what I did was terrible.*

*It really hurts me now that I think about it because I wasn’t like this with Ludmila very much, and I wasn’t like this with Alex at all. With them, I said, “Enough. I don’t want to be like this. I want to be that Romani mother.” With Věra, I was a Czech mother. I carry this around in my heart, and I feel very guilty about how unkind I was. I don’t have a clean conscience. Because I had Czech friends, I behaved like a Czech mother. I am telling this to you, but it is a secret between the two of us.*

*It pains me a lot that I wasn’t a Gypsy mother with Věra. Take for example what Alex has done to me. He is always causing me problems. It’s been like this since he was eighteen years old. He’s always demonstrated two things: that he takes from me, and that he then will take off! I can’t say I know everything about how a Czech mother raises her children, but you know, if a Czech son gives his mother problems, she’ll say, “Enough!” and then he won’t take anything from her after that. Or she’ll say, “Ok, you didn’t give me any money for food, so you won’t eat here.” For us Roma, it isn’t like this. Alex doesn’t give me any money. I argue about it with him. I’ll ask why he hasn’t given me any money. Then he’ll come here, sit down at the table, and not say anything. He doesn’t say anything about*

*eating but I know that he is hungry anyway. So I'll say, "Come and eat something." I've gone out and seen how it is with a lot of Czech families, and it isn't the same! They'll say, "You didn't give me any money so you aren't getting anything to eat." And a Czech mother will say to her children, "If you want lunch, you have to come to eat on time. Otherwise you're not getting any food." With us, it isn't like this. When we have food, then we all eat. When you're hungry, you eat. Not at 12 o'clock, simply when you are hungry. You have to cook enough, not only enough for your children. And if someone comes by – like when you come by for a visit Natašo – it isn't a problem. I'll say, "Sit down and have something." I know that you don't eat meat, so you have koláčky or sušenky. Maybe we are just the type of people who do this.*

*I don't know, maybe I took note of these differences because I had a lot of Czech friends and I visited many Czech families when there was communism. We really didn't have it so bad then because Czechs accepted us, and it was normal for us to go and see Czech families. They watched me carefully, but they saw me as a normal person. Or maybe it is because my grandmother was Polish and I have some of her genes. That is also a possibility.*

*We Roma aren't all the same, but Czech people say that we don't punish our children when they don't do their school assignments. They say that this is why our children don't learn and are not smart. I think that Romani children are smart, but if a child doesn't do his homework assignment, we Roma don't see this as a problem. We work with our children as parents. My mother would ask the director at my school, "Why is the teacher mad at Alžběta?" and the answer would be, "She isn't mad at her, but Alžběta isn't doing her work." My mother would say, "That doesn't matter. She's a good girl." My mother was more concerned about my behavior than my grades. She didn't want me to get into fights or to steal. Today, what is of concern to Romani parents is how much more their children misbehave than in the past. Natašo, it's like you saw in the special school; the teachers are nicer now than during communism because they don't hit the students, but the students still complain and misbehave a lot.*

*But I wasn't like this with Věra. It bothers me that I didn't show Věra that I was happy when she got ones and twos at school. I only said, "Yeah, yeah, fine," I was glad when she did well, but I never told her that. I just didn't want my children to ever feel ashamed, you know? Like when I have problems with Czech grammar, with the difference between long and short vowels, sometimes I get really embarrassed. I wanted my children to be both educated and wise because with both those things, you can have a future.*

*I have the satisfaction of knowing that I carried Věra through her education and that she became accomplished. I wasn't that good Gypsy mother with her, but on the other hand, she says that if it hadn't been for me, she wouldn't have gotten an education. She finished at the gymnazium, she got married, she had kids, and she finished her education off in the course of her third pregnancy. When I used to tell*

*her that I wanted her to finish school, she said she wanted to be a flight attendant instead, but she also thought that she would be betraying me if she did that. For this reason, she went and finished at the vysoká škola – not because of herself but because of me. She just wanted to be done with it. She later told me, “You would have killed me if I had quit, so I held on. If you hadn’t been on me like you were, I wouldn’t have finished. Be proud of yourself! You just wanted me to have the opportunities that you didn’t have. Be proud that you have a clever daughter! You did well because I have an education, I have perspective, I’m tough and I’m not afraid. Maybe I’ll go on for a doctorate.” And I told her, “No, that’s not for you,” so she didn’t go on. Now that I have had time to consider things, it occurs to me that maybe this was a mistake, but she tells me, “Mami! Jezis Maria! You were a wonderful mother! I had the best clothes, you always made sure that they were clean, we were never hungry, we were always in school, and you made sure we had things in our school bags that even the director’s daughter didn’t have! So why are you upset?” I tell her, “Because I wasn’t that Romani mother!” My husband and I wanted Věra – the only cigánka at the gymnasium – to have everything. The other students would go and ask to borrow HER school supplies. All her things were new. We never got her anything old. There was nothing we didn’t slave away for. The majority of Věra’s friends were Czech; they had honors in school like she did. One became an economist, and the other one became a school director. It’s like I’ve been telling you, during communism, it was normal that they would be friends. Her friends saw that I was a cook for the teachers and the professors in the school cafeteria, so we knew each other. It didn’t matter to them that I was a Romka because they saw that my daughter studied well and that we were okay.*

*Věra thinks it’s good that I was strict with her, and she is the same way with Světlana. She argues a lot with her daughter, and when Světlana does something bad she’ll come to me and say, “Mami, what we have here is a result of your parenting.” I’ll say, “That’s not true.” Of course, every grandmother is more forgiving than a mother, and because you have time to devote to your grandchild – to cradle her and hold her, to play games with her – there is a love between a grandchild and a grandmother. I know everything that my granddaughter has been doing since she was a baby, and I know which games she enjoyed playing. As for my own children, I can’t say. I didn’t have the time, and moreover, I didn’t have the money. Věra only had a single toy, a little monkey that was full of whiskers. It was very hectic because my husband and I were at work all the time, rushing about and then falling into bed exhausted. With Světlana, I always knew that when I was tired, I could give her back to her mother. Then when I was rested, I could take her back again.*

*Světlana lived with us until she was three, maybe four. Her parents were working and they had a house, but Svetlana lived with me because she didn’t want to be with her parents. When she started going to school, we thought she should go home and live with her parents but neither Světlana nor Věra could get used to each other. All of a sudden, Světlana didn’t have us around. It was very difficult*

*for her because she didn't know how to talk to her mother like she talked to me. She was really hurt and her mom couldn't do anything to make it better. She was always hiding from her parents and then running back here to see us. I think that when Štefan came into the world, Věra somehow abandoned the idea that she had a daughter; now she had a son and it's like she just wanted to begin fresh. Then Tomáš went abroad for work, so Věra was spending a lot of time here with us. She came here more often, and at that point we still had the pub, so Věra was around for a lot of Světlana's upbringing. Then when Tomáš came back, he helped out here too. They slept here and did school assignments with her. It was this type of family. Everything played out here. Světlana is closer to me than her mother because she believes that I raised her. It is also because her mother scolds her more than I do. She always says, "My grandmother raised me," but this isn't really true. I am her grandmother and she was simply living here.*

*Věra is proud that she has an educated daughter, but she doesn't always believe that Světlana will do well in school. I tell her, "Yes she will." I often call her gymnazium, just to make sure that she has good grades. I tell Světlana, "Look, you have to do well. Your mother is disappointed in me. If you don't do well, she'll blame me. I took you in as a young girl and I was proud to do it, but you must not disappoint your mother. Because of me, you must continue to do well." Now Světlana says that she wants to study at the vysoká škola, which makes her mother happy. I attained the goal of making sure that my children became educated, and it makes me happy that my granddaughters are doing well in school too. They say to me, "Babi! I'll become educated because I see that you like it." They see for themselves that there are pillars they need to reach in order to have a good future.*

Alžběta's memories of her life as she raised a family in 1970s Czechoslovakia contradict her usual descriptions of the communist period as an era of greater security, certainty, social harmony between Czechs and Roma, and intragroup Romani social cohesiveness. Unlike her contributions to the local, collective narrative about Romani social life before 1989, here she makes clear that she and her husband often struggled to make ends meet when they were young parents. Even if there was great job security for Czechoslovak citizens, this didn't translate into not having to cut major corners in order to make ends meet every month (even to the point of Alžběta skipping meals when she was pregnant). The future extent of their financial limitations was something that Alžběta



considered scary and unpredictable. She downplays the importance of her friendships with Czechs as she discussed them in her narrative about communism in Chapter Two; here, she focuses on the self-reliance that her husband insisted they both practice rather than her memories of the trust that her Czech friends demonstrated that they had in her when they loaned her money or other items. Here, she draws attention to the fact that her relationships with Czech people were considerably influenced by the same fundamental ‘ethnic trap’ that she and Zdeňka insist influences nearly all their social interactions with Czechs today. Today, Romani individuals feel like they can’t be *just* as well-educated, well-dressed, hardworking, eloquent or polite as Czechs in order to prove their social ‘decency’ and moral ‘cleanliness’ – they must be *better* and they must do *more*, and even when they provide more than what they feel is adequate proof of their worth, they are still evaluated (at best preliminarily) through an ethnic filter. In many cases, a Romani person is not able to shake off the shackles of being evaluated as a member of his group.

Alžběta’s awareness that she was ‘being watched’ by Czechs, as well as her desire for her children to not be ashamed of their educational level as she was of her own, led her to error on the side of caution – to overcompensate in terms of Věra’s grades, clothes, school supplies, etc. By going ‘beyond’ rather than doing ‘enough’, she felt that Czechs saw her and her family as being ‘okay’ – as Gypsies who didn’t demonstrate their ‘Gypsiness’. So dedicated was Alžběta to her children’s educations that she decided to terminate two pregnancies without informing her husband until after the fact.

Using strategies according to what she believed to be the ‘Czech way’ of mothering, she and Věra together realized ‘success’. Today however, both mother *and* daughter seem to be content in trying to straddle the ‘Romani/Gypsy mother’ and ‘Czech

mother' models. Their significant involvement in educational initiatives that are dedicated to increasing Romani children's success in mainstream (not special) school tracks does not preclude their alignment with other seemingly contradictory ideas, such as a relative lack of concern about their children's school absences and an equal or greater interest in their children's good behavior than their school marks. As a grandmother, Alžběta has most closely approached the 'Romani mother' she now wishes she could have been with all her children, but in this respect, Věra thinks her mother is being *too much* of a 'Romani mother'. Like Alžběta did for her, Věra has devoted a great deal of money into her daughter Světlana's 'success', including her participation in extracurricular activities and her purchase of brand name clothing that is 'better' than that of her Czech classmates. Interestingly, Věra and Alžběta often used me as a sort of 'reality check' for Světlana by pointing to what they interpreted as my understanding of the value of money (due to my shabby clothes) and my dedication to my studies – two skills that they considered to be somewhat lacking in Světlana. The connection between grandmother, mother and daughter is very strong, and Světlana's success or failure is not her own. However, like Alex's will to want to be a 'decent' son and responsible father, whether Alžbeta's granddaughters *want* to achieve educational qualifications for themselves has to do with their own dedication and will to succeed. Like Zdeňka says with regard to her own children, Alžbeta's granddaughters have to want it themselves, and the successful completion of one's education in a mainstream school track is a good start, especially in a country where such a large proportion of Romani students attend special schools.

### III. The Importance of Individual Will

Alžběta's and Zdeňka's beliefs about motherhood and the actions they take as they strive to bring these ideas to fruition throughout their children's formative years are informed by their past experiences, both positive and negative, in the family and educational spheres, as well as their concern for their children's future well-being, financial security, educational qualifications and (perhaps most importantly) their decency and morality as adult men and women. The integration of past, present and future as these women actualize their personal agency in the private, family sphere is beautifully illustrated by Zdeňka:

*Alžběta is actually my kin, but unlike her, I don't have any money because my mother never learned how to keep money. Neither did my father. Alžběta, on the other hand, learned how to manage her money. She slaved away when she had her pub. Yes, perhaps she had some luck, but she also never stopped working for what she wanted. She had gumption. My father wasn't as smart as her. He did factory work. And why? Because my father never learned how to read. Well he did, but only very slowly. He went to school a little, but it was too far away for him to walk because it was cold and he didn't have any shoes. On the other hand, my mother's mother was na výbor.<sup>107</sup> My mother went to school because her mother had money. My grandmother really took her by the hand. She was a smart woman, but she died when my mother was young so she couldn't teach her everything about money. My mother's father also had his own buildings, and they were beautiful, but everything was put up for sale. Why? He drank his money away. He didn't learn how to keep money like Alžběta. If one generation catches it, then one generation after another has a chance. I would also like for my children to have what Alžběta's children and grandchildren have, but I don't have the money. I just don't have the money. I would like it to be the case that my children aren't lacking for anything. During communism, everyone had work and everyone had to work. Children had to go to school and their education was free. You could go to the gymnasium for free. Today, everyone hunts around so that their child can go to the best school. I am paying more money so that my children can go to the regular school.*

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<sup>107</sup> *Výbor* probably refers to *národní výbor*, which were Communist local authorities. Therefore a better translation for *na výbor* probably would be 'had a local council job'.

For both women, the ‘Romani way’ of mothering centers around the belief that their children cannot be forced to do as they wish. Children’s individual and unique natures are accepted as being what they are, thus Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s agency derives in part from the idea that you *are* what you *do*. Not only do they try to instill in their children the importance of being ‘decent’, they prove their ‘decency’ and worth as mothers themselves by ‘being what they do’. As women who rear children, they are by default actors in future-oriented cultural processes and processes of social reproduction. For Zdeňka in particular, the so-called ‘normative’ Czech cultural ideas that remain so powerful to the cultural compromise that she and Alžběta’ continue to find personally rewarding and ‘beneficial’ *remain relevant* because she cannot predict whether or not her children (and she) will ever have real ‘experience’ of them. They are cognitively placed in ‘the future’, but through her maternal alignment with ‘normative’ ideas, her positive self-image as a mother can be maintained. In the present, however, the ‘Romani mother’ focuses her efforts on what her children *are* and *will be*, and as a consequence, her sense of personal integrity can also be reinforced.

Children, just like adult men and women in marriages, cannot be coerced into doing the ‘right’ thing; they must want to be ‘good’, and if they are not, they must be willing to listen and try to decide if they will improve themselves. Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives, in accordance with what their social knowledge as Romani women tells them, express their awareness from an early age about the ‘badness’ of men. At the same time, their social knowledge also includes the idea of the importance of ‘true love’. They hope that their children will have happier marriages than they have had themselves, so they try to prevent their children from becoming stuck without a form of escape.

Mothers remain committed to their daughters, and this can cause friction between spouses who feel like their actions are under constant scrutiny. Women like Alžběta's daughters and granddaughters are under continuous obligation, but they also expect there to be measures of reciprocity from their mother (and vice versa). It is when a family member's 'give and take' is out of whack that his autonomous actions as an individual Rom are particularly likely to become problematic to his kin.

This is not always the case however. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's utilization of 'the narrative *of the family*' as a form of agency is evidence of the more 'collectivist' nature of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's social lives, in that their family members are arbiters of what is sanctioned, prohibited, favorable and unfavorable and thus influence their beliefs, choices and actions. Consequently, they must engage in certain behaviors clandestinely – most often their activities with men and/or other habits that are often looked upon as unfeminine or indecent. The glee that individual Romani women in Skála derived from baring parts of their secret lives to me demonstrates that they regard themselves as individual agents who do not want their lives to be completely circumscribed by the views of their family members or Romani non-kin. These aspects of their 'individuality' occur within a sphere that is both spatially and mentally (although not emotionally) detached from their families. As the next chapter will show, they see their social behavior as being dependent not only on social context but also on their individual personalities and their emotional and physical needs as women.

## Chapter Five – Men and Women

### I. Introduction

#### i. “Do you have a boyfriend?”

“I’ve had a very bad life.” Shaking her head woefully, this is the refrain Alžběta seemed to use as a way to fill the awkward silences that would often follow the memories she told of her marriage. I never met Aleš in real life, a fact that is somewhat strange given the presence he maintained in the ether surrounding and permeating the Procházkas’ actions, conversations, and emotions during the time I spent in Skála. For a long while, the aftershocks of his sudden passing reverberated intensely in various ways in the lives of almost all family members: Věra's mental breakdown in her school classroom, Alex's drinking and depression, and Alžběta's inability to cry her grief away. Alžběta told me that at first she wouldn't let herself shed any tears due to the responsibility she felt to remain stoic in front of her children, but her iron will somehow metamorphosed into a physical incapacity. "I just *can't* cry," Alžběta told me through a grimacing face, sitting on her living room couch, paying no attention to the hum of the television that was on low volume in the background. Glancing towards a pack of tissues that was stationed on the coffee table (should her luck somehow change), she continued, "I *want* to - I think it would make me feel better. I keep trying to cry but I can't! The tears won't come."

Aleš's spirit didn't seem ready to leave; something was making it difficult for either Alžběta or him to find peace. "Aleš was here last night you know," Alžběta whispered to me about a month after his death. She leaned in towards me, careful not to let Ruda – who was sitting slouched in front of the television – hear her. "I woke up because Ruda

was coughing in his sleep. You know how he has asthma, so I was worried he might be having an attack. When I got up to check, I *smelled* Aleš. It was his cigarettes, you see. It smelled very strongly of smoke, just like the kind he would use. It was Aleš."

Somewhat ominously, I was witness to the last, terse phone conversation Alžběta had with her husband. The day before Alžběta and I were to leave for Skála so that I could move in, I met her at her other apartment on the outskirts of Prague to discuss our travel plans. Her face distorting into a look of annoyance as she saw the caller ID on her mobile phone, Alžběta drew in a long breath before finally answering with a short, "Yes? No! I already told you, I'll be home tomorrow. No, I'm not coming home today! I'm not going to speak with you right now. I have a guest. Tomorrow, yeah?" I sat rather awkwardly on the sofa, not sure where to put my eyes as this was going on. I finally decided on the tray of salami and cheese that Alžběta had placed on the coffee table in front of me. When Alžběta hung up the phone, she paused and stared off into the distance for a moment. It was the same look that I would see on her face a day later, after we disembarked from the bus in Skála and she paused to watch a flock of ducks gliding down the river. It was as if she was taking a moment of calm in order to brace herself for an ensuing storm. As soon as it had appeared, it was gone; she suddenly turned to me and asked, "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"Oh no, not exactly," I said somewhat shyly. "I do have a good friend – his name is Paul – but he's not my *přítel* (Cz. boyfriend). Just a *kamarád* (Cz. male friend). Alžběta's eyebrows raised, and with a grin she said, "Oh? Tell me more." I explained that Paul and I had met during a conference, and that despite his clearly flirtatious behavior towards me and our evident mutual attraction, I did not reciprocate on his advances because their

intensity had frightened me to a certain extent. By the next time we saw each other in our mutual home base of London, his flirtatiousness had almost completely subsided and I figured that he either was no longer interested in me or had interpreted my shyness as a lack of interest. Nevertheless, after a few months of socializing, my interest in him had increased, and when I finally admitted my feelings towards him, he apologized and said that he had feared that he might be leading me on. He said that he would like to remain my friend, but that since any relationship of value doesn't develop quickly, he wanted to get to know me more over time.

Alžběta remained silent for a moment, seemingly mulling over the scenario I had just set before her. Finally her silence broke and she said, "*Pfuj!* (Cz. ugh!) Well you know, men are *zlé* (Cz. mean). They're *all* like this. They *all* just want sex. But we'll see how it goes with him, won't we?"

## **ii. Chapter Overview**

In the previous chapter, I briefly discussed the predominance of Romani women's discussions about both the positive and negative aspects of relationships between men and women. It is a topic that Romani women in Skála invest a great deal of energy into discussing with each other, and it's frequency as a conversational theme was true not only of Romani women's conversations with each other, but also of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's one-on-one conversations with me. Our discussions of our relationships with members of the opposite sex became a rhetorical theme that served as a link between most of our conversations and as a symbol of our interest to maintain our mutual self-recognition of our fictive 'mother' and 'daughter' roles. Without any prompting, both



women elaborated at length on the profound emotional and physical abuse they experienced during their married lives. These moments were ‘unveilings’ of a sort – not so much of the informational or detail-oriented variety as of the relinquishment of the stoic faces and no-nonsense demeanors they were compelled to wear throughout the moments of life in which they felt the most vulnerable. Alžběta insisted she could not cry or show any ‘weak’ emotions because she very much viewed herself as the glue that held her family together. “The Romani mother is the highest in the family,” she explained to me, “therefore I must be strong for them. They look to me. If I start to cry, then they’ll become depressed as well. If I am not strong, they’ll panic. It (the family) won’t function if I don’t stay strong.” They detailed their experiences primarily as a way to release years of stifled anger, frustration and disappointment and as a way to psychologically process and sort through these issues at seminal moments in both of their lives: the death of Alžběta’s husband Aleš and Petr’s emotional and financial abandonment of Zdeňka and her children. They also did this as a way to ‘school’ me (a single young woman) on how to avoid doing what they regarded as their “stupid mistakes” with men.

The genesis of Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s keenness for continually returning to the topic of men – whether as my ‘instructors’ about their opinions about the darker aspects of ‘typical’ male behavior, as reincarnations of their former selves (giddy and love-struck schoolgirls who wished to revel in the more light-hearted and joyous elements of love, sex and marriage), or simply as puzzled girlfriends and wives whose life experiences thus far had failed to provide them with satisfactory answers to explain why their relationships with men had not worked out as they would have liked – did not occur in isolation. I encouraged our joint venture in the discussion of men – not only because of my

cognizance of their relative preoccupation with the subject, but also because of my own confusion and doubts about the intricacies of male-female relationships at the time. Our ongoing tendency to drift towards the subjects of love, marriage and sex was as much a reflection of their perceptions of what my interests as a twenty-four-year old woman *should* have been as it was of their unfulfilled wishes and unresolved confusion relating to this component of the human condition. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's continual re-visitation of these themes shows that gaining a sense of comprehension of their relationships with men was of paramount importance to them personally. Although they largely frame their thoughts, convictions and actions in terms of their families, their interpretations of themselves as women with personal (and often confidential) hopes and desires are particularly linked with their romantic relationships with men. Our distinctive personal biographies and life circumstances did not preclude a considerable degree of overlap in our life experiences and thought processes. Like the grey area of a Venn diagram, facets of our routinized performances 'as women' are shared. This suggests that our internalized cultures (which have been tailored in relation to our positions within a social structure), as well as the current cultural environments and social contexts in which we live, are not *so* disparate as to prevent our united possession of particular 'pieces' of social knowledge.

In this chapter, Alžběta's and Zdeňka's extensive narrative engagement on the subject of their past, present and future relationships with men will be presented. As has been demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, their past experiences in this sphere of life are strongly connected to their thoughts and actions in the present. They are acutely aware of what they perceive as 'history repeating itself' when it comes to the more

destructive behaviors of men with whom they have been involved. Their ‘lived experience’ of men’s excessive drinking, physically abusive habits, jealous tendencies, irresponsibility with money, and pursuit of extramarital relationships with women encourages them to be skeptical about men’s true intentions. Men are declared to be ‘bad’ because they are thought to be this way inherently (or biologically), but Alžběta and Zdeňka also show that they believe that it is up to the will of an individual man to conduct himself in a manner that honors how ‘men used to be’ – faithful to their wives, (co)breadwinners who provided their wives and children with enough money for their needs, and devoted fathers to their children. Their ‘perceived experience’ about ‘true love’ persists partly through social myth. Of course, many young Roma like young people everywhere fall in love and have exciting and passionate romances, and as women mature, they likely remember the joyfulness of these times in their lives. However, the idea of idealized ‘true love’ as something that will naturally result in a ‘happily ever after’ sort of marriage *is* an idea that Romani women in Skála vigorously cling to as the ‘norm’. Based on the preponderance of women who have had negative ‘lived experience’ with men, their consent to the cultural compromise of ‘true love’, as well as their strong emotional attachment to this concept, continues on through many (but not all) women’s mediated accounts of it.

Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives about men are intrinsically singular due to their different memories, experiences and perceptions about the functioning of their relationships, but they also are influenced by their access to a shared body of cultural conceptions. Their narratives are a medium for both shared cultural representations and individual style, personality and social experience (Skultans 1998). I propose that a

common theme running throughout Alžběta's narratives about male/female relationships is representative of her unique perceptions and interpretations of the more interpersonal interactions she has had with men, but it also is significantly informed by Romani women's collective narratives about 'the nature of men'. Alžběta uses her personal yet culturally informed narrative about men as a bridge between her own interpretations about male behavior and my own narrative engagement about my friendship with Paul.

An additional cognitive frame with which Alžběta makes sense of her social relationships is her view that female friends are either potential gossips (and therefore unreliable as confidants) or home-wreckers and man-stealers. Following a betrayal by one of her friends as a teenager, Alžběta has had a life-long reticence towards friendship with women and a preference for friendships with her daughters or platonic relationships with men. I suggest that besides adultery and gossiping, a social phenomenon that influences women's lack of faith in one another is their ongoing participation in swapping, borrowing, lending and sharing of money, clothes and household items. Theoretically no one individual should ever 'get ahead' of another; the fact that there is *limited supply* of sought-after resources is what fuels the process of swapping in the first place. There is an expectation of reciprocity, but there is also an expectation of mutual exploitation. A woman who is not as generous as those who have loaned, shared, and exchanged with her is viewed badly, but she also anticipates that others will inevitably be stingy towards her in kind (Stack 1974).

From an *operational* perspective, women perceive 'being friendly' and 'getting along' as often only being relevant to the time and place in which a social interaction is taking place. Whatever the reason that one woman views her friendliness towards another

woman as necessary or beneficial in certain circumstances, it seems to have little bearing on how these two individuals might act around each other in a different context or how they might feel about each other when they are not in each other's presence. The maintenance of amicable public relations in Skála is often more a means to an end rather than significant in its own right. Alžběta's and Zdeňka's awareness of this reality means that they often think that women who want to be their friends are simply in pursuit of the fulfillment of their own personal wishes and needs. Being affable is a series of performative acts which serves to make life flow more smoothly; it is a way to avoid conflict, but it is also a way to learn gossip, connive, manipulate the emotions of others and take advantage of people materially and financially.

Alžběta and Zdeňka declare that (unfortunately) they have no female friends to speak of whose companionship is based on shared interests, feelings of affinity, compatible personality characteristics or other non-materialistic factors. As for the sorts of topics that Alžběta and Zdeňka consider either inappropriate, uncomfortable or too confidential to speak about with their children – for example, romance questions, arguments with family members and health issues for which it would be helpful and more enjoyable to have a friend who they trust (and with whom they feel affinity and to whom they can relate) – these women state that they simply have no one with whom they can discuss these sorts of things. They identify 'true friendship' as something that characterizes their relationships with their children or as a phenomenon that cognitively resides in the time of their childhoods. In this respect, they imply that their concept of friendship is something that is more devoid of selfishness or ulterior motive. Their childhoods are remembered as being genuine and uncorrupted. It was a time in which

their relations with others were not tainted by the more ‘adult’ considerations of their female companions, such as material consumption, money, status and romantic/sexual interest in men. Relatedly, many of the same characteristics that distinguish ‘true’ friendship from the type of friendship that they now reject parallel those that they use to narratively contrast the eras before and after 1989: loyalty, offering help to someone in need without waiting to be asked, and a lack of preoccupation with elevating oneself above others in the name of status and wealth.

In this chapter, three primary issues will be examined. First, Romani women’s ideas about the masculinity of Romani men – loosely speaking, the ‘gender identity’ of Romani men – is largely based upon the notion that ‘a man is a man’, i.e. that an individual who is born as a man with male sexual anatomy is simply an altogether ‘different’ sort of person than a woman. Similarly, when Alžběta and I would discuss women’s supposed tendency to get jealous of one another’s boyfriends or good looks, she would conclude, “Of course it is like that! We are women!” Much like the group of Spanish Gitanos studied by Gay y Blasco (1997: 530), Roma in Skála do not possess “a conceptual dichotomy that would correspond to the anthropological distinction between ‘gender’ and ‘sex’”. In Skála, Romani women’s ‘lived experience’ of men’s excessive drinking, physically abusive habits, jealous tendencies, irresponsibility with money, and pursuit of extramarital relationships with women encourages them to be skeptical about men’s true intentions, but fundamentally, men are declared to be ‘bad’ because they are thought ‘by nature’ to have certain weaknesses. Yet, Alžběta and Zdeňka also show that they believe that it is up to the will of an individual man to conduct himself in a manner that honors how ‘men used to be’ – faithful to their wives and financially trustworthy. In other words, ‘good’

men transcend and/or inhibit their innate, naturally occurring weaknesses while ‘bad’ men let their urges determine their actions. Furthermore, while the men they primarily base their opinions upon are Romani, they do not specify ethnicity when they declare that ‘a man is a man’. Therefore, is Romani women’s belief that Romani men have naturally occurring weaknesses actually a cultural construct that is ethnically marked? Through these women’s narratives, I will try to examine the interplay between nature, culture and ethnicity.

Second, in this chapter I will consider how Alžběta and Zdeňka link their personal narratives about their romantic relationships – a ‘sense making’ process which is simultaneously individualistic (due to the secrecy in which they envelop these relationships) and collective (because their behaviors in these relationships are influenced by norms and values that are agreed upon in collective communicative spheres) – with my own narrative engagement on the subject. How do our stores of social knowledge about male/female relationships overlap, and in what ways (if any) does this relate to their culturally constructed (and perhaps ethnically marked) notions of masculinity?

Finally, taking into consideration Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s skepticism about entering into friendships with other women, how do their friendships with their children or with members of the opposite sex work in practice?

## II. First Love and Marriage

### i. Alžběta

“*Alžběto*, since you are checking your boyfriends’ horoscopes, why don’t we talk about dating and falling in love today?” I asked Alžběta this question after I discovered her in the office one evening, checking her weekly romantic horoscopes on one of the community center’s desktop computers. With her feet perched up on one of the office’s cushioned swivel chairs, her hands propped behind her head, and a flour-covered kitchen apron tied around her waist, she said, “Oh sure! That’s a good theme! Just let me finish reading these.” She pulled her reading glasses up from the string around her neck and motioned to the computer monitor. “Do you believe in horoscopes *Natašo*? What’s your sign?” This was not the first time she had asked me this question; whilst hanging out in her apartment, I often flipped through the latest weekly ‘stars and forecasts’ magazine she had purchased; reading the fortune cookie-like horoscopes was a useful way to improve my Czech skills. “Yes, sometimes I think they can be very accurate. I’m a *Rak* (Cz. Crab/Cancer), and I have a lot of the personality traits that a *Rak* is supposed to possess.” She peered at me over the rims of her glasses. “Me too! I am *Vodnár* (Cz. Aquarius), that’s why I like learning things so much.”

“You want to know about my *první láska* (Cz. first love)?” And so, as I set my recorder on the desk space between us, Alžběta began telling me in more detail about a story she had alluded to before – a story of infatuation, betrayal, and the repercussions of crossed wires of communication. Little did I know that these events would serve as a primary justification for the way Alžběta approached her relationships with men and her friendships with women throughout her adult life.



*I fell in love for the first time when I went to Eastern Slovakia with my mother for a pout' (Cz. saint's day, fair). I was sixteen and a half years old. My relatives and I went into town to see my brother. We were waiting for the bus but for some reason it passed by us. There was a lot of dust on the road, so our white clothes were getting very dirty. One woman - one of my kin - came by and said that we would sleep at her aunt's place. We went there, and I helped her around the house for a while as our clothes were drying. After we did a bit of cleaning, we went into town. All of a sudden I saw this BEAUTIFUL man. I looked at him and I said to my relative, "Ahhh! He is beautiful!" She said, "What?" And I said, "That guy! He is gorgeous!" He didn't see me but I saw him! She said, "Come. Let's take a longer look." So we sat there for a while and watched him. He was totally beautiful. I like tall men, and he was tall with dark hair. And he was well dressed too. I don't like fat men and I don't like small men. I'm a small thing, but I must have a man who is 180 cm tall or taller! He was like a mannequin, right? [laughing] Yes, when I saw Jiří for the first time, I was dumbstruck. Even today, he is handsome. Alex just saw him at a party and talked to him. He didn't know I had any history with Jiří, but without knowing this Alex spoke to him and then later he said to me, "Mami, that guy is a frajer! What do you think of him?"*

*So, later my relative and I went to the pout'. At that time I was a blonde, and I was the only blonde woman there. It was a nice party and there were lots of decent guys there. Then Jiří saw another guy ask me to dance. He came over to us and said, "No, let me dance with her. She is so young and you are too old for her." So he took me and we danced and danced. Then he showed me up the stairs of the dance hall and led me to the balcony. He held my hand. Then he took me in his arms and kissed me! I slapped him. He was surprised and said, "Why did you do that? I really like you!" Then I gave him another slap and he said, "Aha! You've never had a boyfriend!" He recognized that about me - that I was decent.*

*Later in the evening, he told me that there would be two other girls there and that they would be angry if they saw me with him. He said, "Look. They'll be jealous! Go home and go to sleep." In the morning I woke up and looked outside the window, and he was standing there and watching! He said, "What are you doing there?" I said, "My relatives live here." Of course he had already found that out; he was just joking around with me. He said, "Let's go out this afternoon!" So we went out and walked around. He was so nice. Yes, there was a velká láska (Cz. great love) there. He said to me, "I really like you! I've fallen in love with you!" It was very nice. He asked if I would wait for him after I went back to Skála. I didn't realize that he was in the army and that he had to re-enlist. But he was serious, and he thought that we would be together after he finished his service.*

*Before I left to go home, we said we would write to each other. And then what happened is that my kamarádka (Cz. female friend) was jealous of Jiří and I, and she wrote to his mother and told her that I was pregnant. She told lots of people in*

*Skála the same thing, so then THOSE people wrote to his mother and said, “Alžběta is a kurva” and “Alžběta has been with a lot of men” and such. It wasn’t true at all. It couldn’t have been true because I hadn’t ever been with a man; I was still a virgin.*

*So then Jiří wrote to me, asking me if it was true that I was pregnant. I tried to send him a photo of me because I wanted him to see that it was a lie, but he never got the picture so he went on believing that I was pregnant. And I never heard from him, so I thought, “It’s over. He doesn’t want me.” Thus it was the end – the end of love, the end of everything.*

*Then I got married and I was very unhappy. My husband Vojta was handsome and wealthy, but I didn’t like him. We met at a party. He was also like a mannequin – very handsome with blonde hair and blue eyes. He was a Rom but his mother was an Olašska. He looked like a Greek or a Roman. Neither Jiří nor my husband was as handsome as him. He was...well, I just have never seen anyone so handsome! I still haven’t. He was elegant and graceful, but I didn’t like him so it didn’t work. I wanted it to work but it didn’t. I was always crying, so he saw that I was unhappy. I told him the truth and said, “Look. You know I had a boyfriend, and I am unhappy because I still love him.” He said, “It will be okay. You’ll see.” At first he was kind and decent to me. But I only thought of him like a kamarád. I married him because the whole thing with Jiří had been a disgrace to my whole family. My family was disgraced because people were saying that I was some sort of kurva and that I was pregnant. Because of that I had to get married quickly. Get it? Because everyone was saying, “She was with a soldier!” and “Maybe she’s pregnant!” and “Now she has a different man again!” So I had to. And I cried!*

*Because Vojta knew that I didn’t love him, he had some other girlfriends. It didn’t matter to me because I didn’t want him anyway. He was very patient, but even so, when he would come home in the evenings and try something with me, I would tell him not to touch me. He would ask why, and I would say, “Because I love Jiří. I told you that already! I am only with you because of my family. I am only here because of my family and their customs. I am only here because my brothers made me.” He was on his hands and knees trying to get even a kiss from me, but I would yell, “No! I don’t want to!”*

*I was with him for two months. I stayed with him long enough to show people that I wasn’t pregnant. I only had sex with him a couple of times – maybe five times – but I also made sure that I didn’t get impregnated by him. I was always waiting at the door, hoping Jiří would come for me, but he didn’t. He didn’t protect me. I was so unhappy, and when I saw that I wasn’t pregnant because I had my period, I left him. It was a good thing too; he was becoming very mean because I didn’t love him. He said to me, “You really don’t like me, do you?” I said no. He said to me, “Go then. I don’t care anymore.” My mother was glad too because she saw how unhappy I was. She saw that I was crying all the time and that I wasn’t going*

*to parties with him or any of my friends. But wow! Those friends of mine were really crazy about him! They were still telling me, "Go back to him!" And actually, he had fantastic parents, fantastic brothers and sisters. They were very intelligent and kind – and also quite wealthy. They loved me.*

*After I left Vojta, I just wanted be alone. I didn't want anyone else because I had really, really loved Jiří. I had opportunities to go to parties but I didn't have any interest anymore.*

*I met Aleš when he came to Skála with a bunch of other men from Slovakia. They came here for work. Some girls came by and told me, "There are some new guys here! We spoke with them!" I said, "So what?" But my friends really wanted us to go out and find them again, so we went to the main square. I left them so I could go and buy some shampoo. When I came back, my friends were gone but Aleš was there. He told me that his friends had left too, so we sat there for a while and chatted. Then we both went home.*

*Some time later, my friends told me that they were going to go to a party and they asked my mother if I could come along with them. My mother said, "It doesn't matter to me. She can go", but I said, "No, no, no! I don't want to!" In the end, I went to the party anyway and the girls looking at the different guys and saying, "That one's handsome!" and "What about that one?" And I said, "Uh huh. Sure." I wasn't interested. Aleš came over to me and said, "I want to dance with you." My kamarádka stood up because she wanted to dance with him, but he said, "No." He looked straight at me and said, "I want to dance with YOU." So we danced and talked about something. I told him that I needed to go to the toilet, but I really just wanted to run away and go home. I tried, but he found me and said, "Why did you leave?" I said, "I don't want to dance with you because you came here with another girl." He said to me, "But I don't want her. She came with me, but she is only after sex. I am not interested in that." I said to him, "No, no, no. I don't want to. You are here with someone else." But he kept coming after me and insisting, "No, I don't want her. She isn't a good woman. You're decent because you ran away from me when you saw the other girl. I don't want her!"*

*Yes, so it was like this with us. We started to go together for coffee or tea – but nothing more than that. If he tried anything more, he got a slap from me. I reminded him, "I'm still married!" I told him everything about Jiří and Vojta. He told me, "I think highly of you. You're super because you tell the truth." So we continued just talking because he knew that I would smack him if he tried anything more. We went out together for a month, but I still did nothing more than converse with him because I kept saying, "Go away. Go away." He was really glad that I told him to go away because he was very handsome and women were always running after him. This is why he fell in love with me. I was the first woman who had ever given him a slap across the face. He said, "Diky bohu! Ne sex!" (Cz. Thank God! No sex!)*

*He went home to Slovakia for Christmas. He wrote to me from home and told me that he loved me and that he wanted us to be together, but I couldn't marry him because I still wasn't divorced from my first husband. Vojta caused me some problems with that because he didn't want anything with me, but he also didn't want to give me a divorce. After I had been with Aleš for a year, I became pregnant with Věra. When she was born she had Vojta's last name because I still wasn't divorced from him. Right after she was born, Vojta said to me, "I still want you. I want you because you are my wife." I said, "I don't want you!" He said, "Then I want your child." And I said, "You're crazy! It is my child and Aleš's child." When Věra was more than a year old, I went and complained about it. Aleš, Vojta and I met at court and he had to say, "I am not her father" and Aleš had to say, "I am her father." Then Aleš started being weird. He said, "Vojta is your husband. If you want, go to him. But the child is mine and I am keeping her. Go home with him." And he walked away. I ran after him and said, "What are you doing? I don't want him. I don't want him at all. I have a child with you and I don't want him." Finally I got the divorce.*

*When we were first living together, Aleš gave me calm and he gave me time. He knew that my family had pushed me into marriage with Vojta and that I had been badly hurt by all of it, so he was very patient. Aleš was like that. No other woman existed for him except for me. He was never rough with me, not like Vojta had started to be when he lost his patience with me. Aleš never forced me to have sex with him. In the mornings, he didn't do this to me. He would say, "See? I am not so bad." I look back on these good things with fondness. He had such a strong character. Even now, when his friends are talking about him, they say, "He had character. Alžběto! Why are you speaking badly about him? He was a good person!" And it's true. He was.*

*Aleš and I were together for almost forty years. It wasn't a great love – not like it was with Jiří, but I saw that he was a person who had learned to work hard. I don't know why I felt such a great love for Jiří but not the same for my husband. I guess it's because Jiří was the first man to recognize me in this way. That is why it was my first love. I don't know. It's just like that! It's hard to explain. When we met in Slovakia when we were young, we were only together for four or five hours, but first love always stays with you. There will be a first, a second, a third....but the first you always keep with you. I believe that a person never forgets their first love, even if there are many bad things that come with it.*

*Even though I didn't have a great love with Aleš, he was a decent man, he loved me, and with him I saw a secure future. I saw those things in him. He cared for his children, he went to work, he gave me money...he did everything right. I was lucky because my husband helped me a lot. When he saw that I had quit something, he immediately tried to figure it out for himself. At that time, there weren't disposable diapers; there were no Pampers. You had to wash them. But Aleš was so nice, so kind and fair, that when he came home from work and I wasn't feeling well, he would go to the creek across the street from our apartment*

*and he would rinse the diapers off. The girls were young then, and they would laugh at him as he was doing this. He would say to them, "Why are you laughing at me? I am doing this for you!"*

*He was a person who was always alongside me. I was very spoiled because I was the youngest child in my family and all my siblings had doted on me. I would say to my husband, "I don't know how to do this!" and "I don't know how to do that," and he would say, "Try it. I'll teach you." I would say, "Why don't you just do it?" and he would say, "Because you may need to know how to do it by yourself someday." I would cry and he would say, "Don't cry!" He was strict with me in this way, but I didn't hate him for it. Today I thank him and God in heaven and on earth because he taught me so many things! I remember him as a fantastic person.*

*But then when he lost his job at the end of communism and there was no work available, he began to drink and beat me horribly. From that point on, our marriage disintegrated. I don't forgive him for that. But before he began to drink, he was a fantastic father and husband. At that time, he was number one in my eyes and he only lived for his children and me. I respected him. He helped me clean, wash dishes, change diapers – everything! What more could I have wanted?*

*And he was gorgeous too! Lots of women think Alex is handsome, but he is much less handsome than his father! All the women wanted him, but he still didn't want any other woman besides me! My friends were always coming over to our place and he would say to me, "No. I don't want your friends in our flat. Out! Out!" I said, "Why not?" And he said, "They aren't coming here to see you, they're coming here to see me! I don't want that." So he would shut them out. He would tell them, "She isn't home! Go away! Out!" [Laughing] He would say to me, "I don't want them here. I have you. I have my children. I don't want another woman. Really." I don't know why it is that my husband didn't want to have other women. I don't know why. Maybe I was lucky, unlike many women in the world. And díky Bohu because it is rare!*

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Alžběta's recollections about her first romantic and sexual experiences with men are characterized by a discursive framework that she frequently uses to interpret her relationships with the opposite sex. During her initial interactions with her first love Jiří and second husband Aleš, she swiftly rebuffs their sexual advances. According to her

narrative, unlike most other young women with whom these men interact, Alžběta does not chase after them; they approach her and single her out as someone they find attractive. They are accustomed to receiving a lot of (unwanted) female attention, and as a result, they consider Alžběta's apparent disinterest in them and her reticence about having physical contact with them as not only a refreshing contrast, but also as 'proof' of her 'decency' (i.e. chastity or lack of experience with men) and her relatively higher worth as a romantic partner. Through Alžběta's words, Jiří and Aleš express their boredom with the status quo – women who only want them for their looks or their hitherto sexual availability. Both men fall in love with her quickly, and as we will later find out, Jiří (like Aleš) 'never loves another woman' after meeting Alžběta. Aleš's fidelity to his wife, as well as his patience as she slowly gets over her discomfort with (or fear of) physical intimacy, are implied to be highly unusual traits for a man to possess. She describes his willingness to help out with household chores and childcare as being no less unusual. The rarity of Aleš's helpfulness within the household, as well as his fidelity as a married man, are emphasized elsewhere in Alžběta's narratives when she gives general descriptions of Romani men. For example, whilst talking about her recollections of motherhood and pregnancy, she says:

*I believe that motherhood and pregnancy are different for each woman. For instance, I had a kind husband who helped me. Other men don't think that they have to help out during pregnancy. Before, these Romani men didn't have any books that could have helped them to have a fuller comprehension of what their wives were experiencing. Today, when a child is born maybe the man is a little more prepared. The whole family celebrates the birth of the child, and then when it comes home, the man has complete happiness about it. Then again, he doesn't always know when he should help the woman, but younger women tell me that men are helping out more now. This is a big difference from the way it used to be.*

*During communism, it wasn't like how it is today when men wait in the hospital when you are in labor. My husband could only at the baby look through a very high window after it was born – that's how it was. He wasn't allowed to come for visits or anything.*

*I think it is better the way they do things today. Before, all the guys would go out and drink while they waited for the woman to give birth, so they didn't see her suffering. The husband used to be like, "Hooray! She gave birth" and "Let's celebrate! I have a son." I am glad that now they are able to see what is what, that they see the woman bring a child into the world. I believe that this is very good because the man has a different perspective. Now a man respects the woman because he has fear too. You want him there with you because the delivery is about two lives. You also want him there with you so you know he isn't off having fun with some other woman.*

When on some occasions, I would ask Alžběta *directly* as to whether or not it is commonplace for Romani men to be unfaithful to their wives, she would deny it and say that it is the exception rather than the rule. In all other cases, she would implicitly and explicitly state that it is rare for a woman's husband to be faithful to her, thus her husband was unique in this regard. She clearly extends this idea – the *universality* of the (heterosexual) male impulse to be with more than one woman and the *commonality* of their lack of will to stifle this urge – beyond those (Romani) men who constitute her pool of direct and indirect observation and experience, thus here it seems that popular ideas about masculinity among members of Skála's Romani female population do not always carry ethnic salience. 'Negative', intrinsically male qualities become ethnically marked as Romani in certain social contexts.

What about femininity? Unfortunately I had no exposure to Romani men's discussions about 'the nature of women', so it is impossible to conjecture upon their collective agreement on culturally meaningful notions of femininity. However, Alžběta's and Zdeňka's concern about the reputations of their teenage daughters, their implicit and

explicit efforts to attest to their own ‘decency’ as young women, and their straightforward claims that women carry more shame than men as a result of their actions suggest that female sexuality is also something that Romani women must monitor through self-restraint (i.e. ‘Good’ women conduct themselves in accordance with cultural values about female modesty, while ‘bad’ women do as they are compelled to do based on their own desires). Of course, it isn’t this simple. As will be demonstrated below, women who follow through on their natural desires for romantic and sexual love are not always judged negatively; in fact, their wants and needs are encouraged by others.

Zdeňka’s narrative engagement on the subject of men – with a particular focus on her troubled relationship with husband Petr – has a few threads of continuity with Alžběta’s own implicitly and explicitly expressed convictions about the fundamental natures of men and women. Like Alžběta, Zdeňka has been betrayed by women she considered to be her friends (Eva). They have been successful in having sexual liaisons with her husband. Also like Alžběta, she considers women to have difficult lives due to the impact that certain male traits have on them. Zdeňka more particularly assigns her uncomplimentary opinions to the cultural tendencies of *Romani* men (and consequently, to the widespread dissatisfaction of *Romani* women), but her specification perhaps stems from the fact that, unlike Alžběta, she has had romantic relationships with both: one Czech and one Rom. Her past experiences therefore naturally compel her to draw comparisons between the two and to correlate these differences with ethnicity. This might be loosely described as ‘illusory correlation’ (Chapman 1967, in Tajfel 1981: 149-150).<sup>108</sup> Individuals sometimes draw correlations between two social classes which are

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<sup>108</sup> Chapman, L. J. 1967. Illusory Correlations in Observational Report. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*. 6: 151-155.



either unrelated, or are related to a lesser extent than is actually the case. This usually occurs when a person observes or interacts with ‘infrequent’ events or ‘infrequent’ people. Past events have influenced Zdeňka’s belief that, generally speaking, the cultural differences between ‘the Czechs’ and ‘the Roma’ are great enough to create a certain degree of mutual incomprehension between those who are in interethnic relationships, but that these differences do not inevitably extinguish the possibility that a Romani woman and a Czech husband can have a well-functioning relationship (see below).

Alžběta acknowledges that there are differences between Romani and Czech men and women, but in her opinion they are too significant to produce a successful union. Her pessimism on this issue is not informed by her own romantic experiences; the knowledge she draws upon is her experience as Ivanka’s mother-in-law. She frames a mixed marriage’s low chance of success in terms of the diametrically opposed *modi operandi* of Czech and Romani families to whom the married individuals are attached. Alžběta, Světlana and I discussed this one evening when we were baking Christmas cookies. A few days before, Alžběta had been trying to convince Světlana and her boyfriend Radek about the importance of maintaining the tradition of the Romani engagement ceremony (Rom. *mangavipen*).<sup>109</sup> Neither one of them demonstrated the slightest interest in an engagement ceremony, first and foremost because they had no interest in getting married – at least not yet. I restated to them my opinion that as an 18-year old, Světlana is still quite young for marriage, and Alžběta repeated her belief that “*u nás*, a girl is usually

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<sup>109</sup> In Romanes, *mangavipen* means “engagement” or a “ceremony that binds the couple.” Whereas traditionally, a Romani wedding (*bjav*) was a prestigious affair, the *mangavipen* occurred in a family setting. The young man and his parents would arrive at the home of the girl’s parents to *te mangavel la čha* (ask for the girl). The young couple’s marriage was then sealed with a family celebration. Often the following day, the boy’s family would take the girl to *ke sasvi* (the mother-in-law), where the young couple subsequently lived together. Alžběta suggested that the wedding can take place 30 days after the *mangavipen*. See <http://ling.kfunigraz.ac.at/~rombase/cgi-bin/art.cgi?src=data/ethn/cerem/affiance.en.xml>.

married by the age of twenty because if she is older than that, no man will want her.” I became curious and said, “I don’t think a Czech man would care in the least if a girl is older than twenty when he marries her.”

“Well of course a Czech wouldn’t care!” Alžběta said. “But I don’t believe that Czechs and Roma should intermarry. It just doesn’t work. The Romani *mentalita* and *kultura* are too different, and Czech people don’t want to adapt to us. *U nás*, enough food is prepared for everyone. A Romani mother wants everyone to be fed. In a Czech family, if there are three people in a family, enough food is made for three people, and those three people don’t want to share with anyone else. They are only concerned with what is theirs. What do you think? You think it depends on the individuals in question, right?”

From my perspective, Alžběta’s question seemed to indicate that she considered herself to have a developed awareness of how an ‘outsider’ might react to her more reductionist mode of thinking, and this didn’t appear to be problematic to her, despite the fact that similar ways of thinking on the part of the *gádže* result in her ongoing relegation to an ‘ethnic trap’. The limited scope of her past observations of ‘infrequent’ events and people is also a possible example of ‘illusory correlation’ because in all her other commentaries about Ivanka’s faults, she never attributes their occurrence to be ethnic in origin. Thus, within a conducive social context, these negative traits can become ethnically marked. The above conversation revolves around a question that more or less requires Alžběta to recall readily available groups stereotypes from her memory, and as a ‘rare’ event that provokes strong emotional and physical responses from her, Ivanka’s mixed marriage with Alex fits the bill.

As will be illustrated below, despite some of the aforementioned similarities, Zdeňka and Alžběta do not interpret their romantic relationships with men with the same narrative theme. Both women stress their rejection of a man's preliminary romantic come-ons, their prior inexperience and shyness around men, and men's inclination towards adulterous relationships (all ideas that are collectively negotiated and agreed upon), but Zdeňka hardly interprets herself as a woman who is sought after by many men, less still as a woman who 'condemns' men to a life of romantic pining. She does not consider her relationships with men as being especially 'exceptional' in any way. Her involvement with them comes into fruition as if it is a matter of course, not because she is particularly drawn to the men in question. She certainly indicates that she mentally processes the potential benefits and disadvantages of getting involved with men, but Zdeňka seems to frame the initiation of her relationships if she was being carried along by a current, and despite trying to reach out for some branches to stop her forward-moving progression, she keeps going down the stream. She certainly doesn't 'play the victim'; she emphasizes that she has been 'stupid' in her choices about men. In the face of things not having turned out as she would have liked, she settles at a level of acceptance about the circumstances she is experiencing. She continues to move through daily life in the direction of the current, but in a few inconspicuous ways she continues to fight back.

## ii. Zdeňka

“*Ne Natašo!* We have to drink it now! While Petr isn’t home!” Zdeňka said as she quickly placed two cordial glasses in front of me on the kitchen table. I had come to Zdeňka’s apartment to ask if she would like to take some clothes and household items from me that I was no longer using, and one of the items on offer was a bottle of spearmint liquor. Zdeňka eyes had taken on a mischievous glint when she found the liquor within the box of items. At first she had insisted that she didn’t want it because she didn’t drink alcohol, but apparently she had changed her mind in the course of our conversation. Before today, Zdeňka had shunned the idea of engaging in the consumption of alcohol, partly because she didn’t care for the taste of alcoholic beverages that much, but also (I suspected) because Petr didn’t allow her to drink and because of her negative associations with it due to her father’s and husband’s alcohol-induced tendency to be physically violent.

On this afternoon, we had been speaking both formally and informally about male behavior. Before I had started my recorder and asked her to give her thoughts on relationships between men and women in Skála, we had been having some ‘girl talk’ about the latest news she had heard about Petr (who was living with his new girlfriend), my most recent email correspondence with my friend Paul, and the fact that in both of our opinions these individuals’ conduct left something to be desired. In the process of our chatting and recording, Zdeňka’s exasperation about Petr and my own feelings of confusion about male behavior had incensed her to such an extent that she clearly thought a drink would do both of us some good. On this day, Petr’s prohibition of her alcohol consumption was a care she obviously wanted to throw to the wind. “*Natašo*, you know I

can't keep it here. What if Petr sees it? He'll get angry! We'll have one glass each and then you have to take it home. Okay?" Zdeňka looked expectantly at me. "Oh fine," I conceded. The reason I had offered the liquor to her in the first place was because I thought it tasted awful, but the prospect of 'rebell' had made Zdeňka look the happiest that I had ever seen her. We clinked glasses; she smiled and I grimaced.

The impetus to 'rebel' – and more generally, the urge to 'be free' – was not something that Zdeňka had shown herself to be impervious to on past occasions. Beyond speaking to Zdeňka in the children's playground across the street from our apartments, one of my more significant interactions with her during the initial stages of our acquaintance involved an act of defiance against Petr. On one summer evening, Alžběta and Věra decided to make a bonfire in the garden because my mother had come to visit me and they wanted to get to know her better. As we sat around the *ohně* drinking some Czech white wine and as I translated back and forth between them, without turning around, Alžběta suddenly called over her shoulder towards the building next door: "Zdeňko! I know you're there! Come down and join us!" It was only months later that I found out that from the small window in Zdeňka's kitchen, one could overhear almost everything being discussed in Alžběta's garden. Zdeňka's head appeared in the window frame. "Come on!" Alžběta repeated. "Natasha's mother is here, all the way from America!" Zdeňka didn't need to be encouraged any further. Her head disappeared from view and a few minutes later she bounded into the garden. "Sit down and have some wine with us!" Věra said, but Zdeňka continued to stand in front of us with a coy expression on her face. "Oh I can't! If my husband comes home and sees that I am out here, he'll really beat me." She smiled and shrugged her shoulders. Věra and Alžběta waved their hands in

irritation. “Oh *prosím tě!*” Alžběta sighed with over-exaggerated exasperation. “Just sit down for a minute!” My mother leaned in and asked, “What did she say?” I translated and my mother looked stumped, unsure how to react to such a blunt admission. Zdeňka only stayed for a few minutes, during which time she, Alžběta, Věra and my mother quickly bonded through some light-hearted, quasi-misandric banter. Her curiosity and urge to flout Petr’s dictates seemed to have been satisfied, so she turned around and went back to her apartment. She almost appeared to take pleasure in being so direct. I sensed that it was done neither because she wanted to elicit sympathy nor because she wanted to shock, but because she could *actively* find some sort of tragic humor in the circumstances of her life rather than resigning herself to apathy, denial or false hope that things would improve.

However, the reality of Zdeňka’s emotions – hidden behind these acts of resistance – could not always be concealed. The look of sheer panic that came over her face during some of our morning chats over tea or coffee – when she heard the front door unlock and was faced with the possibility that Petr had unexpectedly come home for something – was an instinctual, primal reaction. Whatever her ‘transgression’ may be, she never knew if it would bother him on one day or be of no interest to him on the next. Smoking, however, was something Petr never allowed Zdeňka to do (despite the fact that he was a smoker himself), and when on one occasion she was smoking in the kitchen and heard the door open, after shaking herself out of a frozen state of terror, she threw the cigarette down the drain of the kitchen sink and started running the water as she frantically waved her hand to get rid of the smell. When Petr’s Aunt Kamila appeared in

the kitchen's entryway, Zdeňka slumped against the sink and put her hand on her chest, sighing in relief. "I thought you were Petr!" she whispered.

The aforementioned realities of Zdeňka's life are the just some of the factors framing Zdeňka's 'official' thoughts on relationships between men and women:

*Z: With us Roma, it is like this: a woman must listen a lot. She isn't allowed to drink, she isn't allowed to go to the pub, she isn't allowed to do anything. A guy is allowed to do everything. For us women, it is hard. I don't know how it is in America, but I do know that the worst men are Italians and Roma. Those Arabs are also quite mean men. Greeks too! Italians, Greeks and Romani men also have a reputation for being romantic. It's because Romani men are so romantic that they often have lovers. Many, many lovers. The men are very temperamental. It is complicated to be with them. With these Romani guys, a woman has to learn well. A Romani woman is very loyal to her husband. There are few women here who are unfaithful to their husbands, but most of the men are unfaithful to their wives. Olaši men are faithful to their wives, but it is because they have to be. It is their law.*

*In the beginning, our men go out with us a lot. They love their wives. It is only later that they change. A girl sees her father, and she thinks that her boyfriend will be different, but then later all she has is depression - constant depression and fear. With us Roma, the majority of women are depressed. My daughter also thinks that it will be different for her. She sees how it is with her father and me, so I always tell her, "Find a nice guy - not one like your father." You have to look out for your daughters. She must listen to me when I tell her what is good in a man and what isn't. I keep telling her that I don't like the boy she is dating. He isn't a good one and I know that he isn't. He's a fake. He's mean and I know that he will use her. She is the one who is always chasing after him. Why doesn't he come here for her instead? If a man really loves a woman, he will go around the world many times for her. He will come looking for her because he doesn't want her to be with another man. This is why I tell Erika to take her time and to be patient. I remind her that she should look around a lot. You have to look for a very long time. I didn't study my husband enough.*

*I would like to go out, simply to exercise, dance, be with the girls...these sorts of things. I was a very good dancer when I was a young woman. I would like to do these things again, but I can't. I just can't.*

*N: How did you meet Petr? You've never told me.*

*Z: I met him here in Skála, at the disco. I was sixteen years old. I was there with some of my friends and their boyfriends. Petr was a friend of these guys, and they*

had invited him to come along. Petr didn't live in Skála at that time, he lived in Okraj. Petr asked me if I would like something to drink, and I said yes so he bought me a Kofola.<sup>110</sup> We talked, and then when I said I was going to go home he said that he would walk me there. I said that wasn't necessary and that I could go by myself, but he insisted so I said fine. He told me about how he was married and had two young children, about his family and his job – things like that. After that night, I saw him at the disco a few more times, and each time he would walk me home. Then maybe the fifth time he walked me home, he tried to kiss me, but I said no, that I wasn't interested in that. I didn't want to go out with a man who was still married – and with children too! I didn't like that. I didn't even think he was attractive.

N: What? Petr isn't unattractive. Why?

Z: I thought he had big ears! I even said to him, "You look like Dumbo with those ears of yours!" You know, like the elephant? [laughing] But, I kept seeing him when I would be around town, and one time he even showed up at my house and introduced himself to my parents. So we started going out on dates. And you know...that was it. But I didn't sleep with him until more than a year after we first started dating! No! I didn't want to. Before Petr, I hadn't had any boyfriends. I was shy with boys – terribly shy! There were a few boys I liked who I would see when I went to Prague to visit relatives, but I didn't have anything special with them. Or maybe I kissed them? I'm not sure, I don't remember, but definitely nothing more than that!

I also had a good male friend there. I liked him quite a bit too, but he never knew that. [giggling] His name was Dušan. He was a friend of my cousin. I was sixteen years old when I met him. We were both crying when I had to go home! But I did, and later that year I met my husband. I've seen Dušan once since then, when I went to Prague to visit my aunt. I already had Erika by that time, and he had a child too. He didn't recognize me at first, but my cousin – Dušan's friend – said to me, "Look! There's Dušan!" I was like, "Where? Where?" Then he came over and hugged me and said, "Zdenko! How are you?" I said I was fine. He asked about Petr because he heard that I had gotten married. He asked me if Petr was kind to me, and I said yes because at that time, he was kind. [laughing] I was very shy with boys when I was a teenager. But, I don't know. After I had a few very good male friends – just friends – I slowly began to open up.

Petr was my first lover, but I think this was a mistake. Men don't care if a woman is a virgin or not; it's not like they will think she is easy if she isn't a virgin. Maybe they cared about it in the 1950s or something, but not anymore. However, for men there is still a difference. If a woman isn't a virgin when she first meets her husband, she will be more guarded by him because he is afraid that she might go off with another man. On the other hand, if she is a virgin, he is more likely to

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<sup>110</sup> Kofola is a Czechoslovak cola that was created in the early 1960s as a cheaper rival to Coca-Cola and Pepsi.



*have affairs with other women because he feels certain that she won't stray.<sup>111</sup> He says to himself, "She's at home." This is the way it happened in my marriage. Petr has lovers because he knows that I won't leave him. He thinks, "She isn't going anywhere." This is bad though. This isn't what marriage is!*

*Sometimes, a Romka will have a lover because she sees something better in him than her husband. Sometimes she will take a lover because the guy has some money – not because she particularly likes him. She just wants her children to have a better life. Even when a Romka has a lover, almost always she will leave him and go back to her husband, even if she doesn't want her husband anymore. She does it not because of herself but because of her children. She does it so that they will have their father.*

*N: Don't Roma ever get divorced?*

*Z: It's acceptable. I don't know why people don't get divorced more often. I also want a divorce from my husband, but he says no. I say yes. It doesn't matter to me anymore. On the one hand, for my children's sake, I do care, but on the other hand, he doesn't have any interest in his own children so it is a closed chapter for me. I don't know. The children are mine, but they are also his. In other Romani families, a man might have affairs, but he still comes back to his wife and children because he loves them. My husband doesn't love his children - his own children! If he would love them, then it would be different; I wouldn't want a divorce. The only people he loves are his lovers. It is shameful of him to leave his own children at home but to spend time with his lover's children. I don't get it. I just don't understand him.*

*N: I doubt Petr loves his lovers. Why would you think that?*

*Z: Because he buys them nice things – perfume, flowers, chocolates. He doesn't buy those things for me, and he definitely doesn't buy his children anything. Oh, he loves his lovers! I know he does.*

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<sup>111</sup> Alžběta remarked many times that women are “crazy” for the men to whom they lose their virginity. She attributed the tendency for women to “go crazy” after they have sex for the first time, as well as men’s tendency to be the instigators of sexual relations, to the basic shape of male and female genitalia. "Do you know why men are the way they are?" Alžběta once asked me as we sat around her kitchen table. Flatly pressing her hands together as if she were about to go into prayer, Alžběta aimed the tips of her fingers towards the area between her legs and moved her knees apart. Even though we were alone, she lowered her voice and said, "Because a man's (Alžběta paused to lower her voice further) penis goes into a woman. He goes inside her. He has the external part and she accepts it inside of her. This is why he is the one who wants sex more. It's because he is the one who does the inserting. Likewise, it is because a woman has it inside her that she is more emotional about sex. That's why a woman goes crazy when she has sex with a man - especially if it is her first time."

### **III. Boyfriends and Lovers**

#### **i. A Woman's Need for Love**

In light of Alžběta's and Zdeňka's recognition of the occurrence of male infidelity and their understanding of it as men's lack of will to subdue the essential male urge to be sexually polygamous, one would be inclined to assume that they would not only be condemnatory of women who have affairs, but that they would also feel morally conflicted about engaging in extramarital relations themselves. Yet, once again, things are not so clear-cut. Zdeňka had a brief affair about four years into her marriage with Petr, and at the time of my fieldwork, Alžběta was romantically involved with two different married men (Václav and Jiří). They do not engage in these relationships whilst feeling guilty; they consider their involvement with these men to be permissible under the prevailing circumstances, or at least acceptable to the point that they experience little more than nominal moral ambivalence. The drive to find 'love' – the love of romantic gestures like receiving flowers and men's declarations of affection – was something that both these women found lacking in their lives. The ongoing cultural relevance of 'love' to Romani women is not without influence. "People want to have new experiences," Alžběta once said to me, not in relation to herself but in relation to the issue of infidelity in general. "Then why should people get married at all?" I asked. "Well for family and children of course!"

On several occasions Alžběta and I talked about Petr's latest affair, which was well known among Roma in Skála due to the fact that his mistress was living in the very same building as Zdeňka and his children. The particular circumstances of the affair – the proximity of Petr's mistress and her relatively advanced age – seemed to be much more

objectionable to Alžběta than his unfaithfulness. She routinely made comments along the lines of: “Can you believe him? He has a young and pretty wife at home. Why does he want to have an affair with someone who is an old woman? She’s the same age as me!” On one occasion, when (as often was the case happened) a life history session had turned into more of a gossip session, I asked Alžběta:

*N: Do you think it is important for a husband and wife to be faithful to one another?*

*A: Well yes, of course. I was with my husband for thirty-eight years, and during that time, I didn't have any other man. I wasn't after sex. No! Sure, I liked to have fun with other men, for example, joking and horsing around with them, but I was never looking for sex. I don't know. I don't think men and women have to have lovers. On the other hand, maybe it was only because my husband was so good, so kind and handsome, that I didn't have an affair. He didn't have other women, so why should I have other men? Plus, we were working a lot for our children. Like I told you, we were working many jobs. We didn't have time to go out to parties. He never went anywhere and I neither did I. I didn't like going out.*

*Later, when our children were grown and married and he began to drink, then I had different worries. There was our building and our pub to look after, and still more work on top of that. We were always together during this time, and while I did meet some other men, I simply had so many worries that I didn't even consider it. I simply didn't have any peace, and mainly I didn't meet anyone nice. Maybe if had met someone kind, I wouldn't have been faithful to my husband. I can't say, “I never would have cheated on him.” I am simply saying that I didn't meet anyone genuine. Maybe if I had met someone, and if he had said, “I love you,” and if I had loved him, then I would have left my husband. But I didn't. I was always telling my husband, “You're lucky that I haven't met anyone! You see for yourself that I could go out into town. If I would still be a young woman, maybe I would meet someone else!”*

*Look. If the fact that a man has a lover is the reason for a divorce, then it is a terrible thing. Personally, I can't speak about that because I didn't have that experience. Maybe my husband was so clever that he did cheat on me and I never knew about it! [laughing] Then he would be some sort of cool guy! Everybody wants what they don't have. If a man or woman learns how to be so clever, then that is super. Maybe my husband learned how and I never noticed the signs! He never gave me any reason to be suspicious. At home, everything went as normal. He told me that he was never with another woman in his life, and I didn't have any reason not to believe him because he never went anywhere. He always came home. He wasn't sleeping anywhere else. He went to the pub sometimes, but he always told me at what time he would come home. I*

*trusted him a lot. If he was going to be gone somewhere for a week because of work, he told tell me where he would be staying. So I just believed him.*

According to their own descriptions about their relationships with men, Alžběta and Zdeňka have experienced little unadulterated, long-lasting romantic love, yet their feelings of disappointment, frustration, and resentment have not put an irreversible damper on their hopes for the future. Alžběta certainly never shied away from labeling certain woman as *kurvy*, *čubky* or *prostitutky*, but she didn't make any negative moral judgments about a woman's desire to have physical contact with a member of the opposite sex *sensu stricto*; in fact, Alžběta considered a woman's desire for love and romance as an absolute necessity for a healthy and 'normal' woman. For all of the turmoil she weathered through during her union with Petr, Zdeňka continued to bashfully laud his sexual prowess and their compatibility in the sexual arena.

During my time in Skála I was a twenty-four to twenty-six year old woman, an age that, according to many, would be considered past its expiration date for the marriage of a Romani girl. One of the first questions to come from the mouth of any new female acquaintance was inevitably, "*Máš kluka?*" (Cz. "Do you have a guy?") or *Máš přítele* (Cz. Do you have a boyfriend?)" When I assured them that I did not, their typical response would be to say reassuringly, "*Neboj se! Ty jsi mladá! Máš čas*" (Cz. "Don't worry! You're young! You have time"). After confirming my status as a single woman, Petr's Aunt Kamila told me that "just like grass", a woman will get all *usušený* (Cz. dried up) if she doesn't have a man (an opinion to which all the other women in the playground shook their heads in agreement). Alžběta and Zdeňka routinely declared that various flaws in my physical appearance – persistent acne, brittle and thinning hair, an emerging

widow's peak, weight gain, weight loss – were curable by the experience of *láska*, and in particular, through the physical euphoria a woman can achieve through sexual activity.

However, just as Alžběta and Zdeňka seem to regard their involvement with boyfriends Václav, Jiří and David as morally permissible under the circumstances in which it occurred (which will be outlined below), and just as they think that it is utterly normal for the young women in their families like Světlana and Erika to want to have sex, the 'normalcy' of a woman's sexual activities is quite context-bound. Since heterosexual relationships are the only sexual relationships that Roma in Skála seem to openly discuss (at least with pertinence to themselves or to 'the Roma' in an abstract sense), just as the acceptability of a woman's sexuality is contextualized, so must be a man's.

Alžběta's belief that, by nature, men are the instigators and women are the submitters in sexual situations constituted a major impasse in her comprehension of my relationship with my friend Paul. She routinely used his 'odd' behavior, as compared to the 'normal' behavior of her boyfriend Václav, as a talking point during her sessions of revelation about her clandestine romance. The fact that Paul did not endeavor to have sexual relations with me compelled Alžběta to not only question his sanity, but also his sexual orientation. For Alžběta, a platonic relationship between two relatively *hezký a mladý* (Cz. young and attractive) people was *abnormální*. Reciprocally, my preference to abstain from male companionship during my many months in Skála prompted Alžběta to ask me on several occasions how it was possible that I couldn't be yearning for male company. She couldn't understand my choice to 'play down' rather than 'play up' physical attributes simply so that I could lessen the possibility of being approached by

men along Živá Street. Her recapitulated questions – " But don't you *want* a boyfriend?"; "Why do you always your hair in a ponytail?"; "Wouldn't you like someone to touch your shoulder, hold your hand, sit close next to you?"; "Why do you wear black so much? You're young! Wear some colors!" – draw one's attention to another thematic element of Alžběta's narrative engagement with the subject of men: whilst engaging in relationships, she attempts to strike a compromise between satisfying her wants and needs (the procurement of male attention as validation of her desirability as a woman, the experiencing of romance love, the acquisition of companionship) and having her actions and ways of thinking accepted as valid by those in her social world (She does not want her interactions with men to be construed as 'indecent' by the man in question, friends, family, etc.)

Alžběta's conversations with me about her relationship with Václav illustrate this compromise. Václav's 'natural' role as the pursuer of sexual intimacy simultaneously validates Alžběta's femininity and constitutes a major roadblock to the progression of their relationship. The ardor of Václav's feelings charms her, but his excessive drinking and depression (egged on by financial hardship), as well as his demonstrations of jealousy, scare her due to their similarity to what she experienced with Aleš. She derives pleasure from playing on Václav's insecurities about the sincerity of her feelings for him, and refers to the 'wisdom' she derives from being in a rather strategically dominant position in their relationship as a way to 'school' me on how I should 'manage' men in my own life. In particular, she considers the sensuality of her relationship with Václav, in stark contrast to the complete lack of physicality in my friendship with Paul, as evidence of my friend's lack of sexual interest in women in *toto*.

## ii. (Ab)normal Relations between Men and Women (and Women and Women)

“So?” Alžběta exclaimed expectantly, having just opened the door to find me standing on the stoop in front of her apartment. I had just returned from a week-long trip to the United Kingdom, and Alžběta had had high hopes that my time there would bring some sort of resolution to my *podivný* (Cz. strange) relationship with Paul. “Well...” I started, but before I could continue, she ushered me through the door, furtively looking at the invisible echoes that unfortunately had already reverberated through the hallway. Sitting down in the living room, I saw that our chit chat would have to be momentarily put on hold due to fact that Alžběta’s granddaughter Světlana and her boyfriend Radek were putting on their coats and getting ready to go out for the evening. As they stepped out into the foyer, Světlana looked over her shoulder and directed a knowing smile in our direction; in her usual way, Světlana chose to say nothing but clearly communicate that she was aware of everything.

Exhausted from my travels, I chose to deflect Alžběta’s eager queries for a few moments. “So how are things with your friend?” I asked. During the week I had been away, Alžběta herself had been out of town in Prague. I knew that she had planned on seeing the new man in her life, Václav, and I was curious to know how their date had gone. Glancing over her shoulder to make sure that Světlana had closed the door behind her securely, Alžběta deftly ran into her bedroom and re-emerged with three heavily creased pieces of printing paper in her hand. She carefully unfolded them and placed them on the kitchen table. As she re-arranged them, the complete image of a handsome, laughing, older man coalesced. Alžběta, just to his right, was laughing along with him at some entertainment that had taken place beyond the edges of the camera lens. “This is

Václav,” she told me with a coy smile. This is the party I met him at a few months ago, when I was in Prague. I was there, sitting at a table and talking to my friends. All of a sudden, I heard this man speaking *perfektní* Romanes. I said to my friends, ‘Who is that *gadžo* speaking Romanes?’ My friend told me that he is a Rom. In fact I thought he was an Italian because he is so sophisticated, so polite and talkative. He is actually younger than me, but he looks much older because of his grey hair. I am glad for that!” she laughed. “We talk a lot on the phone, sometimes three times a day, and when I see him in Prague, we go out for coffee or for a walk in the park. It’s nice to have someone to look forward to everyday, isn’t it? And he really respects me too! For example, this one time he picked me up in his car to take me for a drive. His friend was in the backseat, and he kept making all these rude comments about me. Václav stopped the car and said, ‘No, you aren’t going to talk about her that way! Get out!’ Yes, he really is a good guy! But you are the only one who knows about him, so you can’t tell anyone!”

“You haven’t even told Věra?” I asked. As Alžběta’s favorite, I assumed that if she had divulged tidbits of her love life to anyone in her family, Věra would be the most likely candidate. “No,” Alžběta answered, shaking her head resolutely. “It’s not that I think she or Ludmila would be angry with me if they found out that I am dating. It’s just that I don’t want to upset them. Their hearts are always going to be with their father. I told Světlana about it too, but she wasn’t even listening to me. It is of no interest to her; she is too preoccupied with her own love life. But Alex – he’s different. He doesn’t know anything about Václav. I can’t tell my son about him because he already told me that he doesn’t want me to date anyone. He told me, ‘No other man besides father! Now I am the man of the house, and I am telling you that you aren’t allowed.’”



My eyes widened. “And what’s your opinion on that?” I asked. Up to this point in time during my stay in Skála, I had had somewhat restricted access to the interactions between Alžběta and her son. Aside from the argumentative nature of their relationship, the image replayed in my mind most often (which I was aware could in no way be a comprehensive representation of the power dynamics between them) was of Alex sprawled on the floor in front of Alžběta’s television in his undershirt and builder’s trousers, only moving to lift up his arm to accept the bottle of beer that his mother had just opened for him, all the while not ungluing his eyes from the episode of *X-Factor* that was being aired. Rolling her eyes, Alžběta sighed. “Well, you know, Václav would like to live with me someday. He’s married, but it is a difficult situation. His wife is very *šeredná* (Cz. ugly)...she has *vousy* (Cz. whiskers)! She is quite mean too. She is an alcoholic, and so she is in bad health. Because his wife drinks a lot, just like my husband did, we understand each other quite well. She is so grumpy and ugly that I don’t blame him for having had other lovers besides me while he’s been married. He is afraid of having to deal with Alex though. He told me, ‘I’m not going to just stand by and do nothing if your son starts being disrespectful towards you.’ He is afraid that he will get in a fight with Alex. So, you are one of the only people I’ve told about Václav. I know you won’t talk about it with anyone else here, but other women – no! They’ll just tell everyone! Now *Natašo*, tell me what happened with you and your *přítel*.”

Even though I always corrected her, Alžběta still referred to Paul as my *přítel* rather than my *kamarád*, almost as if she could turn her wish into reality. “Well *nic se nestalo*” (Cz. Nothing happened). This gave Alžběta a start. “What do you mean *nic se nestalo*? That isn’t possible!”

“Like I explained before, I went to London for two days, and I was staying in his dorm room. Because he only has one bed, we had to share it. He offered to sleep on the floor, but I told him not to worry because I didn’t want him to be uncomfortable in his own room.” Alžběta was clearly disappointed at how my report was beginning, and her raised eyebrows and wide eyes betrayed her lingering hopes. “And?” she asked me. “And nothing! It was the same during the next two nights. We got into bed, we said good night to each other, and then we went to sleep.”

“*Natašo, ne, ne, ne.*” Alžběta shook her head at me pitifully, as if I had been the victim of a major insult. “*Není normální* (Cz. It isn’t normal)! There is something wrong with this guy. Listen. When I was in Prague this last week, Václav had drunk too much to drive home. He asked if he could sleep in my apartment. I was worried of course, but I couldn’t let him drive. I told him, ‘Okay, you can come up, but you are sleeping on the couch.’ When we got upstairs, I got into my bed and he was on the couch. But just after I closed my eyes, all of a sudden I felt these little kisses on my shoulders and arms. Václav had gotten into bed with me! I asked him, ‘What are you doing? Get back on that couch!’ And he said, ‘*Ne ne Alžběto.* I promise I won’t try anything! I just want to be next to you.’” Chuckling, Alžběta suddenly remembered the point she had meant to make. “But you see, Václav and I are old! I’m old and he’s old, but he still wanted to kiss me and touch me! *Natašo*, you are a young, pretty girl, and I’ve seen the pictures you’ve shown me of your guy. I remember because when I first saw the pictures, I thought he was a Rom! He is very handsome too. Do you see how this doesn’t make sense? Two good-looking people, alone together, in a bed! And he tries nothing! He doesn’t even try to kiss you! *Není normální.* I think you need to find another guy. Go out! Meet other people your

age and have fun. Don't wait around for him, because I think that he has a psychological problem." Alžběta tapped her temple. "*Natašo*, I'm telling you, I think he's gay.<sup>112</sup> *Fakt*."

"*Alžběto!* He's had two serious girlfriends! He even lived with one of them for a few years. He isn't gay!" Alžběta remained unconvinced. "You can never be sure about these things. Maybe he did like girls, but now he likes men! Maybe he's confused, and he doesn't know which he wants. Look - there is a guy who lives in Skála. He plays on the same football team as Alex and Petr. I know he's gay because he told me once, when he was drunk. You remember how I told you about the pub I had downstairs? Because I worked at the bar, people would tell me all sorts of secrets. They knew that they could trust me, and I heard a lot about people's personal lives. This guy told me that no one else knows that he is gay. No one would ever guess it either; he acts quite masculine, he dresses like the other men, and he has the same interests. He is too afraid to tell anyone though. So you see, it's hard to tell. And anyway, you told me that Paul is a good dresser and that he likes to clean his flat. Yes, you remember my words! He's gay."

Slightly exasperated, I finally shrugged my shoulders. "Well, maybe you're right. Anything is possible. But couldn't it be that he just isn't attracted to me? Maybe he just likes me *platonicky*, and nothing more. Or maybe because he is slightly older than me, he thinks of me as a little sister. Not everyone has the same ideas of what is attractive and what isn't." Alžběta persisted. "No, it isn't possible." I thought of another angle to try.

"So what you're telling me is that every man you've ever known has found you attractive

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<sup>112</sup> Alžběta's typical reaction to homosexuality, or more specifically to gay men, was to giggle or engage in effeminate posing, such as when we were discussing Světlana's hairdresser. On another occasion when she brought up Paul's probable sexual confusion, she said, "You know, I just don't understand how all these celebrities and musicians are lesbian or gay. I'm afraid that in twenty years, there won't be any children anymore, or that there will only be children because women have been artificially inseminated. Gay or lesbian - it's only about sex! I don't get it."

and has wanted to sleep with you? Haven't you ever liked a man who only wanted to be your friend?" Alžběta looked down at the table as she scanned her memory. "Well, yes of course. But even if they didn't want me to be their girlfriend, they still would have liked to have had sex with me!"

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Alžběta's *non sequitur* logic about my friend – 'he doesn't try to have sexual contact with you, therefore he must be gay' – demonstrates her belief that unless mentally unbalanced, gay or impotent, a man wants to have sex with an attractive woman. Whether her status as a woman who has been persistently sought after sexually is reality or is a matter of self-interpretation, Alžběta's verbal presentation of herself as such reveals the importance of male adoration to her as a way to reinforce her self-image as attractive and desirable woman. Simultaneously, when the demonstrations of male physicality that she expects are successfully garnered, she is seemingly reluctant to reciprocate in kind.

Alžběta's reticence was acutely demonstrated in our subsequent discussions about Václav. Despite Václav's initially meek displays of affection, which Alžběta interpreted as tokens of his true respect for her, as the weeks of their relationship together wore on, his growing keenness about sexual intercourse (and Alžběta's protests against it) became a mounting source of tension between them. Alžběta's physical rejection of Václav, his feelings of inadequacy deriving from his inability to financially provide for her (e.g. paying for dates and gifts), as well as his sense of entrapment within an inescapable marriage to an alcoholic and wheelchair bound invalid all coalesced into Václav's alcohol-induced displays of jealousy, suspicion and depression. During our visits,

Alžběta's comments about the intensity of Václav's affection oscillated between a giddy sense of satisfaction over his public displays of lovesickness and his private displays of sexual excitement, and an intense fear that his drinking and depression would ultimately impact her life in a duplicate manner to that of her husband Aleš,

The 'honeymoon' period of their courtship was short-lived, and it was effectively at an end less than a month after she first revealed Václav's disjointed photograph to me. "Things have been bad," she admitted with a long sigh, "and I'm not really sure what to do about it. I actually haven't spoken with him in the past few days. It's his *trest* (Cz. punishment)!" She briefly chuckled at this idea, but quickly returned to pensiveness. "When I was in Prague last week, I told him that I would see him the following day. I already had plans to meet up with one of Václav's friends. When he found out that this was why I hadn't met with him as soon as I arrived, he got really angry with me. He came to my apartment late at night, completely drunk and making a bunch of noise outside on the sidewalk. He accused me of cheating on him. I told him that he has no right to be jealous given that *he* is the one who is still married. I decided to let him in because I was afraid someone would call the police, but that was a mistake. I thought we could talk about it, but he just continued to yell, saying that there could be no other man in my life but him. I finally slapped him across the face and told him to get out. He sped off in his car, but then he came back a few minutes later. He called me from his mobile phone and said he was outside and that he just wanted to apologize. He was crying and saying, 'Please please, I need you! I'm sorry!' I just told him to leave me alone, and then I hung up on him. He keeps calling me, but I don't answer. A few of my relatives work with him in construction. One of them called me and told me that they think Václav's

gone slightly crazy! They are quite concerned; they tell me that they are afraid he's going to hurt himself by accident because he's walking around in a complete daze. I don't know...He frightens me. He is really reminding me of Aleš. And it's not just the drinking. Sometimes Václav uses the same words as my husband, and he even has the same facial expressions and mannerisms. It's really strange! But you know, this isn't the first time he has accused me of seeing other men. Before this, when we would talk to each other on the phone in the evenings, when he would hear music on the television in the background, he would accuse me of being out somewhere with another man instead of being at home! When I would tell him that it isn't true, he would call me a liar."

Following some negotiations, she began to see Václav again. "Do you know what happened when I saw him a few days ago?" she said during a subsequent visit. "Václav and I were in the car, talking, and all of a sudden he jumped onto me and started kissing me! And do you know what I did? I smacked him and put out my hand for him to kiss instead!" Laughing at this mental image, I said to her, "So is this more *trest*?" She giggled. "Yes! But you see, this reminds me of what I was saying to you before about your *přítel* because....well, did I ever tell you about the first time Václav kissed me? We were in my apartment, and all at once he grabbed me. As he was kissing me, it suddenly felt like something was on my leg. I jumped back and said, 'What is *that*?' Václav was smiling, and then I saw that it was his, well...." Alžběta lowered her voice to a whisper. "His *penis*, you know? He looked really proud of himself! He said, 'What do you mean, *what is it*? You're like a virgin!' I had to explain to him that it's been a long time since I've had sex – more than fifteen years! He couldn't believe it! He still has sex with his

wife even though she is so ugly. So, believe me *Natašo*, that friend of yours *není normální*.”

Alžběta’s insistence on the impossibility of there being a heterosexual man who does not want (and therefore try) to have physical relations with a woman doesn’t impede her from trying to be ‘just friends’ with a man. In fact, she prefers male rather than female friends.

*The reason that I don’t have female friends is because I have been disappointed by people in the past, so I have a hard time trusting women now. My friends are my daughters. Like the woman I was talking to just now, Eva – she isn’t a friend. We were just having some light conversation. We are just talking “blah blah blah.” I’ll tell her some things, but there are other things that I wouldn’t tell her. I wouldn’t speak with her the way I am speaking with you right now. For instance, she’ll say to me, “Do you have a boyfriend?” I’ll say, “No, I don’t,” or that it is still too soon after my husband’s death for me to have a boyfriend, or that I don’t think that I should meet anyone new because I don’t want to upset my children, or that I just don’t want to. I don’t tell her the truth. We don’t go out anywhere together. I have a car, and I am sure she would like to go out somewhere to sit and chat and have coffee, but I actually think that she is quite sneaky. She always wants me to pay for things.*

*I’m afraid of secrecy. I’m afraid because in my youth, my girlfriend betrayed me and turned my life upside down. Have you read *Count of Monte Cristo*? It was similar to that – with letters. Jiří thought I didn’t want him, and I thought he didn’t want me because my friend hid the letters that he sent to me. My friend’s mother was away at the time, but when she returned, she found the letters that her daughter had stashed away. By that time, I was already married to Aleš.*

*So, from this period of time onwards, I didn’t want any female friends, and nowadays I really pick and choose who I trust. I only have *známosti* too (Cz. acquaintances). My friends from work are really just *známosti*. They are fantastic people. But I like my male acquaintances more because I can tell them things and I know that they won’t repeat it. But a woman will be like, “blah blah blah.” [laughing] Well this is the way it is. We are women! I would say that I only have one acquaintance who I can speak to about my personal life, and it is a man who really advises and counsels me.*

*We women immediately judge each other. Do you know why? Because we envy each other. What she has, the other doesn’t have. She can go out and have fun, but the other can’t. So she will go home and call the other woman a *kurva* because she is afraid of her. She’ll yell about how she isn’t allowed to go out*

*because she is jealous. Women are like this. We envy each other's free time, clothes, dresses.... Well, I don't! But for men, it doesn't matter what type of clothes you have.*

*Women don't want to argue with each other, so they'll say "Ahoj! How are you? Where are you going? Come and have some coffee!" And then later, they call the woman who they invited for coffee a cow. The mentality is that people don't want to be bad. They want to be nice, but then they do otherwise. I also want to be nice. If I didn't take heed of this mentality, then I would probably say similar things, like "She's so conceited." Then that woman would hear about it and come argue with me. Get it? If there is a woman who is always at home, I'll stop by her place and see how she is doing. I'll compliment her. It's a type of decorum. We Roma have this mentality, but Czechs really aren't any different. It just happens that we are always more grouped together. We yell more too, so Czechs always think that we are arguing. But we aren't. We are neighbors, so we have to get along. We also have this mentality because we live in a small town. Skála is a little place. Everyone knows everyone so you must be good. It doesn't work well if you aren't friendly.*

*I have lots of female acquaintances with whom I enjoy myself outside. Like Kamila. She is an acquaintance of mine because we are relatives. We will make jokes with each other – you know, like gags – because we knew each other as young people. But in the family, it isn't quite the same as with other friends. She'll tell me lots of things, but I don't do the same with her. Lots of people tell me discreet things because they know that I am trustworthy. I had a pub, and many times I saw people telling lies but I didn't say anything about it to anyone. I forgive people because I don't want to create unpleasantness.*

*You see for yourself that I don't have girlfriends. You've seen how in a year and a half, I have had few people here to visit. If I had such a friend she could stay here with me and sleep over. I don't have a single girlfriend like that because I've been greatly disappointed throughout my whole life. That one betrayal turned me inside out. I don't want any. I'd rather have male friends. They are better.*

*That one male acquaintance, that one friend of mine, lives far away. He is a true friend, really he is. I'll call him when I need something, or he'll call me. When we meet up, we'll sit down and talk. We help each other out a lot. He has a gorgeous young wife. She's more than twenty years younger than him. Actually, he has always been in love with me, but I always tell him no. He isn't my type. When he first told me his feelings, my husband was still alive and healthy. I was probably thirty years old at the time. He wanted us to see each other, but I told him, "No, I am married and I don't want anyone else." After that, we continued to see each other and have fun as friends. He kept trying! But I kept saying no. And now, you see, we have known each other many years. He is a Don Juan but he isn't good looking. He only dates younger women. Actually he and his wife aren't married, but they live together and they have children.*



*Just the other day, he called me. He said that he and his wife had argued about something, and so I gave him some women's advice about his wife and children. Then he said to me, "When are you finally going to accept me?" I said, "When I was thirty, forty and fifty years old, I said no. When I am sixty and seventy, I'll still say no. And then after that, we'll be dead!"*

*I believe it is better that we remain friends because he really understands me. He has me, he has a girlfriend and he has a beautiful wife. And he is always having affairs with different women. He carries on in this way and he'll ask, "Do you like her?" I'll say, "She isn't attractive" or "That one is nice-looking". Things like that. So we have fun together like good friends.*

*Natasha: But actually, that isn't quite friendship because it isn't platonic. He has romantic feelings towards you, right?*

*He does, but I don't know, perhaps it isn't the same as with his girlfriends. He still has a wife, but when he brings a new girlfriend to show me, I'll say if she is pretty or not. I am glad that he has good-looking girlfriends because he is rather ugly, but when he speaks and when he is with you, he understands you very well. He can enjoy himself with anything. He has charisma.*

*When I've asked him, "Why do you keep looking when you have such a gentle and beautiful young wife?" he has said to me, "You know why? Because she is very young. I can't carry her through the rest of her life. I'm old. In a few years I'll be sixty, but she'll only be in her thirties. I know that she will want a younger man. That's normal. This is why I don't want to marry her. I am giving her her freedom because I know that this time will eventually come. When it does, I want a wife of stability, someone who is clever and intelligent, like you!" He always says to me, "It's going to be you." I laugh because I think he is just being funny. I'll say, "Why don't you choose another women, someone who is older?" And he'll say, "Well, it's because they are after my money." He was the first man that his wife ever slept with, and so she went a little crazy with him. She got pregnant, and because she had been decent before she met him, he decided to help bring up the child. Sometimes I laugh and say, "If I would come to you, you would take me at once!" But I never tell him to wait for me. I don't know. I appreciate him, but I just don't think I could live with him. I love him as a friend.*

*Sometimes it is difficult not to have a girlfriend to talk to because I am human and I have problems of my own. We all have the need to tell someone about things that bother us because everybody hurts sometimes. We all ask ourselves if we are crazy or not, and then we want someone to talk to. That's the truth. Someone who says that they don't need anyone isn't telling the truth. We are people and we must. Do you remember when I was very upset and I talked about it with you? I felt better afterwards, and it made sense for me to tell you because I know you*

*won't repeat it. But when you leave, Skála, I will not have anyone to tell these things to.*

*You trust your mother as someone to talk to. Likewise, I speak a lot with my daughters, but I don't tell them everything. Not discreet things. My daughters tell me a lot, Vera more so than Ludmila. But they don't tell me about discreet things anymore. Vera and Ludmila are friends with each other too, and they'll ask each other what is the matter. They'll talk about work and family. But I don't think they tell each other private things. It's not that they don't trust each other, but they are just too embarrassed. They are bashful.*

*Svetlana doesn't really have girlfriends either. She doesn't have a lot of friends because – I don't know – she was with me a lot of the time when she was younger, so she didn't need friends. Now she has a boyfriend, so again she thinks she doesn't need friends. But I believe that, as a consequence, she solves her problems badly. She doesn't have any friends, and when bad things happen, she solves her problems in an ugly way. I won't discuss it further, but I think that she really didn't have a friend when it was necessary. After she broke up with a boy she used to date, she healed herself all alone. It was bad. Those people who commit suicide...they are alone. They don't have friends. And that is the same type of person as Svetlana. She doesn't want to communicate. When she is sad, she wants to be alone.*

Zdeňka's similar lack of trust in women and orientation towards her children as a source of friendship came up one day when, during a lull in our conversation, we heard Alžběta's voice coming from outside the kitchen window. Zdeňka got up to peek outside, and she whispered to me, "Look! There is Petr's lover sitting in the garden with Alžběta! There, with the black t-shirt!" I recognized that it was Eva, and up until this point, I had had no inkling that she was one of Petr's girlfriends. "I suffered the most during his affair with her. Petr was going around with her for seven years, but he agreed to leave her because of the new baby. But now he has a new lover, only this time she is a younger woman than me. Eva is just an old cow. Her husband is dead and Petr spent money on her."

“Well *Zdenko*, I never would have guessed that she was the one Petr was sleeping with! Alžběta seemed to be disgusted about the whole thing, yet they hang out together? I don’t get people here! People speak very badly of one another, but they just act like everything is great when they are around each other.” Zdeňka laughed. “Yes, exactly! You see the way people here really are! There are a lot of actors nowadays. I don’t have a reason to be false towards you or you towards me. It’s understood that we are friends and we’ll tell each other things. You confide in me about certain things, and I confide in you. That is *důvera* (Cz. trust). Why act false towards me? If am speaking with you, would it be nice if I turned around and talked about you with someone else? Would it be nice if I am speaking with you, and then you go to Alžběta say bad things about me? Why should I have fun at your expense, or you at my expense? Friendship means helping someone in times of emergency. I’ll help that person and she will help me. You just recognize who’s a friend – like you and me. I know that you would help me in an emergency, and if you would be too ashamed to ask for help but you were in need, I would come and help you right away.”

“As a young girl I had lots of friends, but then you grow up, and what happens is that friendships evaporate. They just go away because you don’t have time. Věra and Ludmila are my friends, and if I would have money like they do, I could be a good friend in return. I only ask for their help sometimes, you see? Vera is a fine friend, and Ludmila is good too, but at a distance. She keeps her distance more.” She paused. “I guess my real friends are my children. They say that today, your friends are your family. Look – I had a few girlfriends who were nice in the beginning, but in the end, they went off with my husband. A girlfriend will always mess things up – always! Today friendship costs a lot. I

choose whom to trust and whom not to trust, but nowadays, they say that you shouldn't believe in your own shirt, because you can't be certain of what you really have. You don't know what lies beyond. You can't trust anyone today. But I have faith! It's just that you have to recognize over time who you can trust. When someone says, "Trust me," I take a closer look before I do. Some people are mean and they just use you. But I trust you Natasha, so you must not tell other people things about me, do you understand?"

### iii. "I once had a lover...a Czech boyfriend."

Following Alžběta's conclusion about Paul's sexual orientation, during a chat with Zdeňka over tea, I asked her, "Don't you think that is silly? Just because he doesn't try anything with me doesn't mean he is gay!" Zdeňka shook her head. "No, actually I agree with her."

"But *Zdeňko*, don't you have male friends?" She shook her head vigorously. "No! *U nás Romové* that doesn't happen. Okay, so maybe when he is the husband of one of your friends, you'll say "*ahoj*" or "*jak se máš*" (Cz. How are you?) – but that's it. As for a male friend with whom I could go and have a cup of coffee, no, that doesn't exist. It's because you don't trust them; that is, you are bashful and you are afraid that people will say that you are lovers. It's fine if he already has a girlfriend or a wife, and you also have someone. Then it is okay for him to be your friend. But if you are friends with a man and you are sitting in his home or something, you are afraid that he will think that you are an easy woman. It's stupid, but that's the way it works with us, and that's the truth. Look. My mother went to work, and my father was jealous because he thought she had some sort of male friends. It was quite bad because he hit her because of it. And of course it

wasn't true! How could it be? She had to come home from work, cook, clean, and then go to work again in the morning. When would she have had the time? It isn't a good idea to keep a lot of male friends around you because then your husband will turn around and have a lot of female friends. You have to be careful with that."

"But don't you think it's a pity that you aren't friends with men? Sometimes men think about things differently than women, and maybe it is nice to have their opinion." She thought for a moment. "I don't know because I don't know what it is like to have one. Sure, as a little girl I had friends who were boys because I was free. We played together outside and such. But it isn't like that now because my husband prevents me from doing that."

"But I once had a lover... a Czech boyfriend," she continued. "Unlike my husband, he was a kind man. With Petr, there is always something to deal with. I am always, always, always waiting for what is going to come next. David, the Czech guy, was different because he actually had conversations with me. My husband doesn't do that. Few Romani men chat with their wives, like over coffee for example. Czech men will chat, but most Romani men don't know how. Of course, when I was first dating Petr, he was really nice! We talked all the time - about how it was when we were growing up, about how it was when we were in school. We talked about our worries. I talked to him about my family - lots of things!"

"Why did you decide to have an affair with David?" I asked. Zdeňka smiled demurely as she fixed her eyes on the kitchen table below. "I don't know," she laughed. "I wanted to try him! I wanted to see what type he would be. He was a sailor in France, and he wanted me to go there and live with him. I would have gone too. I only had Erika,

and she was young – only four years old. He really loved her too. It was only because I didn't have Czech citizenship that I didn't go with him; I had Slovak citizenship. If I had had that Czech citizenship, I would have tried to get a divorce from Petr so that I could be with David. If not for the fact that they hadn't wanted to give me a Czech passport, I would be in France today.”

“I met him when he was here to visit his sister; he was on holiday for two months. He came from Brno. He told me that he called his mother and father there, and he told them that he had met a girl who he really liked, but that she was of Romani origin. He even presented me to his mother!” Zdeňka laughed. “When I wanted go to meet him, usually I would ask my parents to look after Erika. At that time, I was living at my parents' place in Skála-Rudnina.<sup>113</sup> I had a flat, but I was alone because Petr had left me and gone back to his first wife. My father said, “I don't want you to stay there alone. Stay at my place.” I said okay. It made sense because mother and father were still going to work, and I was always going there to cook and clean for them anyway.”

“There was a little pub near my parents' place, so my mother, father and I would often sit outside and drink lemonade. I met David for the first time when we were there one day. I caught him staring at me. He was watching me and watching me! I was so embarrassed. Aaaahh! I was blushing! I got up to go to the restroom because I was so embarrassed, and when I was in there, he wrote me a note on the back of a pub ticket and put it on my table. When I returned to the table, I looked at it. It said: “I am sitting opposite from you. My name is David,” etc, etc. And it said, “Write something back to me!” So I wrote back, “ I'm not interested. I'm married.” So he wrote back, “Oh *pardon*.

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<sup>113</sup> An area of Skála that is on the outskirts of the municipality.

I apologize.” Then he wrote me another note that said, “But let’s go on a date anyway!” Zdeňka cupped her hand over her forehead as she laughed; clearly she was reliving the feelings of shyness and excitement that she had experienced as a twenty-two year old. “Back then, I was very pretty. I was quite thin because when Petr left me to go back to his first wife, I became very depressed. I cried a lot. I was suffering, but even so, I looked very good! My hair was long.... I’ll show you a photo of how I looked then!” Zdeňka hurried out of the kitchen and came back a moment later with a photo of her and Erika as a four year old. “I gave this picture to David so he would remember me.”

“And Petr never found out?” I asked. “ Oh! I don’t know....but this is our secret!” she whispered. “*Natašo* don’t tell anyone!” Zdeňka paused for a moment before continuing. “I ran into David once again, ten years after we had been together. I had Adela and Miloš by that point in time. I was alone with the children because Petr was in the clink for two years for assaulting a police officer. It was a Sunday, and we had gone to the square for some ice cream. David was there buying ice cream with his sister, but I didn’t recognize him. What I noticed was that this man kept looking at me! Finally he said, ‘Excuse me? Miss?’ And I said, ‘Yes? What is it?’ And he said, ‘*Zdenko*? Don’t you recognize me?’ And I said, ‘No...’ Zdeňka laughed. Really! He was still handsome though, very handsome! He said, ‘It’s me, David? Remember?’ And I was like, ‘Oh no!’ I was embarrassed! I only spoke with him for a half hour and then I left. I never saw him again after that.”

#### IV. Coming Full Circle

Alžběta and Zdeňka are different women. However, certain thematic elements of their narratives about their relationships with men, such as their reticence towards (or outright rejection of) men's initial romantic or sexual overtures, the emphasis they place upon their sexual inexperience with men as young women, and a focus on men's general inclination towards sexual polygamy parallel one another, a reality which stems from the persisting relevancy of certain cultural ideas to Romani women in Skála. Interestingly, their narratives contain similarly lukewarm feelings about their friendships with women, even though Zdeňka's financial circumstances are so much less secure (a factor which should prompt her to enter into a process of swapping, borrowing and loaning with other women). Their friendships with their children are equally as limited, although perhaps for different reasons; Zdeňka's children are too young to be informed about some of their mother's adult problems, and Alžběta is uncomfortable with sharing certain pieces of information with her adult daughters (she wishes to keep her activities private not only because they are personal, but because she doesn't want to cause them worry).

Their spatial proximity to one another, their communication with one another, as well as their exposure over time to similar cultural 'materials' contributes to the similarities between them, and as a result, within their individual life stories and their conversations about romantic love, sex and marriage is a collective, gendered, Skála-specific narrative. However, perhaps more so than their narrative engagement on other topics, their narratives about men are more 'personal' – not only in terms of the secrecy surrounding the subject matter, but also in terms of how reflective their narratives are of ethnically marked, 'Romani' cultural values. More specifically, Alžběta and Zdeňka have



both experienced much disappointment, frustration, trauma, and physical and emotional pain during their romantic relationships with men, but they have also experienced moments of infatuation, humor, respect, pleasure and companionship. Based on the context in which their social interactions with others take place, they can decry troublesome aspects of ‘the nature of men’ and/or emphasize that it is the ‘nature of women’ to need the ‘love’ of a man – romance, passion, sex, and demonstrations of affection (all of which should take place within a monogamous arrangement). Based on social context, many of these cultural ideas *can become* ethnically marked as well. In this chapter, I have suggested that ‘rare’ social events and ‘rare’ people are easier to recall from one’s memory stores, and in such cases, the actions of a few can be amplified into stereotypes of the social group (or one of the social groups) to which the observed individuals belong (or are thought to belong). It can be ‘the nature of men’ *or* ‘the nature of *Romani* men’ that Alžběta and Zdeňka find so wearisome.

Their interpretations of ‘decent’ male and female conduct are also very circumstantially contingent. A teenage girl’s or young woman’s sexual activity can be looked at as completely decent and ‘normal’ or utterly shameful and ‘irregular’ depending on the circumstances. As far as Alžběta and Zdeňka are concerned, they regard it as completely normal and acceptable for an eighteen-year-old girl to be having a sexual relationship, but it should be done quietly, monogamously and in the best case scenario, with a ‘good guy’. Alžběta told me that it isn’t only her interest in maintaining tradition that causes her to insist on their marriage; unlike other Roma in Skála, who avoid marriage in large part due to the lessening effect it has on the amount of social benefits they can claim, neither Světlana’s nor Radek’s families receive benefits. The

Prochazka's interest in a wedding not only stems from their concern about Světlana's (and therefore the family's) reputation as being 'decent', but also from their interest in making their secure financial status evident on a public stage.

Alžběta's and Zdeňka's ongoing receptiveness to 'love' is perhaps facilitated by the fact that they blame their husbands' faults on their unique temperaments, their husbands' weak wills and/or their Romani mentality (Zdeňka) rather than on the idea that 'men are like that'. Their narrative journeys of reminiscence reveal themselves to be incongruent, however. Alžběta's was one of forgiveness. During my first few months in the field, Alžběta spoke about her husband and his violent behavior in very blunt, raw and uncomplimentary terms, almost bordering on venomous. Then after four or five months had passed, Alžběta suddenly began to speak about Aleš in a new way. Rather than elaborating upon her years of torment, she chose to dwell upon Aleš's pre-alcoholic years, during which time he was known by Skála's Roma as an unusually doting father and as a husband who was uncharacteristically empathetic to his wife. Zdeňka has never attempted to portray Petr's husbandly actions as consisting of anything other than adultery, drinking, physical abuse, financial neglect of his children and emotional coldness towards her. She persisted in mourning her husband's absence from the home, both in terms of her feelings of rejection as a woman who had ceased to be physically desired by her husband and her regret over Petr's complete lack of interest in his children's welfare. During my visits, she would tearfully ask why he loved his girlfriends instead of her and why he treated her so badly even when she tried so hard to be a good wife. Zdeňka would use these moments as a springboard for warning me against choosing a mean boyfriend or husband; at the same time, she could easily launch into

admonitions about how I shouldn't live life without a man – as she now had to do – because we women all need romance in our lives.

Zdeňka's eventual decision to file for divorce was motivated by financial necessity more than by her desire to do so. “You know what *Natašo?*” she said to me one time as she broke down into tears. “For me, it isn’t good that I’ve applied for a divorce. For me it’s still very hard. I still love him because we have children together.” If not for Petr's decision to move in with his girlfriend and his complete monetary neglect of his children, Zdeňka would have continued to live with him despite his frequently abusive behavior towards her because, realistically speaking, there would have been no way for her to escape her marriage even if she had wanted to. As a product of the Czech special school system and as the mother of three young children and a newborn baby, Zdeňka had neither the time nor the educational qualifications to find steady employment. Even at the time of my departure from Skála, she had not given up hope that Petr might some day come back to her. Besides her wish that her children receive an education, Zdeňka stated that her major hope for the future was that her husband might ‘improve himself’ or that she would meet a different man who would be kind to her children.

For Alžběta, even after she was able to forgive Aleš and remember him for his good qualities, she continued to feel his presence in both good and bad ways. His later years as a wife-batterer and drinker contributed to her difficulty in completely opening herself up to subsequent suitors, while his good characteristics as a father and husband made it difficult for Alžběta to find another man who could measure up to her standards. Moreover, unlike Aleš, her love interests have not been as patient with her in terms of taking things slowly in the sexual arena. Despite these conflicts, Alžběta has

demonstrated that she isn't willing to trade in her expectations of a 'good man' just for the procurement of male companionship. In fact, by the end of my stay in Skála, Alžběta mostly extricated herself from regular contact with Václav until he would agree to leave his wife and get his monetary affairs in order. Whether or not Alžběta stuck to either of these resolutions in the long-term is unknown, but the articulation of her standards demonstrates her strong drive to find happiness in the way she wants.

I will close this chapter with my last recorded conversation with Alžběta because it illustrates how her contemplations about past, present and future events work in unison. Alžběta doesn't live in an 'endless present' any more than the past holds complete control over her present and future actions or the future is something that she feels she can predict. Her temporal orientation cannot be classified in just one category, for all three are irrevocably intertwined.

*N: What do you want in the future? Do you often think about it?*

*A: The future, huh? Well, when my husband was still alive, we had a lot of problems together. My husband was such a big hindrance that I couldn't do many things because of him. I wished that my husband would leave me. I thought my world would be better, and that maybe I could be happy and he could be happy too. But the truth is always different. We are always imagining the future differently. My husband left – he died - and now I am alone. I see that, on the contrary, it is worse to be alone. It is harder. In the future I imagined, everything was supposed to be better. But it is the opposite. I imagined that when I would be alone, everything would be light and easy. I thought that I would go out a lot, to restaurants and things like that, but this isn't fun for me anymore. It is still too soon for me. All of a sudden I know that I can go out, yet I don't want to. When you have freedom, you don't want it because you know that you can live as you like. So, the future isn't how I had imagined. When someone leaves you all of a sudden, your whole system changes. All of your plans change. He has been gone a year and a half, and life is completely different.*

*But my wish for the future is that I will find a very good and very kind man. I know that he will not only be good and kind because problems will come up. This is normal. But you wish for life to be better, and so I also think about my children and what they will have, like every mother or grandmother wishes. I know that life will not always*

*be easy, and I have to wrestle with that fact, but I believe that I should experience one year of happiness. During the last fifteen years of torment I went through with my husband, this is what I wished for – at least one year of happiness. Because the future will not only be good; obstacles always arise.*

*N: I remember that when I first came to Skála, you only had bad memories of your husband. But then gradually you spoke of him as a good father and a kind husband. What changed your mind?*

*If my husband had been bad from the beginning, I would have left him. It was gradual. He was a wonderful father and husband until he was thirty-eight years old. Wonderful! I respected him a lot and I really looked up to him. But that isn't love. Respect is something different from love. He was a handsome man. He was a kind and good person. He worked and he never went around with other women. He gave everything to his children. But then when he lost his job, he began to be cruel. This is the reason why right after he died, I forgot that he had been good. He had killed all the good memories I had of him. I thought that he had always treated me badly. In speaking of him this way, I wronged him.*

*But now some time has passed, and this is why I can say that he was a good husband. It's because I've had calm. All at once it was quiet without him because he had been like a volcano. With him, there was always something! But I am a human being, and every person eventually returns to what was previously experienced. Now it's all coming back to me. I don't know - maybe it is because I haven't found someone else yet! Maybe that's why I miss him.*

*I don't like going to the cemetery with my children. They have accepted that I don't like to go there with them because when I do, I have terrible physical reactions that I cannot deal with. Instead, I'll go to the attic where all of his things are in storage, like his clothes and pillows. I'll sit there and chat with him, I'll cry, and then I'll feel better. When I go there, I realize that I miss him. For one year and three months I couldn't cry. Now I can. If he calls to me, I'll go upstairs and we'll talk. Then afterwards I'll feel better.*

*If I told you that my future would be such and such, it wouldn't go according to plan. It simply doesn't work that way. We are human. You can wish. You can say, "Yes I'll go to work and I'll have this type of job," but maybe you will not have the type of job you want. Maybe you won't have a job at all, and because you aren't going to work, you can't buy things to make your life different. This affects you.*

*N: Maybe you don't want to hope because you don't want to be disappointed.*

*I do have hopes. Everyone has wishes. Everyone wants to be loved and give love. Me too. But I am afraid because at my age it is different than it is at your age Natašo. At my age, anyone can die just like that. I would be terribly disappointed if I found someone to love and then he died. It would be very difficult for me if I found someone*

*to love in my 70s, and then he decided that he wanted a different woman. I am afraid of that too. I also fear that I'll never find anyone and that my children will have to take me. I am already alone a lot of the time, and I am afraid that when Světlana gets married, then I will be completely alone. Ah! But I don't want to think about that! I don't want to think about such a black future.*

*I would like to meet someone and be with him. As I was telling you, when I went back to Slovakia to visit my old village, I met a man who wanted to marry me right away! When I arrived there, I was pleasantly surprised. There was a beautiful highway with overpasses and roundabouts. There are lots of Penny Markets and Lidl's<sup>114</sup>, just like here. I thought there would be nothing, like how it was when I was a little girl. And somehow I thought that the girls there would still be wearing long skirts and dresses, but they are wearing body piercings and modern clothes, miniskirts and shorts. Anyway, the man I met wanted to come back to Skála with me. He is a widower and totally alone. He is quite handsome too, tall with dark hair. But he is so lonesome that he doesn't look after himself, so he is too thin and he isn't clean, You know, men don't learn how to take care of themselves.*

*He and my niece are neighbors in the same panelak, so she showed me pictures of him as a younger man. He was handsome, clean and trim. A frajer! She said, "Look! Look at how he used to be! He is at the bottom of the barrel because he doesn't have a wife to look after him." When he asked me to marry him, I said, "You must do this sort of thing all the time!" He said to me, "I've had lots of women, but I really like you." And I said, "But you didn't ask if I like you! I can't move so quickly. It won't work. You have to wait." And he said, "No, no, no!" And then I said, "No, no, no!" [laughing] Maybe if he would come here, and we went out and got to know each other a little better...Maybe then. But slowly! He told me, "I've fallen in love! I am completely crazy for you!" And I said, "Good! So write to me." And he said, "No! I want to be with you now!" And I said, "No! It won't work."*

*And then just a few days ago, when I was at a music festival in Ústí nad Labem with Věra, Ludmila and Alex, I met a different man. He was well-dressed and handsome with a nice car. Just super! He said to me "Pani, where is the party here?" Alex and I were looking for the same party, so he said, "I'll look with you." So we got there, and he went up besides me at the bar and said, "What will you have?" I said, "I already have what I bought for myself." And he said, "No, don't have that. I'll buy you something." And I said, "I don't even know you!" It turns out that he is the uncle of Julka, my kamarádka from Prague. He already knew everything about me because I was the moderator of the festival, and when he saw me speaking at the podium along with my daughters, he asked Julka, "Who is that?" So then he sat at the table with us and talked. He liked me a lot!*

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<sup>114</sup> Supermarket chains.

*The children liked him too because he was well-dressed and had lots of gold. He had everything!*

*I liked him, but...I know that these men just like conversing with me, but that isn't how I want love. My husband and I weren't happy for fifteen years, so I really wish that I could have someone to be besides me. Do you know what I mean? I don't want the type of man who is only after sex! No, no, no! I want someone who is understanding, someone who will be there for me when I am ill or when I need help, someone who will be besides me when I wake up in the morning. One and two, we will help each other out and love each other. There doesn't have to be sex or that sort of thing because I am older. I just want us to help each other, to appreciate one another and to love one another.*

*That is the future I dream of... I don't know. Sometimes I think that it is still too early for me to be so gloomy. But then again, I am afraid. I am really afraid. And there have already been so many years that I haven't had any fun! I would really like to live! Then I could stop and say, "Hmm. Maybe this is what I have been waiting for!" It doesn't have to be this way, but maybe it could be!*

*N: When you think back over your life, do you think that it has been a good one?*

*It is truly difficult to say! That is a difficult question. [Long pause] Hmm. Well, as you know, I was disappointed by Jiří. I imagined a different life with him after we saw each other after so many years. Maybe it is good that it turned out this way because I realized that this person, my first love, was completely bad. He is a completely different person than I thought. Still, I would like to experience that love that I imagined I would have with him.*

*On the other hand, I can't say that my life has been bad. Unlike how it was with my husband, there are many women whose husbands don't give them any money, whose husbands have been fooling around with other women from the start. I didn't have those problems. So that was good. I have healthy, clever and educated children, so I can't complain about that. They are married and they are living their lives. I can be happy about that. I have granddaughters who are smart and who are studying a lot. Nowadays there isn't any work available, but my children have jobs. What more could I want? I am happy. I am happy that they are happy. I can be proud. I have it pretty good! [laughing]*

*Maybe I am able to say this because the past fifteen years were so bad. But now that I have had a year and a half of peace, I realize that when I am going somewhere – to a festival with my children or something like that – maybe I actually am happy! If I would try to savor every moment, however, I wouldn't be able to be happy.*

*I was just living as I was living. I was always striving to work for my children. Perhaps I should have had a bit more consideration for myself. And maybe I made loads of mistakes with my husband. A lot. Like when my husband gave me*

*my first slap, I shouldn't have put up with it.*

*I am terribly afraid that when I find a man to love, he will be a drinker. I have this pattern in life. Maybe I am the type of person who attracts men who drink. Maybe this is just the way I am. I don't know if this is my fault or not. But now I have met Václav, someone with whom I would like to grow old, and once again he is a drinker. Because of this, I can't decide if I want him or not, but what I feel towards him is what I wasn't able to feel towards my husband. I feel that love. I also see that Václav looks up to me in all respects, and this makes me want to be with him for this reason. So you see, I am making the same mistakes with him!*

*In this respect, I fear for my future because maybe I could actually find an intelligent man! That handsome businessman from the music festival – the one with the beautiful clothes and nice mobile phone – he just liked talking to me, but nothing more. Why is it that this man doesn't have any interest in me, yet a man who has no money, drinks, and lots of problems wants me? Why? I don't know. Maybe this is my life.*

*Jiří and I speak with each other, but I don't really like to. I think that is fair because for me he died as a young man. And in fact, I really thought that he had died because that's what I had heard! When I was twenty-five years old, I went to Slovakia because one of my brothers died. I asked one of my friends about Jiří, and she told me, "He is no longer with us. He's gone." I cried a lot about that. And then about ten years ago, I was at a festival in Prague and all of a sudden he came up to me! I thought I was crazy because he was supposed to be dead! But no, it turned out that he had been in Prague the whole time. So we met after thirty years! He recognized me right away, but I didn't recognize him. He took me by the hand, and I said, "Go away! Who are you?" And he said, "It's me, Jiří!" And I said, "Oh wow! You're old!" [laughing]*

*When I ran into him after all those years, he was constantly in my thoughts, but I gradually came to realize that he is a bad man. He told me that he isn't. He told me that he used to work. But now he plays the automaty all the time and he isn't bringing any money home to his wife. I saw that he was latching onto me. I saw that this was happening between the two of us. I said to him, "What are you doing Švejkačku?"<sup>115</sup> It was rubbish, and I didn't like it but I let him do it anyway.*

*He said that he is unable to forgive me. He told me that he only got married to his wife because she was pregnant. He said that she is good, but that he has never had a big love for her. He wasn't content with his life. In the beginning he worked*

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<sup>115</sup> Švejk is the eponymous protagonist of Jaroslav Hašek's novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*. Set during World War I, many of the Czech characters are portrayed as fighting in a war that they don't understand and fighting on the side of a country to which they feel no loyalty. Švejk epitomizes this theme, although it is not clear to the reader whether it is his stupidity, incompetence, or passive resistance that causes him to repeatedly frustrate Austro-Hungarian military authority. The idea that he is simply feigning stupidity whilst quietly thumbing his nose at authority behind its back, as well as his adeptness and cleverness in getting himself out of tricky situations, are traits that are exemplified as 'typical' Czech characteristics.



*and everything was good, but then he started going around with more and more women. His wife was at home with their children while he was doing that. I said to him, "Why did you do it?" And he said, "It's your fault. You did it to me" He sews the story this way. He gave me a lot of guilt. He said it was because he was constantly thinking about me. He said that for six years after meeting me, he couldn't love another woman. He only wanted me. And then when he heard that my marriage was good, he started sleeping with a lot of women. And because he was very handsome, all these women just went off with him. There wasn't one pretty woman in all of Prague that he didn't sleep with. He said that his wife allowed him to do it too. It didn't matter to her that he fooled around because she was happy to have a handsome husband. Maybe he cheated on her, but she wasn't angry about it because he always came home.*

*I am not able to enjoy myself with him now because...I don't know. I see that he is a big fake. I am glad that I was reunited with him and that we were able to speak with each other again, and of course I am happy that he is alive and healthy, but I don't want to see him. I believe that maybe destiny is such that we weren't supposed to be together because there were some bad things that I came to recognize in him. After we met each other again and we started spending time with each other, he really hurt me. I don't want to say anything more about it, but I will say that I have a good reason for getting rid of him and wanting to stay away from him. I have a good reason. I thought that we would be good friends. I thought that we would visit each other and have conversations, that we would tell each other what is bothering us and things like that. But no. I see that he is a person who wants to take advantage of others. I am just glad that now I see what he is. I am glad that I substantiated that he is a bad person. He thought that when my husband died, he would come here and we would finally be together. He said that his wife would be happy if I would marry him because they have problems. But I said, "No. I'm not going to help you." He told me that he loves me, but I said, "No. I don't want you." Why should I marry him? He's bad. When he is at parties and I see him, sometimes there will be ten women after him! I don't like it. He'll say, "I came here with her or her but it isn't anything serious." And with every one of them, sex, sex, sex! He knows that he is handsome, and then he'll say to me, "I came here for you. I am not some dog. " I don't like it though.*

*I've spoken with Jiří many times about what it might have been like if we had been together from the time when we were young. When we are sitting in a cafe or somewhere outside, after some time, all of a sudden he will say, "How would it have been?" And I'll think to myself for a few minutes and say, "Hmm." He'll say, "What about trying it now? What do you think?" And I'll say to him, "I wouldn't put up with you." Natašo, maybe he would drink a lot. Maybe he would beat me, like it was with my husband. I always said to my husband, "Do what you want, only don't trick me and don't take money away from our children. If you do these things, it's over. I'll leave and I'll will show you what is what. If I make a mistake, forgive me, but just don't do these things to me." My husband knew what I would tolerate. I've said to Jiří, "If you would do to me what you've done to*

*your wife, I would leave you.” He’s said, “No. I couldn’t do that to you because I love you. I’ve never loved her. For me, you are the woman with whom I would have liked to have had children. You would also be my lover.” I don’t know. I don’t think it would have been good with him. I think maybe it could have been worse than it was with my husband. Jiří told me that he won’t be like this anymore, that he won’t drink or anything like that. And indeed, he has been quite enterprising in his life, and I am too, so maybe we wouldn’t have it so bad together. One doesn’t know. One simply doesn’t know.*

## CONCLUSION

During the first few months after I returned from my field research in Skála, a faculty member in the Department of Anthropology at UCL posed the following question to me: “If your informants were living in England, do you think they would discuss their beliefs, values, habits, and choices in terms of how things work ‘with us Roma’? Do you think their self-identification as people of Romani origin would be as much of a key factor to their sociality?”

I was honestly stumped as to how to respond. The ways in which Alžběta and Zdeňka thought of themselves in relation to their place in the world at any given moment seemed so entrenched in their family relationships, their apartments, their street, their town, the nation state, past and present political ideologies, and whether or not they had woken up on the wrong side of the bed that I couldn’t imagine mentally transposing them into a different town (let alone a different country) and being able to predict their social behavior and participation in cultural processes in any coherent way.

One thing I knew was that during my conversations with them, they made it clear that they imagined England and America to be utopias compared to the Czech Republic – so much so that I immediately felt guilty that I had sullied their idealized versions of these countries when I informed them of the existence of neo-Nazi and skinhead gangs in California, the anti-immigration stance of the British National Party, white supremacist militias in the American West and Ku Klux Klan groups in the American South. But on the other hand, I told them about how people from so many different cultural, ethnic and national groups could live together relatively harmoniously in places like London, New York City and San Francisco. It seemed just as futile an exercise to try to imagine how

Alžběta would live day-to-day life in Boise, Idaho or in a pastoral cottage in Kent as it did to try to picture Zdeňka navigating through groups of Rastafarians, hippies and 1980's style punk rockers on the streets of London's Camden Town. It therefore seemed like it would be easier to approach the questions that had been posed to me in reverse.

In the Czech Republic, the Roma have been described as being 'ethnically indifferent' because they frame their self-identification according to different criteria than those that are imposed on them by their categorizers. Since Czech people often self-identify as members of the Czech *národ* (so the argument goes), Roma must therefore be interpreted (or interpret themselves) in the same way. These scholars argue that it is only as a result of Romani individuals' contact with ethnically marked cultural stimuli during their social interactions with members of the majority population that they are compelled to 'show' ethnicity (Lozoviuk 1997).

However, the fact remains that even if Roma only 'show ethnicity' due to external pressure from majority populations, it happens nonetheless. There is a consensus among contemporary scholars of Romani studies that Romani groups throughout the world are extremely varied and cannot and *should not* be discussed without paying proper attention to these differences. Among scholars, there is an equally strong consensus that all Romani groups distinguish themselves from the *gádže* in certain ways. Just how members of a Romani group mark and reinforce their differences from 'their *gádže*' is not only a matter of how they are located in relation to local institutions, ideologies and practices, but is also a matter of how Roma think of themselves in connection to local places and pasts (Lemon 2000). Perceived ethnic differences are both distillates of historical situations and influential determinants of contemporary behavior (Ross and Nisbett

1991). The ways in which Roma *distinguish themselves* from non-Roma, as well as the ways in which they are *distinguished* by non-Roma, are also constantly evolving in concert with social, economic and political changes that influence both groups within a society.

The salience of Romani ethnicity has a temporal dimension as well. Many Romani groups are discussed in terms of their present-time orientation to social life, whereby their ethnic singularity is performed ‘in the here and now’. A Rom ‘is what he does’ rather than being what he ‘will be’ or ‘was’; on a daily basis he reconstitutes his difference from the *gádže*. In many cases, this involves the inversion of his marginal position in society and repositioning himself in the center of his own moral universe (Day et. al 1999). For a Rom who also aligns himself with the *gádže* (or with certain *gádže*) in relation to a cultural idea that has a future-orientation –for example, one that involves planning one’s actions in advance, the deferment of consumption or the investment of one’s money into establishing ‘roots’ – his ‘identity’ might be of a more dualistic temporal nature.

Moreover, ethnic boundary marking is strongly influenced by situational influences, the subjective attribution of causality and the flawed nature of processes of human inference. Patterns of behavior that are interpreted as being characteristic of a given social group can often be highly consistent across several groups who find themselves in a social situation with the same contextual conditions (Ross and Nisbett 1991). People’s predictions of how those in their own (and other) social groups will behave fail to take into consideration the extent to which their own cognitive processes have affected their judgments, as well as how others may construe the same social event very differently. The relative importance of different, subjectively valued ‘ethnic’ traits is

bound to vary from individual to individual; moreover, what certain subjective values ‘mean’ to one individual (e.g. decency, kindness, immorality) can ‘mean’ something different to some one else.

In the midst of so much apparent ambiguity, how could one possibly predict how Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s self-identification with Romani ethnicity might work in a different location? And is it appropriate to try? Of course, the questions that were asked of me were meant to make me think about how primary these women’s membership in the Romani ‘group’ is compared to their belonging in many other ‘groups’: as members of the female sex, residents of the Czech Republic, members of the *Slovenska* Romani subgroup and their respective families, and as residents of Skála and Živá street.

In the Czech Republic, their self-identification as Roma is paramount. As this thesis argues, of course, the family is of primary importance to these women’s social lives, for it is within the boundaries of their families that these women invest the majority of their emotional and physical energy and find the greatest potential for the realization of their personal agency. Their children are what they care about the most, thus it is in relation to the wants and needs of their children that they proceed through daily life. Yet, their movements are not restricted to the walls of their flats. They come into contact with Romani non-kin and Czechs on a daily basis, and during their observations of (and interactions) with these individuals, they variously identify themselves with other Roma (in opposition to Czechs), align themselves with (some) Czechs and distance themselves from (some) Roma, or *are identified* as Roma by the Czechs. In all these cases, they interpret themselves and others in terms of their ethnic group memberships – as being Roma, ‘Gypsies’, *gádže* or members of the Czech *národ*. When it comes to intergroup

behavior between Romani and Czech individuals, ethnicity is not only salient, it is unavoidable.

If Alžběta and Zdeňka would be transported to a different location, their adjustment to the social differences between their old and new social environments would be predictable on one point: their need to understand the changes around them, and their need to adapt to these new social conditions ways that will preserve their positive self-image. In the Czech Republic, these women express their desire to be seen as individuals and be recognized as having an existence separate from their skin color. This is the ‘trap of ethnicity’. Their skin color, and in turn their ethnicity, are culturally marked according to their ‘Gypsiness’ – the messiness, dirtiness (both literally and figuratively), disorder, indecency, laziness and abnormality that non-Roma consider to be collective traits of the Roma. In a new location that would allow Alžběta and Zdeňka to not be classified according to an ‘objective’ feature that makes it impossible to leave their Romani/’Gypsy’ ‘group’ when they are in the Czech Republic, would they deny their ethnic origins or exemplify them?

Group membership isn’t necessarily predicated on feelings of social cohesiveness. If Alžběta and Zdeňka would live independently from other Roma, either with or without their family members, it doesn’t follow that they would cease identifying themselves in terms of their Romani ethnicity. Group membership is influenced by one’s internalization of certain social norms and seeing oneself as embodying these norms in one’s attitudes and behaviors. These women have significant histories in Skála, and the ways in which their social positions there have been internalized as part of their *habitus* will of course have an influence on them as they categorize and classify images, sights, sounds and

ideas in a new environment. This thesis has shown to what a great extent Alžběta and Zdeňka reflect on their pasts as they take action in the present and contemplate the future. It is undoubtedly a part of the Roma's collective social history that they are a people who have always been excluded, targeted through acts of violence, and seen as 'inferior' by other social groups. They carry a psychological objectification of their social status as a 'cursed' people. From an early age, individuals in 'inescapable' minority groups also can demonstrate reverse ethnocentrism – a devaluation of themselves according to how they perceive that 'outsiders' view them (Tajfel 1981). Alžběta's and Zdeňka's perspectives on the perspectives of others who don't like them because of their ethnic group membership and their perceived 'Gypsiness', as well as their alignment with the cultural idea that they have historically been the despised underdog, do not disappear overnight. Improved social conditions in a new location that *presumably* should bring about these women's psychic liberation from the 'ethnic trap' do not automatically confer positive self-image.

Ethnicity is a source of meaning and community, especially in the absence of religions or sociopolitical ideologies that could fill this role. In societies where these vacuums exist, where identifiable social groups benefit differentially, and where members of society are relatively 'free' to take action according to their convictions, ethnic tension and conflict can come into being very easily (Ross and Nisbett 1991). Alžběta and Zdeňka are proud of many of their cultural values and behaviors, and these are cultural components that they are likely to use as they mark their ethnic difference from the *gádžie*. In the Czech Republic, in terms of the ways that their ethnic difference is identified and categorized by others, these Romani women continue to dream not so



much of the day when their *difference* from others will disappear, but of the day when this difference ceases to be *conflated* with the type of ‘Gypsiness’ that they try to distance themselves from everyday. In the meantime, these women ‘are what they do’ in the present, reflect on what they were in the past, and frame some aspects of their present day personal agency in terms of what they have decided is beneficial to their children’s and grandchildren’s futures.

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## APPENDIX I

### LIST OF NAMES

#### First generation

Alžběta Procházková: <i>the matriarch</i>	Václav: <i>Alžběta's boyfriend</i>
Aleš: <i>Alžběta's second husband (deceased)</i>	Eva: <i>Petr's lover</i>
Vojta: <i>Alžběta's first husband (divorced)</i>	Karolina: <i>Zdeňka's mother</i>
Jiří: <i>Alžběta's first love</i>	Kamila: <i>Petr's aunt</i>

#### Second generation

Věra: <i>Alžběta's eldest daughter and child</i>	Tomáš: <i>Věra's husband</i>
Ludmila: <i>Alžběta; second daughter and middle child</i>	Jakub: <i>Ludmila's husband</i>
Alexandr (Alex): <i>Alžběta's son and youngest child</i>	Ivanka: <i>Alexandr's ex-wife</i>
	Zdeňka Kopecká:
	Petr: <i>Zdeňka's husband</i>
	Josef: <i>Zdeňka's former lover</i>

#### Third generation

Světlana: <i>Věra's eldest daughter and child</i>	Erika: <i>Zdeňka's eldest daughter and child</i>
Štefan: <i>Věra's son and middle child</i>	Adela: <i>Zdeňka's second daughter</i>
Lucie: <i>Věra's youngest daughter and child</i>	Zlata: <i>Zdeňka's third daughter</i>
Radek: <i>Světlana's boyfriend</i>	Miloš: <i>Zdeňka's oldest son</i>
Jarmila: <i>Ludmila's oldest daughter</i>	Michal: <i>Zdeňka's youngest child and son</i>
Mariana: <i>Ludmila's youngest daughter</i>	
Ruda: <i>Alexandr's son</i>	
Vendula: <i>Alexandr's daughter</i>	

## APPENDIX II

### A NOTE ON CZECH LANGUAGE AND PRONUNCIATION

The Czech language (*čeština*) is part of the Western Slavic branch of the Slavic language group. It is mutually intelligible with Slovak, and to a lesser extent with Polish; both languages are also part of the Western Slavic subgroup.

The language is composed of seven noun cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, locative and instrumental), and the endings of nouns are declined differently based on their case (i.e. their function in the sentence, such as noun, direct object or indirect object), which genders they carry (masculine animate, masculine inanimate, feminine or neuter), and whether the final letter of the noun in question is hard or soft. In this thesis, individual Czech nouns appear in the nominative case, and all adjectives appear in masculine inanimate form. An exception to this is Czech phrases: nouns are declined according to the rules of standardized Czech grammar.

The Czech alphabet has forty-two letters and is based on the Roman alphabet. The alphabet is entirely phonetic and letters are always pronounced the same. Word stress falls on the first syllable of a word.

#### Vowels

The duration of long vowels is approximately double the length of short vowels. Long vowels are marked by an acute accent (´)(*čárka*) or a ring (°)(*kroužek*).

	Long	Short	Example	Transliteration
Aa	á	a	<i>Já</i> (I), <i>nad</i> (above)	<b>ya, nuhd</b>
Ee	é	e, ě	<i>veliké</i> (large), <i>pes</i> (dog), <i>tělo</i> (body)	<b>ve-lee-kair,</b> <b>pes, tye-lo</b>
Ii	í	i	<i>prosím</i> (please), <i>velmi</i> (very)	
Oo	ó	o	<i>balcón</i> (balcony), <i>noha</i> (leg)	<b>bal-kawn, no-</b> <b>huh</b>
Uu	ú, ů	u	<i>ústa</i> (mouth), <i>pozůstatek</i> (relic), <i>muž</i> (man)	<b>oo-stuh, po-</b> <b>zoo-sta-tek</b>
Yy	ý	y	<i>malý</i> (small), <i>ty</i> (you)	<b>ma-lee, tea</b>

#### Diphthongs

Diphthongs are sounds that consist of two vowels within the same syllable.

au	<i>autobus</i> (bus)	<b>ow-to-bus</b>
eu	<i>pneumatika</i> (tire)	<b>pneu-ma-ti-ka</b>
ou	<i>koupit</i> (to buy)	<b>koh-pit</b>

## Consonants

Czech constants are hard (h, ch, k, r, d, t, n), soft (č, ř, š, ž, d', t', ň, c, j) or ambiguous (z, s, v, l, b, p, m, f)

	Example	Transliteration
b	<i>bláto</i> (mud)	<b>bla</b> -to
c, č	<i>co</i> (what), <i>odpočinek</i> (rest)	<b>tso</b> <i>ot-po-chi-nek</i>
d, d'	<i>dávny</i> (ancient) <i>ted'</i> (now)	<b>dav</b> -nee <b>tedy</b> (y as in "yes")
f	<i>foto</i>	<b>fo</b> -to
g	<i>vegetarián</i>	ve- <b>ge</b> -tuh-ri-an
h	<i>zahrada</i> (garden)	<b>zuh-hruh</b> -da
ch		
j	<i>již</i>	<b>yizh</b>
k	<i>navěky</i> (forever)	<b>na-vye-ki</b>
l	<i>loni</i> (last year)	<b>lo</b> -nyi
m	<i>menší</i> (smaller)	<b>men</b> -shee
n, ň	<i>nížký</i> (low) <i>promiňte</i> (excuse me)	<b>nyeez</b> -kee <b>pro-miny-te</b> (y as in "yes")
p	<i>dopis</i> (letter)	<b>do-pis</b>
r, ř	<i>rok</i> (year) <i>řeka</i> (river)	<b>rok</b> <b>rzhe</b> -kuh
s, š	<i>slovo</i> (word) <i>pošta</i> (post office)	<b>slo</b> -vo <b>posh</b> -tuh
t, t'	<i>fronta</i> (queue) <i>děšť</i> (rain)	<b>fron</b> -tuh <b>dairshty</b> (y as in "yes")
v	<i>otvor</i> (opening)	<b>ot</b> -vor
x	<i>sexista</i> (sexist)	<b>sex</b> -ees-tuh
z, ž	<i>zmiz</i> <i>už</i>	<b>zmiz</b> <b>uzh</b>

### APPENDIX III.

#### DISCOURSE VS. NARRATIVE: A CLARIFICATION

I wish to stop and make a point on the subject of *discourse*. Perhaps the reader has noted that I have not made use of the term thus far, opting instead to use phrases such as “national dialogues” and “larger-scale dialogues”. I do this for a few reasons: 1) in order to avoid unintentionally aligning this thesis’s theoretical analysis with certain problematic aspects of the discourse concept, and 2) in order to make a distinction between the *narratives* with which individuals in Skála have a real and tangible sense of engagement, and the media, academic and advocacy *dialogues* about Romani issues with which their individual, familial and local narratives might share many parallels, but to which they have not *directly* contributed.

Of course, discourse need not be interpreted as only applying to the meta-level or as occurring on an overarching scale ‘up there’ (e.g. groups of statements that are conceptualized as belonging to one system of formation, like economic discourse, political discourse or the discourse of race). Foucault’s own theoretical positions on discourse have been noted as appearing in various different guises throughout his writings (Mills 2003). At times the definitional emphasis is placed upon *utterances* which belong to the same discursive formation (i.e. a restricted number of statements for which a group of conditions for their existence can be identified), whereas at other times the emphasis is placed upon the “body of anonymous historical rules, always determined in time and space” under which the statements occurred – in other words, the *conditions of existence* themselves (Foucault 2003: 131). Discourses are not without histories – they are not timeless – because conditions for the occurrence of their enunciation are always



contextualized by the social, economic, geographic and linguistic conditions defining a given period. Yet, despite their historicity and contextualization, the question has not been to ask why and how discourses emerge and become embodied at a given point in time; “We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse” (ibid: 30-31). A specific discourse is to be approached as and when it takes place and should be disconnected from the “distant presence of [its] origin” (ibid: 28). Foucault’s wish to disassociate discourse from a notion of continuity is related to his explicit aim to distance the concept from “the anthropological theme” – the tendency to use totalizing cultural categories such as worldviews, traditions, and ideal types in order to inject history into forms of social analysis. Categories such as ‘tradition’ serve to distinguish a new group of phenomena from a background of permanence (ibid: 17).

The decoupling of discourse from the notion of historicity - and by association, from the “anthropological theme” – has meant that discourse has sometimes taken the place of culture as the key terminology of anthropological tracts (Wimmer 2002: 24). An interest in individual and sub-level variability, and a wish to avoid ‘totalizing’ notions of culture which are conceived of as entities which loom over their bearers, has led anthropologists to try to understand how in a specific place (e.g. a village, an island, a city quarter), many different discourses overlap, flow into networks of meaning, disintegrate and eventually disappear. Social life is equated with the coming and going of discourses (Foucault 1978: 211, in Wimmer 2002: 25). Local, national and international discourses, discourses grouped by gender or race, and class-based discourses intersect; they correspond or conflict with each other. More scholastic energy has been invested into making explicit the fluid, interconnected, and ephemeral nature of discourses than

into explaining *why* discourses are fluid and ephemeral and *how* they interconnect. People *have* multiple and changing discourses that compose their social worlds, but without any analytical tools to investigate why it is *these specific* constructions that typify their worlds instead of others – why these discourses appeared and how they may have disappeared – people are seen as living within a sort of discursive machinery. Somehow a full circle has been made. With the objective in mind of trying to avoid the classical way of describing culture as a bounded entity with historical longevity and internal consistency – a self-contained unit that members of a group have and members outside of the group do not have – what has been arrived at is much the same phenomenon. Perhaps the stasis, historicity and continuity characterizing classical cultural concepts has been replaced with the hybridity, transience and effervescence of discourse theory, but in both cases, individuals appear to be relatively powerless within their social worlds.

Yet, “people are not imprisoned in the confines of their own cultural traditions or in discursive strait-jackets” (ibid: 31). It is individuals who bring cultural materials such as discourse out of a state of inertia, not the other way around (Rapport 1992). Individual personal interests are of course influenced by one’s social position and *habitus* – a network of dispositions which, developing in accordance with one’s social position, guides one’s perceptions, understandings and actions (Bourdieu 1977, Ch.2) – but one still possesses a natural capacity to evaluate the pros and cons of various situations in day-to-day life, taking into consideration the achievement of one’s own interests (Engebrigtsen 2007: 19-20). Narrativity is a fundamental part of this process because human beings are “narrating animals” (Rapport 2000: 75). It is a natural way in which people try to achieve a sense of comprehension about perpetually unfolding life events, as

well as about social and cultural boundaries that are under constant negotiation (Cruikshank 1998). Even when the self comes to know itself through its *own* narrative acts (a relatively individualistic activity), because narrative involves one's cognitive grappling with collective, culturally symbolic forms – words, gestures, images, sights and sounds – it is a public activity (Rapport 1997). As a 'sense-making' process, narrative is a means by which one can achieve the wish, intrinsic to the human condition, to have one's *singular* worldview accepted as legitimate and valid by others in their social world. One's social perspectivity does not just involve one's own; perspectivity includes having perspectives on the perspectives of others (Hannerz 1992: 68).

Sokolová (2002: 11) points out that while popular *discourses* in communist Czechoslovakia replaced a rhetoric of Romani ethnicity with a rhetoric of social deviancy, the personal agency of Romani individuals who were affected by these *discourses* was not eradicated. Roma “were not passive recipients of their fate”; they found ways to turn policies and categories, primarily oriented towards their subordination, in their favor. For example, segregation in housing and education, which existed in blatant contradiction to the state's rhetoric of equality and inclusion, generated a sense of collectiveness and group consciousness in the Romani population. People in positions of authority on the local level (e.g. teachers, doctors) also interpreted state policies in their own ways. Nevertheless, Sokolová uses Foucauldian discourse as a primary terminology because official discussions about health and social decency (i.e. 'normative' social behavior) were used as tools of *power* and *control*.

On another note, while Somers (1994) uses narrative terminology (narrative / narrativity / narration) and underlines its significance to social life, she risks conflating

this nomenclature with discourse (and the lack of individual agency inherent within) by stating that “all of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*” (606).<sup>116</sup> Everything an individual knows stems from the intersecting and relational storylines in which the individual finds or locates himself. *Seemingly* this description echoes that of social life as ‘the coming and going of discourses.’ (Foucault 1978: 211, in Wimmer 2002: 25).

However, Somers’ brings up an important point which inevitably (and necessarily) dives straight to the crux of how Romani individuals make sense of their sociality through narrative engagement: the omnipresence of *social categorization* to cultural life. Individuals assign themselves (and are assigned by others), to various categories and groups, with some group memberships being regarded as more salient than others depending on the passage of time and changes in social context (Tajfel 1982). At minimum, a ‘group’ can be defined as “two or more persons who are in some way socially or psychologically interdependent: for the satisfaction of needs, attainment of goals or consensual validation of attitudes and values” (Turner 1982: 15). Since a group “has no existence but in relation to other groups” (Deschamps 1982: 87), just *what* these collectively held group attitudes, values and goals are considered to be, as well as their perceived social and cultural *importance*, may be different depending on whether it is people internal or external to said ‘group’ who are doing the defining. The traits that characterize one’s own ‘group’ (ingroup) acquire their significance only in comparison to their perceived difference from the traits of other ‘groups’ (outgroups). Indeed,

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<sup>116</sup> Italicized emphasis is Somers’.

sometimes collectively shared notions of which traits constitute ‘ingroup’ membership criteria may originate from the ‘outgroups’ themselves (Tajfel 1981).

Not all social situations encourage individuals to act only in terms of their group membership(s), as there are some encounters in which the behaviors of the persons involved are relatively more influenced by their unique interpersonal relationships than by their membership in different perceived social categories. Yet, no matter how familiar people have become or how close their personal relationships may be, it is nearly impossible to imagine a social encounter which is not affected at least to a minimal extent by their mutual assignment of each other to a range of social categories (Tajfel 1982).

Whatever categorizations are made of the surrounding world, they stem from the interaction between the information that an individual gathers from the outside and his or her internal processing of this information. The importance of cognitive systems of categorization goes beyond the simple ordering and classification of social environments because in many instances, different classes of stimuli, objects or people are assigned different subjective values. A sociocultural environment is an “intentional world” because our beliefs, emotions and other mental representations imbue it with meaning (Schweder 1990, Shweder 1991). Through the ongoing process of social experience, the cultural relevance of different symbols, images, sounds and words is negotiated by individuals in a collective communicative arena. In turn, these stimuli acquire varying levels of emotional significance to the individuals involved (Tajfel 1981).

Thus, although the narrative engagement of an individual is just that – a singular and personal contribution – it’s also an inherently social activity due to the collective nature of the processes through which various socially categorized stimuli gain cultural

relevance. Moreover, while certain individual narratives might be more ‘personal’ than others in terms of the extent to which their creators draw upon straightforward and readily identifiable collective cultural ideas, they *necessarily* must embody the ways in which people interact with others in their social environments (Skultans 1998). The ubiquity of social categorization means that no matter an individual’s enactment of personal agency through the use of narrative, it is inescapable that he or she cognitively grapples with subjectively valued ideas that are of significance to the social group(s) to which he or she belongs, as well as with the opinions, judgments and ideas that individuals belonging to other social groups have about his or her group. Thus, to return to Somers’ argument with a slight specification: all of us come to be who we are by *being located or locating ourselves* in social narratives that are not *solely* of our own making.

With these caveats in mind, in this thesis I attempt to disentangle the cultural analysis that is based upon Alžběta’s and Zdeňka’s narratives from: 1) the idea that *discourse is an actor* which makes use of people in order to exist and have influence (since it is people themselves who create discursive strategies to achieve their aims rather than the other way around) and 2) the lack of distinction between the narratives to which individuals contribute in a real and tangible sense (i.e. the personal, familial and local) and the larger-scale discussions into which their personal, familial and local narratives tie (but which are not produced in a ‘hands on’ manner by the individuals in question).

