

Spatial Separation. The New Ghettoization of the Roma in Ochotnica Górná

Ewa Nowicka

Ochotnica, the longest village in the Podhale region, located between the Lubań and Gorce ranges, stretches 27 kilometers wide. In fact it divides into two villages, Ochotnica Dolna and Ochotnica Górná, which together form the municipality of Ochotnica Dolna. In Ochotnica Górná, right next to the main road, along which the village extends, there is a settlement of people who belong to the Bergitka Roma community, the poorest and least attached to Roma tradition of the Roma groups living in Poland. For that reason they are treated by other Roma groups as a community with lower status. The residents of Ochotnica are convinced that the Roma – commonly called Gypsies, or, in Slavic languages, Tsigani– have always lived there. The oldest members of the community,

however, remember that during the German Occupation they lived in Młynne, in a valley adjacent to Ochotnica Dolna. The Uplanders (*Gorale*) of Ochotnica Górná know little of the Roma's past, culture, language, customs, and social order, and what they do know is the result of very superficial external observation, since there is no social interaction between the and the Roma. A quarter century ago, there was still an old neighbor who remembered them and reminisced about a meeting in his house with the Roma smith Szczerba over coffee. At present meeting for coffee is unimaginable, though one Roma woman works in the local elementary school as an assistant with Roma children and, as a co-worker on the school staff, is invited to school events, including those of a social character. She speaks with pride of the charm and kindness of the administrators and teachers, of their egalitarian approach, of the absence of any kind of prejudice towards her and her family. Roma and Uplander children meet at school, but there is no talk of coming over to each other's houses. The "impenetrability" of the two environments is an enduring fact, similar to what Czesław Miłosz described in *Native Realm* with regard to the Polish and Jewish communities in the Vilnius of his youth. Until recently, this impenetrable coexistence did not bear the signs of conflict.

Roma settlements here have not fundamentally changed since the 1980s and '90s. Most Roma families lived together in a single one-storey house, to which the municipality, with funds from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and

Administration, later added on a second, similar building, allowing other families to move into apartments there. The house or houses have a shared heating installation and are surrounded by the rocky riverside area, separated from the main road by a local stream and the bridge that crosses it, also thoroughly renovated recently. Beyond the bridge, on the side of the settlement there is a single path that leads to the rustic meadows where the residents of Ochotnica have customarily taken their cows to pasture. In the back, behind the nice-looking houses connected to each other as one whole, there are a number of barracks, not many now, in which the whole Roma population of the settlement lived until recently. A small group of those residents still live there, as well as some newly formed families – married couples in which at least one partner comes from another upland settlement. The barracks were supposed to be destroyed immediately after the construction of the buildings was complete, but by force of inertia and due to local authorities' diminishing desire to interfere in the life of the Roma, they have remained.

Every year, when I visited Roma settlements, I would observe positive material changes: the children were better dressed, the apartments were better kept, and in the school, teachers assured me that the educational situation of Roma children was improving. There was a fundamental change, too, in the language used by government officials, teachers, ordinary residents of the village, and the Roma themselves to talk about relations between Roma and non-Roma.

As a result of Roma complaints about aggressive behavior by non-Roma neighbors towards the residents of the Roma settlement, a surveillance camera was set up on a power pole in 2013. Two years later a new element appeared in the landscape: a metal fence around the Roma settlement, which in 2016 was equipped with a system of video cameras facing the area around the settlement. The fence and the video cameras were put there by the municipality for the purpose of protecting the Roma settlement from attacks by villagers. The latter, the Roma's closest neighbors, have not concealed their annoyance— they constantly complain about the stench of the smoke from the bonfires the Roma set to burn tires in order to extract metal from them, which they then sell for scrap. The Roma themselves argue in their defense that that is the only way they have of making money, and refuse to give it up. They say openly: "We have to put food in the children's mouths, after all." These behaviors, not accepted by the village community, are presented as a necessary strategy of survival, to which they are driven by their life conditions. The uplander neighbors point, now from across the fence, at the chaotic mess and the great big garbage heap of salvaged junk from which the Roma take their scraps to sell.

Officials, on the other hand, those who perform some function in the administration or local government, though usually very restrained, state with bitterness:

*"Now you're not allowed to shout anything too loud,
because they [the Roma—E.N.] have special rights.*

Yes, because they are the ethnic minority, they think that any different attitude we have is... it seems to them that we are discriminating against them as a minority.”

When the Polish neighbors call the police, the latter are slow to appear and, faced with a firm wall of combative Roma men, they refuse to enter the territory of the settlement, not wishing to escalate the conflict.

When I began my anthropological research in Ochotnica 25 years ago, the isolation of ethnic communities was in a certain sense greater—significantly fewer children went to school and they finished at an earlier stage than now, schools had no position of assistant for Roma issues, the Roma were noticeably poorer than the majority of their uplander neighbors; but at the same time the smith Szczerba, respected throughout the village, came over to his neighbor's for coffee, and his granddaughter joyfully embraced her Polish classmate, with whom she took the same bus home from school. A young uplander woman carried the child of a smaller, older Roma woman across many kilometers along the main village road, having a friendly conversation with her. Uplander neighbors differentiated the “decent” members of the Roma settlement, who should be acknowledged and respected, from the drunks and deadbeats. The criteria for a positive assessment were diligence, honesty, dependability and decent behaviour. The Uplanders were not glad about the Roma's presence in the village, but they believed that since they had “always”

lived there, they must go on living there. Asked about how people in the village should behave if some barracks were to go up in flames in the Roma settlement, they answered that it would be imperative “to help people— they have children too, they’re people too” and underscored that the priest would no doubt command them to do so from his pulpit. Writing about Uplander-Roma relations in Ochotnica in the 1990s, I did not hesitate to assert that the Roma were simultaneously alien to the Uplanders (due to cultural and physical dissimilarities) and their familiars (due to “squatters’ rights” and habituation). Back then they were familiar strangers, countrymen, sometimes difficult, but not threatening.

The last two decades have seen the implementation of an enormous number of projects whose purpose was defined as “Roma integration.” As part of those projects, Roma received measurable financial support, sometimes camouflaged to some extent in the form of sometimes pointless training sessions whose aims made no sense to the Roma community, as they quite logically were inclined to accept only some concrete form of material aid. Polish institutions (of the national and local government) used rhetoric to promote a kind of integration that was supposed to be something other than assimilation, the familiar process whereby minority cultures become increasingly similar to the majority culture, which often takes place under pressure from the majority. It is thus important now to assess whether and how in the case of the Roma population of Ochotnica some form of integration has been achieved,

and also what circumstances have developed as a “side effect” of activities aimed at integration, not always producing the desired result.

The village and the Roma undoubtedly have a higher standard of living today. Nevertheless, the degree of conflict between the two sides has not diminished but rather has increased. The villagers accuse the authorities of applying to the Roma different and considerably less harsh standards than those applied to the majority. In the eyes of the Uplanders, the Roma not only are not discriminated against, but occupy a privileged position— they receive material aid, are essentially provided for by public funds, and do not look for work, while manifesting an increasingly entitled position. Meanwhile, the Roma, not only their leaders, but also average residents of the settlement, underscore their difficult material situation, the hostility of the entire non-Roma population (sometimes with minor exceptions) toward them, and— an entirely new phenomenon— manifestations of “racism” from the majority community and, for their part, a readiness to engage in certain forms of battle against it and increasing willingness to initiate those. These battles relate to, among other things, their right to ownership of the territory marked by the fence as well as the bridge and paths leading to the meadows beyond the stream. They have begun entering into conflict with Uplander leading their cows to pasture via the bridge and path, declaring them to be trespassers and attacking them with animal feces. The means of battle include resorting to the use of certain carefully cho-

sen forms of mass media (or more often threatening to do so). I have been informed that nobody will threaten the Roma for fear they will immediately call television reporters, who will arrive, shoot a film and show the world how the Roma minority is being discriminated against and its minority rights violated. The local government officials who are in closest contact with both the local Roma population and the non-Roma majority, and are frequently caught in the position of performing the necessary mediation in conflicts, observe that among the local Roma, they have the most trouble with young men, usually the best-educated people in the group. Tension and hostility are coming to the surface in the village, as well as the belief that the policies adapted on Roma issues may lead to dramatic conflict on a scale hitherto not seen.

translated by Timothy Williams