Unlike in any other European region, the Roma in former Wallachia and Moldavia (today’s Romania), have lived in slavery for five hundred years. In the mid-19th century, when slavery was officially abolished, a large number of Roma left the country and migrated to Central and Western Europe as well as to America.

INTRODUCTION

The history of Roma migration into Europe was abruptly brought to a halt for those Roma who arrived in the Romanian territories of the Southern and Eastern Carpathian Mountains. Roma who arrived in Wallachia and Moldavia in the second half of the 14th century were forced into bondage and slavery for five centuries, and their history was marked by a turning point comparable only to the enslavement of the Afro-American population in the United States.

“Gypsies shall be born only slaves; anyone born of a slave mother shall also become a slave …” stated the code of Wallachia at the beginning of the 19th century. Roma were owned by the Prince (as “slaves of the State” – “tigania domneasca”), monasteries and private individuals. Selling, buying and giving away whole families of slaves was common practice among the owners, who had unlimited rights over their slaves. In fact, slave-owners could do whatever they liked to their slaves, short of killing them.

Towards the middle of the 19th century, an abolitionist movement emerged among intellectuals in the Danubian Principalities, and the figure of the “Gypsy” became a frequent subject in newspaper articles, poetry, literature and plays. Once the emancipation of slaves had been achieved, it raised – and still raises today – the issue of their integration into the social and economic life of Romania.
The first undisputed evidence of Roma north of the Danube also constitutes the first evidence of slavery. In 1385, Dan I, Voivode of Wallachia, confirmed property given to the Convent of the Virgin Mary, Tismana, including 40 “salashe” (a term derived from Turkish, denoting families or tent communities) of “Atigani” (“Gypsies”).

A donation of 300 “salashe” of “Gypsies” was made to the Cozia monastery in 1388, by Lord Mircea the Old. Further documentary evidence emerges over the following decades. The Roma slaves of the Tismana monastery are mentioned in all documents confirming its possessions, until the 17th century.

A deed of August 2, 1414, issued in Suceava, Moldavia, mentions Alexander the Good, who gives Toader the Dwarf, in return for “his faithful service”, a village on the banks of the Jeravat where it flows into the Bârlad, or more precisely where “Lie” and “Tiganestii” were “cnezi” (local masters). Historians consider this deed as the first indirect documentary evidence of Roma in Moldavia, and a document from July 8, 1428 as the first direct evidence. In the latter, Voivode Alexander the Good endowed the Bistrita monastery with 31 “chelyadi” (a term derived from Slavic languages, equal in meaning to “salash”) of “Gypsies”.

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SETTLEMENT IN ROMANIA

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FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

Some historians believe that the Romanians took over the institution of slavery from their eastern neighbours, the Tartars. The latter commonly turned prisoners of war into slaves, a fate suffered by many Romanians, and vice versa: in 1402, Alexander the Good gave the Moldovita monastery four Tartar families as slaves. However, slavery was known in the region well before the Roma arrived.

Historians believe that, in their migration from Greece and Bulgaria towards Central and Western Europe,
A local custom required free peasants who had worked on a feudal estate for twelve years to become serfs (“ruma-ni”) of the boyar. There is reason to believe that the Roma were treated similarly. Another, equally important aspect is the weakness of the state in the face of the authority of the nobility. The sovereign could not exercise effective authority throughout the country in order to keep his own slaves under his direct influence. The Roma were forced into slavery by local masters.

The existence of Roma slaves in Wallachia and Moldavia underwent the most spectacular reversals with changes in the masters’ financial situation. Selling slaves was the most convenient way of repaying debts or redeeming oneself from Turk or Tartar slavery. Slaves were good for anything, equivalent to any value, sold, given as wedding presents or dowries, gifted to the monastery so that the master’s name was mentioned during mass, and exchanged for animals or cloth trousers; should they fail to submit, “they should be beaten very hard”. [Ills. 2, 10]
In 1646, the first legislative code, entitled “Carte romneasca de invatatura” (the Romanian book of education), set a number of benchmarks with regard to the rights and obligations of Roma slaves in Moldavia. For instance, a bought slave was required to help his master, and a slave who was admitted to being guilty of anything had to undergo “reasonable” punishment administered with the “cane or the whip”, and could object only if the master used “bare” weapons, in which case the slave was in danger of being killed. In fact, slave-owners could do whatever they liked to their slaves, short of killing them.

As regards marriage, the legal instruments provided that two slaves could marry, but only if the master agreed. If two slaves belonging to two different owners wanted to marry, the agreement of both masters was necessary. In most cases, the two masters reached a settlement.

The report by the four members of the investigative committee divided Roma into six “categories”, according to their occupations and customs (1831).

(provided by the author; abbreviated and translated from Analele parlamentare ale României, Bucuresti, Imprimeria Statului, 1890, I/1)

From the 14th to the 16th century, the legal status of Roma was not subject to any written regulations providing for the various conflicts that might arise between them and other people. However, the “long-standing” attitude towards the Roma was gradually enshrined in laws passed between the 17th and the 19th century. The Moldavian regulations supplement those of Wallachia, with no major differences between the two Romanian countries as regards the legal status of slaves. [Ill. 7]

Throughout the period in which Roma were enslaved in the two Romanian countries, they did not enjoy a legal status securing them minimum rights or protecting them during trials. The slave was not considered a legal person, but classed as the master’s property. A conflict between a slave and a free person who was not part of the slave-owner’s family became a conflict between the slave’s master and the person in question. Slaves were not responsible for their actions, which were their master’s concern. In more serious cases (horse theft, murder), however, the master could abandon the slave and thus no longer had to pay compensation or fines (“desegubina”); the slave had to undergo the punishment, which could be capital punishment.

THE LEGAL STATUS OF ROMA IN SLAVERY

Legislation

Aspects of Slave Life

SPOONMAKERS

GOLD PANNERS

“URSARI GYPSIES”

Their trade was woodwork; they made bins of various sizes, spindles, spoons and other domestic utensils.

Some of them lived off the proceeds of the gold they discovered. Others did woodwork.

They owned bears and earned a living by making them dance in towns and villages.

The report by the four members of the investigative committee divided Roma into six “categories”, according to their occupations and customs (1831).

(provided by the author; abbreviated and translated from Analele parlamentare ale României, Bucuresti, Imprimeria Statului, 1890, I/1)
“GYPSIES” KNOWN AS “ZAVRAGI”

There were about 300 of these families, who were included in the category of the bear leaders.

“LAIESHI/LAYASHI GYPSIES”

Normally settled on the outskirts of villages, these Roma worked iron and made boilers.

“NETOTSI”

There were about fifty families of “Netotsi” (Romanian for “Hottentots”), who had come from Germany.

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DEEDS OF EMANCIATION

Freeing slaves through deeds of emancipation was an opportunity for the master to express gratitude for a life spent in their service. In the mid-19th century, one such deed of emancipation, given to a washerwoman, read as follows:

“I hereby announce that the Gypsy Mary, daughter of Dumitru Cracau and a descendant of the slaves I inherited from my parents, widowed by the death of her husband, because she has served with devotion and ardour since she was a child growing up in my court, putting her heart into the task, such that she has always attracted my gratitude and that of my wife; through this deed which I place in her hands I absolve her from slavery and allow her to go whenever and wherever she likes; for as long as she wishes to remain in my court, she shall, without any hindrance, be entitled to the room she inhabits and her rations, just like all the other slaves living in the court. This will set an example for her son Dinca too, who, if he behaves as well as his mother, will be freed in due course. Dated the 8th day of June, 1849, Dimitrie Canta, logothete.”

Ill. 8 (translated from Sion 2000, p. 130)

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ASPECTS OF SLAVE LIFE

Traces of slavery persisted in the memories of former masters and their slaves, the slaves’ masters decided on the “most suitable” time and person for their slaves. Slaves were usually married very young, so as to have many children and increase the master’s wealth.

If slaves fled a bad situation, the “slaves’ masters and their legitimate heirs, according to the custom of the country, always have the right to claim runaway slaves, from anyone, for there is no period of limitation for slaves in Moldavia”.

The Code of Wallachia, although more concise, contains the same principles: “Gypsies shall be born only slaves; anyone born of a slave mother shall also become a slave; the master shall have no rights over his slave’s life; the master’s rights over the slave shall be confined to selling him or giving him away; Gypsies without a master shall be slaves of the prince; marriage shall be recognized among slaves; a separation shall be declared when a marriage takes place between a slave and a free man without the master’s knowledge”.

These were the main conditions set down by the law until the abolition of slavery in the two Romanian principalities.
had significant advantages. The “Vatrashi” were seen by their masters mostly as lazy thieves and liars, who did whatever was necessary to avoid their duties. Punishment was administered at the master’s whim. The most common punishment was strokes on the back with a hazel rod. The number of strokes ranged from a few dozen to two or three hundred, administered in several goes. Even the hardiest skins gave out after forty or fifty strokes, and bled profusely.

Roma huts had clay and thatched roofs with chimneys. A dormer window could be seen in the back wall. A “salash” of “Gypsies” was squeezed into each hut, comprising the father, the mother, sometimes the grandfather or grandmother and all the children not wiped out by the very frequent illnesses resulting from the squalor and poverty in which they lived.

A number of women, all of them Roma, were responsible for looking after the master’s bedroom, cleaning it, heating it, making his bed, doing the laundry, preparing the boyar’s bath and, in many cases, looking after all aspects of his personal hygiene. The most beautiful Roma women were often sent to massage the feet of important visitors. The boyar’s interest in them propelled them into the court, in his direct personal service. These young women live on in the works of painters and writers of the time.

The obligations of “claca” (work) for the master placed many Roma slaves in a situation of extreme poverty, which shaped their very difficult economic and social position in the subsequent period. The question that arose for the majority of the sedentary Roma was simple: How can one work half the year for the master and have time to earn enough for one’s family to live on? They were farmers, and the days spent in the master’s service took up all the good weather just to work his field. It is impossible to plough, sow cereal, hoe crops and harvest at the end of the season if one owes the master up to 150 days of work a year. So, one could either work for the master and go hungry, or work one’s own field and run into debt.

Nomadic Roma, “Rudari”, “Aurari”, “Bayashi”, “Ursari”, “Lingurari”, and “Layashi”, which accounted for a considerable part (more than a half in earlier times, roughly one third by 1850) of the Roma population, enjoyed a specific kind of autonomy. They had a leader – “jude” or “juge” – recognised by the authorities in Wallachia and Moldavia, who served justice in his “salash” on the basis of Roma tradition. Their tax obligations in most cases were lighter than those of the rest of the population. They were free to move and, probably most significant, did not have the various other obligations like, for instance, “claca”. Their nomadic way of life, it has to be noted, was seasonal, in that they spent some time of the year – usually winter – in the respective estates of their owners.
The next stage in the emancipation process took place in 1847. Prince Bibesco of Wallachia submitted a bill to the National Assembly for the emancipation of Roma belonging to the Holy Metropolis, bishoprics and monasteries, and it was passed unanimously on February 11, 1847. With 2,088 Roma families, the Cozia monastery had the biggest number of slaves, thanks to the earlier charity.
of Voivode Alexander the Good. The Prahova district also had 8,870 individual Roma, and was the leader in this respect. In the districts of Wallachia there lived 47,245 Roma, in 11,446 families, who were former slaves to the monasteries. From further statistics, it has been estimated that in the 1850s there lived about 250,000 to 300,000 Roma in the two principalities. Thus, they counted for about 7.5 percent of the total population.

**THE END OF SLAVERY**

The emancipation of the last slaves, those owned by private individuals, took place in Moldavia in 1855 at the instigation of Prince Grigore Ghica. The sovereign sent an “ofis” to the country’s Extraordinary Council, calling for a “new bill” to emancipate Roma owned by private individuals in Moldavia. The abolition of slavery was seen as a reform that derived “from the very laws of humanity and was primarily a matter of the country’s dignity”. Prince Ghica explained this historic moment: “When Europe shows a keen interest in the principalities and intervenes in their future, our people have a duty to take a step forward.” Slavery was considered as “a vestige of a barbaric society”, “an anomaly that must disappear”, “clashing with the holy Christian dogmas, the principles of humanity and the vital interests of the state”.

In accordance with the prince’s idea, the draft contained two basic elements: “The immediate abolition of slavery in Moldavia”, and “Regulations and conditions governing the distribution of appropriate compensation to owners.” November 28 was declared a national holiday. On December 22, 1855, the “Divan” (the national assembly) passed the “Act on the End of Slavery, Regulation of Compensation and the Transformation of Emancipated Slaves into Taxpayers.”

As regards compensation for the masters, “Lingurari” and “Vatrashi” Roma (settled in villages) were estimated at 8 pieces of gold and “Layashi” (nomads) at 4 pieces of gold, irrespective of gender; only invalids and babies were exempt from payment.

The situation of Roma slaves in Wallachia took much the same direction as in Moldavia. On February 8, 1856, the Prince of Stirbei decreed the “Act for the Emancipation of all Gypsies in the Romanian Principality”. It proclaimed the end of slavery and the freeing of all “Gypsies” in this category, who were immediately registered as taxpayers to the state. The sum of 10 pieces of gold was set as compensation for each slave’s former owner. February 8 became a national holiday. [Ill. 14]

After the emancipation, the Roma continued to form a group of taxpayers at the mercy of farmers and local authorities. Some of them migrated to towns, and an equal number left Romania.

**CONCLUSION**

The picture of Roma slavery in Wallachia and Moldavia is not accessible by unidimensional interpretations. If we are to make general observations from a present-day point of view, then probably the most significant issue is the relative position of nomadic and settled Roma. Whereas the settled Roma (“Vatrashi”) lived at the disposal of their owners, enjoyed no personal rights, were often severely punished, and sold as goods, itinerant Roma (“Layashi” and others) often enjoyed a number of freedoms and even privileges which most social strata of the local inhabitants did not have. These differences can be traced to the present day in the differences between groups of Roma in Romania, and, to a certain extent, all over the world.

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