
Romani Peoples in Eastern Europe and Beyond

MIREES' Open Lecture

On March 1st, 2016, Dennis Avorin, currently employed at the Swedish Migration office as a member of the processing team in the Receiving Unit, delivered a lecture regarding Romani Peoples in Eastern Europe and Beyond. His methodology consisted in a focus over mainly two countries with presumably different historical roots like Romania and Sweden, and a study conducted in two parts, a historical recollection and an analysis, and writing a thesis that deepened the issue of Romani persecutions by a comparative historical analysis. Avorin is also a former Mirees student, part of the Mirees generation 2013-2015, who graduated with distinctions after another brilliant bachelor previously completed in Goteborg.

Avorin started by giving the definition of what according to him is Antiziganism: *“ideological hatred and organized persecution of the Romani people, or people identified as such, by the majoritarian society”*. This term, majoritarian society, is relevant in order to understand the thesis research of Avorin. In fact, he studied the perceptions and the biases people have against Romani and explaining the so-called *“Romani taboo culture”* - a culture of secrecy that protects them from outsiders. Two are the supposed historical origins of Romani, the first is *“O Tejilaripe”* (the downwalkhood) describing a migration occurred from India in the eleventh century from the Rajput tribes leaded by Mahmud of Gazni called *“The Gadjo”*, the second is *“O Aresipe”* (the arrival) where they arrived in Byzantium in the eleventh century starting a semi-sedentary and semi-nomadic life. The migration in Byzantium is explained by linguistic data that suggest one single migration and not waves of migrations. The determination of stay in Iran as short due to few Persian words and the total lack of Arabic words in Romani language suggest that Romani people left Iran before the Arabic conquest in the 7th century. In contradiction with these statements there are the genetic theories advocating that, the arrival of Romani people in Europe should be anticipated for at least 3-4 centuries as showed by the prominent example of a man found in a cave and with the same DNA family of Romani's. This means that the only possible explanation is that Romani were settled in Constantinople at least since 1000 and arrived in Britain thanks to the Vikings.

In the nowadays Turkish megalopolis, Romani inherited the actual common features, with language roots showing a melting within Greek words and Indo-Aryan lingual base. Avorin gave the example of the word “road” that is *“Dromos”* in Greek and *“Drom”* in Romani inferring that perhaps this is the most important word in the language. There also many written examples both from Italian and German pilgrims about Romani called “Little Egyptians”. This was the starting point of the Romani migration through the Catholic Europe. They used to present themselves as *“Pilgrims from Little*

Egypt” and have been sentenced by the Pope to seven years of wandering as punishment for betraying the Christian faith, maybe the first clear example of official persecution. We could also call the 15th century the century of migration, with a set of official sources describing the Romani arrival in different cities. The first one is from 1416 where “*Emaus gentlemen from Egypt and his 120 people*” arrived in Brasov in Romania, then in 1421 the “*Roma Count*” Andreas was seen in Belgium, in 1422 in Alsace, while the “*Chronicle of Bologna*” mentions Andrea from Egypt who passed through Forli. In 1425, it was the turn of Zaragossa, in 1427 in Paris and in 1512 Count Anthonius arrived in Sweden. These sets of official first encounters were followed by complaints of thefts and misbehaviors. Romani were expelled in 1499 from Spain and Portugal, in 1544 Britain introduced laws that allowed the killing of the male Gypsies and locals who befriended Gypsies risked the death penalty. In 1637 Sweden allowed the killing of “*Tattare*” males. During the period between 1500-1800, 148 antiziganist laws were passed in German states and finally in Wallachia and Moldavia between 200000 to 600000 Roma were enslaved. In the 15th century, enslavement and slave donations appeared to increase especially to monasteries, and in 1445 Vlad Dracul took “*11000-12000 people without luggage and animal who looked like Egyptians*” from the Turks in Bulgaria. The 17th century has been a very tough period for Roma with practices like women sterilization, Romani hunting, expulsions, entry bans, violent assimilations, separation of families, prohibition of language, deportation to Brazil, hangings, codification of slavery, fostered from both Catholic and Orthodox Europe. The only exceptions were Scotland, Russian Empire, Ottoman Empire and Poland where they had autonomy and their own military divisions or they were highly taxed craftsmen. An important example given by Avorin comes from the “*Pravile Cea mare*” (Great Code 1652): “*If the Gypsy slave of a boyard steals once [...] a chicken they shall be pardoned, but if they steal something more valuable they should be punished like robbers*”. During the 18th but above all the 19th century according to Avorin and his sources, we saw a complex evolution of antiziganism that evolved in a new set of discriminative practices all over Europe. One famous example is of the Italian Cesare Lombroso with his “*Uomo Delinquente*” and moreover deportations to Australia, residence prohibitions, professional registrations, prohibition of nomadism but what we must underline is the continuative shame of open slavery occurred in Romania until 1864 and the prosecution of Roma hunts in Scandinavia even in the eve of modernity.

All these sources must be considered as “*First Migration*”. Avorin described moreover a “*Second Migration*”, the so-called “*Slobuzenja*”, when emancipated Roma migrated eastwards to Russia, northward to Scandinavia and westward to Western Europe, Northern-Southern America and Australia where *Kalderash*, *Lovara* and *Ciurari* Roma were especially keen towards migration. In the 20th century the infamous and draconian phenomenon of the “*Porrajmos*”, the Romani version of Shoah, happened. This situation precipitated when after Hitler’s election of 1933 and in 1938 we saw the first important racist publication made by Tobias Portschy called “*Die Zigeunerfrage*” (*Gypsy Question*) and moreover Robert Ritter in a medical magazine “*Fortschritte der Erbatologie*” described Romani people as “fallen Arians” hastening a discrimination that was at that time deep and that touched almost all the parts of the German society full of biases and hate fostered by the Reich’s propaganda. Avorin after having analyzed both waves of historical migration, the discriminations and the original theories, put his emphasis on the issue of different Romani subgroups divided by macro-regions. For example he stated the presence of an old style Gypsy group linkable to the first migration, these subgroups are the *Romanisel*, *Sinti*, *Kale* and the

Manoush, then he focused over the second migration subgroups like the *Kalderash* and *the Lovara* and finally , a heterogeneous group of Eastern European Roma like the *Borbash* and the *Gurbeti*. All these ethnic groups are obviously divided by different dialects - Avorin counted 64 of them.

Avorin organized his methodology by comparing the historical policy of both Romania and Sweden regarding the Romani peoples. In Romania the *Baro Porrajmos* under the influence of the Iron Guard led to the death of thousands of Roma. In Sweden, there were no direct victims of extermination but a plethora of Antiziganist policies and practices. In the period directly after the war and until 2000, there arose an open wave of Antiziganism in both countries: in 1948 in Sweden where experiments and sterilization of women lasted until 1968, and in Romania during the period between 1989-1993. Even though the political situations were different, the Swedish Social Democrats and the Romanian dictatorship steadily discriminated Roma who were not expelled but fully excluded by the society. In Romania, they were called officially as “*Others*”. In Sweden, instead they had no possibility to be recognized by a population census, constituting an invisible part of the society. The contemporary Antiziganism could also be recognized in both the countries and another time with a very close pattern, the exclusions and the private violence episodes occurred by people from far right political identities in Sweden and in Romania with what Avorin described as “soft” ethnic cleansing and so excluding and using violence in order to avoid Roma in the cities.

The main aim of the research of Avorin was to identify the main factors that could explain Antiziganism starting from an historical perspective that showed the continuation of the status quo despite of the EU accession. This instead fostered violence in Romania that wanted to prevent any Roma migration. Avorin stated that there is no difference between physical extermination and cultural assimilation, Romani suffered from both not because of social and even religious causes but for **economic** and **political** reasons. Avorin ended with a personal suggestion advocating the right of Roma to **cultural difference**. The common political practice is to link the term Romani/Roma with poverty and try to find a way to let them to integrate. He sees the essence of Romani in their particular culture and is against the territorial proposal as the one made about the Russian Kaliningrad Enclave. There should be plans of **financial aid** to **self-sufficient Romani communities** that should be free to travel wherever they want and not segregated by the decision of any governments and more consideration by the European Union with the institution of a **poor relief fund** available for those Romani communities in poverty that threaten the local municipalities with a concrete risk of bagging. We can conclude by saying that Antiziganism is a sever threat in Europe. The financial and political crisis all over Europe led to discrimination that keep institutions weak and the majorities less patient towards begging episodes or cultural difference leading to the uprising of far right political forces. We have this situation in France, in Italy, in Scandinavia and even in Slovakia where very recently the Fico government has lost one third of his votes transferred to the neo-Nazi political party.

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