

***There's No Way to See  
Suffering from Above.  
Europe's Roma  
Communities in  
Lidia Ostałowska's  
Reportage *Cygan  
to Cygan* (A Gypsy  
Is A Gypsy)***

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Wim Willems claims that the Roma appear in the popular imagination chiefly in two roles—as the dregs of society or in a flattering but not exactly illuminating light as Romantic outsiders.<sup>1</sup> Willems underscores that his book does not answer the question of who the Roma truly are or what they are like, but rather how they are portrayed in literary and anthropological texts of the past two centuries. Willems's

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<sup>1</sup> W. Willems, *In Search of the True Gypsy. From Enlightenment to Final Solution*, London 1997, p. 17.

research indicates that in the history of representations of the Roma, a collective image dominates which does not reveal the ethnic diversity of the group, but instead oscillates around the position that its cultural system is “inferior,” while the “norm” against which it is so judged is naturally located in the culture of the scholar or author.

The history of representation shapes social reality; that history participates in public discourse which has contributed to the continuation of discrimination against Roma, their marginalization and exclusion. The culmination of these processes was the creation, in many parts of Europe of Roma ghettos, closed spaces both physically and symbolically. It should be underscored that the phenomenon of Roma migrations<sup>2</sup> as well as that of the social advancement of some representatives of the community<sup>3</sup> have hindered the process of consistent ghettoization.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, the formation of separate spaces to which Roma are confined, whether camps or neighborhoods on the outskirts of European towns and cities, endures as an ongoing phenomenon.

Images depicting the condition of these communities and their members, hitherto absent in Polish nonfiction literature, have now become the subject of journalism by reporter Lidia Ostałowska.<sup>5</sup> In the period 1996-2000 she

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<sup>2</sup> See E. Marushiakova, V. Popov, “Na Zachód a nawet na Wschód,” *Dialog Pheniben* 20/2015, pp. 12–17.

<sup>3</sup> See C.E. Wyatt, *Romarising. Bohaterowie kampanii społecznej „Jedni z wielu”*, Wrocław 2013.

<sup>4</sup> See B. Jałowiecki, W. Łukowski (eds.), *Gettoizacja polskiej przestrzeni miejskiej*, Warszawa 2007.

<sup>5</sup> All of the quotations cited from this work are from: L. Ostałowska, *Cygan to Cygan*, second edition, Wołowiec 2012 (the first edition was released in 2000). Page numbers are provided in brackets.

took a series of journeys into Roma communities in Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Czechia and Hungary. As a journalist, Ostałowska is conscious of the mechanisms of previous, orientalist representations of the Roma in literature and the media and is consistently engaged in building an oppositional project of listening closely to the Roma point of view; the result of her efforts is a collection of reportages bearing the title *Cygan to Cygan* (A Gypsy Is A Gypsy), an ironic poke at generalizing oversimplifications.

This work may be considered a post-colonial study of the topic; the author perceives in the situation of European Roma their subjugation by the majority population, which exhibits ignorance and abuses of its power— for example, often relying on force in its attempts to solve complex socioethnic problems.<sup>6</sup>

Let us examine the panorama sketched by Ostałowska of Roma presence in Europe in the 1990s, from which she extracts images of ghettos and the nature of how these communities function. It should be underscored here that the main point of reference for the frames that Ostałowska captures is Communism and the influence of the change of system on the Roma's economic situation, as well as the problem of their marginalization and migration. The ghettos described by Ostałowska are shown as the consequence of a two-pronged intervention in the Roma way of life. The

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<sup>6</sup> I have written more on this topic in *Reprezentacja etnograficzna w perspektywie postzależnościowej*. „*Cygan to Cygan*” Lidii Ostałowskiej, [in:] E. Graczyk, M. Graban-Pomirska, M. Horodecka i M. Żółkoś (eds.), *Białe maski / szare twarze: ciało, pamięć, performatywność w perspektywie postzależnościowej*, Kraków 2015, pp. 311–336.

first stage of it was the order for the settlement of the Roma, issued in the 1950s and '60s in Eastern Bloc countries, and the second was the overthrow of Communist governments, as a result of which many Roma were deprived of their jobs.

Ostałowska repeatedly cites historical and political points of reference for the realities she describes of the everyday life of her reportages' protagonists. In so doing, she removes from the Roma the stigma projected on them by attributing blame to them for the fate of their community. She reveals the causes of the poverty, unemployment, and isolation of the group by majority national communities. The reader is struck forcefully by the various factors that determine the living conditions of children and young people. A particularly vibrant point on the landscape presented by Ostałowska, I find, is the reportage "W czarnym wąwozie." From it, we learn of the existence of a Roma intelligentsia in Hungary, and about paths of education that are opening up to some Roma (for example in the famous Gandhi High School in Pécs).

An alternative narrative to the familiar deterministic one is also documented in the story of Limalo, a Romanian Roma who made his fortune in Poland, built a house here, and helps his less fortunate compatriots who have more recently emigrated, fleeing conditions of extreme poverty. His prosperity constitutes an exception as well as a counterpoint to the standard fate of the Roma described in the reportage. In the text, Ostałowska constructs a spatial simultaneity, conveying her narrative through a pendular alternation between

action set in Poland and in Romania. Her eye, sensitive to spatial stratification, perceives divisions that are evident in the smallest details, such as the condition of stucco: “In Comăna de Jos the gypsy area is at the edge of the village. From the bus stop you go along some byways that belong to the gadzh, i.e., outsiders [...]. Nearer to the dam there stand the Gypsies’ buildings. They can be recognized by the marks on the stucco, a meter above the ground. Every year the accumulated water overflows onto it” [7]. Let us note that in keeping with Ostałowska’s usual rule, she tells the narrative from the Roma point of view, as shown by her use of the word “gadzh,” reflecting the Roma focalization, the point of view from which this history is narrated.<sup>7</sup>

“Ederlezi” is a reportage particularly replete with cultural detail, devoted to the situation of Muslim Roma in Macedonia and Albania. The text’s dedication, to Jerzy Ficowski, constitutes a kind of self-referential meta-statement, a sort of declaration of anthropological orientation. It is a fitting hint of things to come, since the reportage represents a study of one of the most important holidays for the region’s Roma dwellers. Ostałowska thereby offers us the chance for a detailed examination of the customs of these communities, and in the context of the whole collection, illuminates another cultural variation created at the intersections of ancient Roma traditions and influences from external milieux. As a result, the reader acquires an increasingly strong awareness of the tremendous complexity and variability of Roma cultures in Europe.

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<sup>7</sup> See M. Rembowska-Płuciennik, *Fokalizacja zmysłowa*, [in:] *Poetyka intersubiektywności. Kognitywistyczna teoria narracji a proza XX wieku*, Toruń 2012, pp. 189–191.

The various formal techniques used by Ostałowska to describe the community of Muslim Roma in “Ederlezi” are worth noting. She generally has a preference for short sentences and the present tense, which allow her to present her protagonists almost as if in a film shot.<sup>8</sup> This reportage begins with sentences that form the perspective of a vital and vivid dispatch through the deployment of the present tense: “Rafet stands clothed in his underwear before the open wardrobe. He looks over the suits. News can be heard from the radio” [81]. In this sentence we get an inkling of another formal device that organizes the text. Ostałowska singles out a particular character around whom the narrative will be constructed. His perspective repeatedly returns throughout the story, up to the final scene, in which his inner monologue appears. I will cite a portion of it: “Rafet seems to be having fun with the guests, seems to be jumping around, but in his heart he is worried. As Šutka he was always victorious. To him, for the best lamb, the flag had always been given—first the Yugoslavian flag, later the Macedonian one. What about now?” [98].

Often, the use of inner monologues in the narration allows Ostałowska to go much further in her attempt to textually represent the protagonist’s point of view than she otherwise could. In the case of the particular problems at hand, it has an additional, cultural dimension. I do not mean merely the suspension of the external point of view in order to

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<sup>8</sup> On cinematic influences in Lidia Ostałowska’s work, see the interview with her in the following collection: A. Wójcicka, *Reportrzy bez fikcji*, Wołowiec, 2011, pp. 204–205. There, Ostałowska mentions being intrigued by Carlos Sorin’s film *Bombon, El Perro*, which, as she notes, does not have the “traditional narrative spine of a film,” but rather is focused on individual scenes of characters’ everyday life.

understand the character's point of view. Rafet here is, significantly, a representative of his community. His cultural practices and way of interpreting the world become, by virtue of metonymy, a part representing the whole. The inner monologue is a form of conveying how the holiday being described by Ostałowska is understood in the local community. Entering into his inner experience reveals the world of values that is contained in such rituals. In the passage quoted above, the importance of the social hierarchy, as constituted in the contest of expertise in preparing a lamb offering, is shown. Other accounts likewise reveal the sacral and identity-affirming functions of holidays. Ostałowska concentrates primarily on the folk dimension of Ederlezi, however, which she illustrates with descriptions of dances, banquets, music, and the holiday pause in linear time.

We should also note that in spite of how certain cultural practices (such as the ritual slaughter that takes place during Ederlezi) function in her discussion, Ostałowska consistently avoids evaluation; her purpose is immersion in the world wherein she finds herself and concentration on its polysensory perception. This position is reflected by numerous details of auditory, visual and tactile impressions in the text. By the same token, the reader is allowed to take part in a kind of immersion in this seemingly impenetrable world. Another wall temporarily disappears, and the audience, learning the cultural practices of the Other and the meanings attributed to them, broadens its understanding. Ostałowska's intention is for this anthropological perspective to work at reducing prejudice, ignorance, and, in effect, the creation of ghettos as well.

Ostałowska, in writing about various Roma communities, attempts above all to be present in them. Her tactic, based on participatory observation and entering into contact with the people whom she is writing about, contrasts with the approach suggested by the metaphorical image of helicopters circling over the struggle in Kosovo: “They fly low, barely above the summit. There’s no way to see suffering from above, so the refugee camp looks like a vacation campground” [95]. When, together with the reporter, we descend into the fray, it turns out that there are Roma living in the camp as well, though they deny their identity. They declare, out of fear, that they are Albanians, since the Albanians are planning a broad assimilation campaign and set this as the condition of the right of Roma to remain in Kosovo.

The most dramatic situation we see the Roma facing is probably in the reportage entitled “Karcer.” Ostałowska takes us to Bulgaria, where she presents the gradual process of ghettoization as the main axis of the narrative. The first episode in the text presents an image of the edge of the city of Sliven, where both Bulgarian Gypsies whose faith is Eastern Orthodoxy and Turkish Gypsies who profess Islam live. In the “higher zone of the ghetto,” as Ostałowska calls it, it is possible to meet Goli Gypsies, who are treated as outcasts by the others due to their extreme poverty and degraded living conditions. Thus inside the ghetto is another ghetto; ghettoization reveals itself to have varying degrees of intensity. Ostałowska calls attention to the situation of the children in this ghetto of the ghetto– they walk around “barefoot and shirtless,” and are deprived of access to education [58]. She refers to the events of 1996, when riots erupted among

hunger-stricken Roma. Their children at that time were dying of emaciation. The Roma Ghetto in Sliven presents itself to Ostałowska as analogous to circles of Dante's Hell in which "confusion, anarchy, and murder reign" [58].

Numbers are important in a reportage, so Ostałowska asks in "Karcer" about the scale of the phenomenon, and weaves the answer into the text: "Each morning fourteen thousand people rise from the neighborhood's beds and pallets. Rich, poor, clever, stupid, simple, hunchbacked, good, evil. This is the nation within a nation, Bulgaria inside Bulgaria" [58]. By listing these contrasting epithets (*rich-poor* etc.), the author polemicizes with the stereotype that such places are filled with the wretched, outlaws, uneducated and sick people. It is notable that she attempts to undermine a stereotype using binary categories, which elsewhere belong to the poetics of the stereotype.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent frames in the reportage, however, describe primarily poor people, afflicted with hunger, forced to steal in their struggle for life. Thus Ostałowska, in listing these simple dichotomies, presents an ironic, distanced approach to all labels with which we attempt, fecklessly, to describe reality using shorthand. For Ostałowska, the chaotic material of life, or the framing of a situation in ways that shake the reader from complacent associations, seem closer to the truth.<sup>10</sup> An example of such a frame is a conversation with a Roma man in prison—asked if he has any requests, he answers without missing a beat: "Work, I like to work" [60].

<sup>9</sup> See E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1994.

<sup>10</sup> L. Ostałowska, *Zbliżenie*, w: A. Wójcińska, *Reportrzy bez fikcji. Rozmowy z polskimi reporterami*, Wołowiec 2011, p. 204.

This image takes the reader to the main theme— the awful abuses of the Roma in Bulgarian prisons. We thus descend with Ostałowska into the lowest circle of hell, comprised of dark expanses where the most elementary human rights are violated. Her lapidary narration does not shock with emotional intensity but rather elicits emotion from the reader. In successive parts of “Karcer,” the reportage takes on the form of an activist documentary. The reporter presents reports from former prisoners that reveal their inhuman treatment by police, investigators, and prison guards. Ostałowska once again penetrates inside this “closed space,” and gathers the scraps of information that she can manage to extract. Sometimes, due to her protagonists’ fears, she must resort to reading body language. She notes: “Prisoners curled up, crumpled, submissive, clinging to the wall like light switches” [65]. She talks with prison psychologists, whose opinions she cites with irony, observing that “they don’t really have a problem with the Roma, and Turkish minorities.” She also quotes their answer, tinged with racism, to her question about the dire conditions prevalent in Bulgarian prisons: “Primitive natures are quicker to adapt to limitations” [66].

Ostałowska’s goal is thus to honestly document the reality of the Roma and to oppose discrimination against them through a detailed account of their situation. This brings to mind that part of the reporter’s job that was defined by Ryszard Kapuściński as becoming “a voice for the voiceless.”<sup>11</sup> The position taken by the prison psychologists mentioned above constitutes another important

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<sup>11</sup> R. Kapuściński, *Dalem glos ubogim*, Kraków 2008.

thread in the collection *Cygan to Cygan*, signalled in the title. I refer to the reality that functions in people's minds. Because the walls that set the boundaries of the ghettos are most deeply present in perceptions in of the Other.

Another reportage that gives us a glimpse of stereotypical thinking about the Roma is a text on Slovakia and Czechia, "Sen do obiadu, zabawa do rana" (Sleep Till Lunch, Fun Till Dawn). This piece is far from making one-sided assertions, and does not avoid showing some frames that also shed light on sources of negative views of the Roma. The structure of the reportage is based on a montage of quoted statements from various points of view. This is typical of the reporter's objectivist poetics, which keeps her commentary to a minimum, aiming to convey the voices of both sides in this interethnic encounter.<sup>12</sup>

When Roma are quoted, there appear currents of accusation toward the "gadzh"—it is they, in the eyes of the Gypsies, who created concentration camps and who also bear the blame for the contemporary plight of the group. There are thus strong generalizations on both sides of the conflict, though the Czechs and Slovaks try to avoid them. Ostałowska astonishingly juxtaposes a statement made by one Czech woman with a factcheck on it, however, revealing the discrepancy between declared views and behaviors.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> P. Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative. The Timely and Timeless*, Cambridge 1994.

<sup>13</sup> Consider this passage in the reportage: "People shouldn't be prejudiced against Gypsies," Ms. Vejrostková asserts. 'Sometimes they are better than Czechs. And those ones I could have as neighbors.' But in the district office there is a petition signed by tenants, including Vejrostková, demanding that an apartment in their block which has become available be assigned to a Czech family" [107].

The reportage cites the problems many Roma have with tidiness, loud games, not keeping an eye on children playing on the streets until late at night, and also the spread of drugs by Roma dealers. The most radical reaction from the Czechs is to build a wall at Ústí nad Labem which, as Ostałowska reports, was supposed to “provide relief for the Czechs” as “they found living with the Gypsies hard” [105]. The Czechs created a ranking system for apartment blocks and assess the “Gypsy” ones as the most devastated and the dirtiest. The “white” apartment blocks were considered the best ones. Ostałowska thus perceives the signals of racial segregation in what are presented as spatial construction and evaluation procedures. She feels that the cause for this is the former process of Roma productivization, which affected mostly men and at the same time disrupted traditional social roles (by, among other things, changing men’s expectations toward women). The theme of the ineffective provision of social assistance to the Roma also resurfaces several times. Ostałowska mentions the institutions founded by the Roma and the local activities initiated by them. The Lacho Drom (*Good Road*) Association proposed three important projects whose aim was to integrate the Roma into the local community. It attempted to actively defuse some potential conflicts in the Roma-Czech relationship by initiating the hiring of Roma cleaning women, the training of Roma men to be local watchmen, and the organization of joint Czech-Roma recreational activities. From the attention she devotes to these matters and the level of detail in her description, we may conclude that Ostałowska is looking for proposed solutions and is testing them out.

Ostałowska's text brings to light a tragic conflict, however, and one difficult to defuse. She seems not to take a position, remaining focused on collecting views that represent both sides of the dispute. The school principal is an optimist who argues that the Czech town she lives in will set an example of "how we can live together beautifully" [120]. Yet the last sentence in the text is spoken by a restaurant owner who let himself be talked into organizing a joint conversation between Roma and Czechs. His unambiguous response to a proposal to repeat that initiative is "I won't rent it, there's no way" [120]. The final moment thus appears to reveal the helplessness of the reporter, as she suggests that the conflict is, for the moment, impossible to resolve.

To summarize, we can observe that Lidia Ostałowska's reportages in this book draw a sociological and anthropological portrait of many Roma communities in European countries. These communities often function within various forms of ghettos, and Ostałowska attempts to understand the reasons for that phenomenon and to describe its consequences for the daily life of the Roma. She draws attention to the various kinds of barriers that comprise the interaction between circles of exclusion and their mutual reinforcement of each other.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Ostałowska does not offer up readymade solutions, though she cites initiatives that counteract the process of ghettoization. It is striking to find how often these are undertaken by members of the Roma

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<sup>14</sup> See A. Jasińska-Kania, S. Łodziński, *Wykluczani z narodu: mniejszości narodowe, migranci, uchodźcy*, [in:] M. Jarosz (ed.), *Wykluczeni. Wymiar społeczny, materialny i etyczny*, Warszawa 2008, p. 273.

community themselves. Ostałowska also reveals the enormous scale of abuses by majority communities.

She herself chooses participation as a form of resistance to the structures of the ghetto. When we read her detailed, multisensory descriptions of these spaces, we have utter confidence that they could only have been written by a person who decided to cross boundaries and enter areas of exclusion, return to them, and practically become a part of them. In a text on the Roma living on the periphery of the Hungarian city of Pécs, we see her hurdling narrow streets, going down the spiral staircase to the Calcium Colony [?], counting exactly how many levels separate these *other* worlds: “One hundred and seventeen concrete steps, step by step. Each one takes us further away from the sunny city of Pécs, from its walls, belltowers, prisons, tiled rooftops, pubs, bakeries, wineries, theaters, cinemas and shops with name brands. Another step and we leave behind the valley of the Danube. Yet another and we are no longer in Hungary, no longer in Europe” [31]. The Roma ghettos are thus absent places, hidden, overlooked in official discourse. Ostałowska aims to reveal their existence, return their presence on the map, and make them visible. Step by step.

**translated by Timothy Williams**