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THE PUBLIC ATTITUDES 'GYPSIES – BULGARIANS'
(Reflection on one Ethnographic Exhibition)

The present paper does not intend to draw generalizations about the image of the gypsies in present-day Bulgarian society, all the more so because the efforts of a number of research and social workers and politicians have not produced satisfactory results in this respect. As practice has made it clear, generalizations and universal prescriptions do not produce the most perspective means of projecting the image of the "other" - in this case of the (gypsy) minority, in the eyes of the (Bulgarian) majority. What I am trying to do is to present to you an isolated case - the experience the National Ethnographic Museum (NEM) at the Bulgarian Academy of Science (BAS) gained as a result of an ethnographic exhibition about the Bulgarian Gypsies. The change in the image is to be found not in absolute parameters but in the possibility to provoke the consciousness of the majority concerning the gypsies' problems and in the attitude of the gypsies as a minority in society; and this is in itself a considerable achievement. The paper will not examine chronologically the event in its details but its results. The guiding idea is to show what the influence of a message was, a message presented through the mechanisms of an ethnographic exhibition seen by some Bulgarians - those who visited it. We will examine the results in its mirror image seen in the visitors' book. Such a book is a necessary part of each exhibition. It is not always used as a profitable source of information. It is, however, interesting and indicative of the reflexes of society to the message of an exhibition. The readiness of the visitors to give written expression of their personal opinion can be considered as a self-expression on a personal level and on the social level - as representative of the attitude of certain social groups; for the museologist it is valuable feedback from those to whom the exhibition is addressed. I will try to draw conclusions about the results of an exhibition concerning the gypsies in Bulgaria as it was seen by the visitors who expressed their opinion in the visitors' book.

Introductory Information

At one of the regular meetings of the NEM Museum Council in Sofia in 1994 two of our colleagues - Elena Marroushiakova and Vesselin Popov suggested that an exhibition dedicated to the Gypsies in Bulgaria be organized. It is my impression that they did not know what would be after that. It is much more interesting to say what the reaction of the Museum experts was. The attitude of

the members of the Museum Council was negative. Their arguments against it were varied and wide in scope: from a purely professional point of view some said no ethnographic material about the culture of the gypsies had been collected and it was difficult to realize the idea because it would have been the first exhibition of this kind in Bulgaria; some said it was difficult to find place for it in the existing plan; the objections of others, charged with irony and negativism, were frivolous - they said, "We've had enough of those gypsies!" and "Why exactly the gypsies?" I must declare that at that time (and this still persists today) the sociological polls showed that 69 % of the Bulgarians had a negative attitude to the Romanies; this was also indicated in the Sofia newspapers in which often appeared publication with headlines like "Gypsies Beat Someone to Death", "Gypsies Kidnap a Girl", "Gypsies Beat a Cop", "Gypsies Terrorize Social Workers" (П.-Е. Митев. 1994, pp. 226, 229). It turned out that, generally speaking, not only the majority of the population had a negative attitude to the gypsies. Even ethnologists were so much influenced by it that it had stifled their ethical and professional obligations to study the ethnically specific characteristic features of the various ethnic groups.

The positive attitude prevailed and in 1994 and the preparatory work for the Exhibition was started (An Agreement between NEM and "Romany Study" Society for the Study of the Minorities was signed). There were difficulties facing the people organizing it coming from three directions:

First: in the field of museology:

- The Bulgarian museum workers had no experience in working in the field of Gypsy ethnoculture and in preparing this kind of exhibition (detailed account of the difficulties in the process of preparing the exhibition can be found in: E. Marushuakova and V. Popov. The Gypsies in Bulgaria. The Problems of the Multiculture Museum Exposition. 1995.)

- The problems in defining the best conceptual system for the presentation of Gypsies' culture.

Second: concerning public opinion. The preparatory discussions of the idea revealed the problems which faced the experts (acting as non-experts) - they suggested that a negative reaction on the part of the audience was possible. The later stages of the exhibition showed that the struggle against the prejudices accumulated during the first years of the transition from a totalitarian to a democratic society (known as a period of crisis) were very strong. Here we will only mention that with the help of sponsors the exhibition was offered to a number of towns in the country for free. In spite of this, at first they refused to take that offer.

The sources of the third difficulty were the interethnic contacts and the delicacy of the relationships between the majority and the minority because the exhibition addressed not only the Bulgarians but the Gypsy community as well which was not united.

The Opinions

One of the problems was what approach to adopt in order to make the project effective. The decision to present the variety of Romany culture and its ability to adapt itself to and coexist with Bulgarian culture seemed to be the best. This approach proved to be the best indeed in the course of the independent life of the exhibition. A visitor asked the following question in the visitors' book: "What is the difference? Could a foreigner tell what the difference between the Bulgarian and the Gypsy is...?" Another visitor answered the question in the following way: "After such an exhibition everyone will reconsider the question about the differences between the life and traditions of the Gypsies and the Bulgarians and will discover that there are no differences. The only differences are in the degree of hatred for the Gypsies..." The uniform idea the majority of the Bulgarians had about the Gypsies was undermined. The exhibition showed the different groups of gypsies, their basic crafts and specific features which exist within the macroculture of the majority and this widened their ideas concerning the richness of the culture of the Gypsies. The intention was to revive the "memory" of the Gypsies, create in the present day Bulgarians a positive image of them and thus help to develop, if not to instill a positive attitude to them, at least come to know them better and make them think which form the basis of tolerance and respect.

It is a well-known fact that Bulgarians and Gypsies have lived together for such a long time that it seems like eternity. This was the basic motif in determining the time parameters of the exhibition, setting as its most recent limit the 50's of the XXth century. Its title "The Gypsies in Past Time" - takes us right away to the past, to the time of the "traditional" model of the relationship Bulgarian/Gypsies (E. Marushiakova, V. Popov. 1993, pp. 209, 210) in order to avoid all possible ambiguities which could give the problem political coloring. The impressions of the visitors confirm the rightness of this choice. In the first few days after the opening of the exhibition in Sofia, someone who identified himself or herself as "A visitor" gave expression of her or his gratitude in the book that we "had touched upon a way of life, which was familiar and not so familiar after all". The representatives of the younger generation - teenagers who were aware only of the negative image of the gypsies of the 90's were even more categorical in their opinion - for them the exhibition revealed "an unknown world which has been around us all the time." No one of the exhibition's organizers had expected people to recognize so clearly the task they had set themselves, but this kind of written impressions confirmed how useful their idea was. Addressing knowledge and memory about the joint life aroused not only the curiosity but also the interest of the majority in the culture and life of an "unknown" minority in our society. The exhibition became the central news item in the media of the towns in which it was shown and this led to discussions between representatives of the various

institutions and the community about the problems of the Gypsies in Bulgaria today and of the interethnic contacts/conflicts in Bulgarian social life. We banked on the rediscovery on the part of the Bulgarians of the positive image of the Gypsies in the past and on the message: “come to know them in order to understand them” and got positive results. I shall here quote the opinion of some of the experts who responded to the question why the basic idea of the exhibition was exactly the rehabilitation of the Gypsies’ culture. The historian, Prof. Vera Moutafchieva, thinks that “for the Bulgarians the Gypsies are so different that they are outside the framework of the stereotype which ... supposes “us” and “them” to meet on one and the same level. The Gypsies are not on that level, they are **below** it.” “The fact,” she writes, “is that the Bulgarian does not consider the Gypsy to be his equal, but until recently he did not look upon him as at someone who was dangerous because he was and had never been dangerous,” (“Gypsies”, 199?)

The other opinion was that of the ethnologists E. Marushiakova and V. Popov. They think that “the Bulgarians look upon the Gypsies as something natural and even necessary on the level of life where they meet certain (quite varied) necessities (E. Marushiakova, V. Popov, 1993). Placing them in the dichotomy “ours - not ours” does not disturb “the harmony in the Bulgarians-Gypsies relationship since in the conditions of traditional culture the basic overriding characteristic is integration, the unity of the world and the existing harmony, that is although “not ours” as a category and respective status, the Gypsies are an inseparable part of this world and the general cultural environment in which they have a place of their own.” In the last few years, in addition to the disparaging attitude of the majority was added the tendency of turning the Gypsies into “a scapegoat” during the period of crisis (E. Marushiakova, V. Popov. 1993, p. 216). These were the basic motifs defining the parameters of the exhibition as an attempt at “rehabilitation” before the Bulgarian audience of the Gypsies through the richness of their culture. Positive reactions were envisaged within these parameters both on the part of Bulgarians and Gypsies. The exhibition provoked a second important result - Romany organizations and state cultural institutions joint efforts to work together.

It is a well known fact that each exhibition is either a success or a failure, but its life does not depend entirely on either of them. From the moment of the inception of the idea it is clear how long it is going to last in time, “from - to”, depending on its size, the timetable of the respective museums and this automatically limits the scope of the social response to it. The success of the “Gypsies in Past Time” exhibition in Sofia made the time and the space of its “personal” life longer. It made it possible to more people in the country to see it. In the last five years it has been shown in nine towns and it is planned to be shown in two more towns until the middle of the year 2000. We have to be honest and make it clear that initially the interest in the exhibition was determined by the fact that it

was offered free of charge and the necessary finances came from donors. During the period of crisis and the fact that the museums in the provinces had no money played an important role. But the social response to the exhibition changed the principle of its circulation after the first, sponsored period, came to an end. Now the time-table was determined by the town to which the exhibition went and which covered the expenses. The town of Haskovo is an interesting case. In 1995 the exhibition was offered to and rejected by its History Museum. At the beginning of the year 2000 the same museum together with the Town Council and two Romany organizations invited the exhibition with the excuse those five years earlier the times were hard. I would not like to comment the situation although it is difficult for me to accept their explanation; for me the only explanation is the fact that after having been shown in a number of places the exhibition's reputation grew. When it was opened in Haskovo the media showed interest as did the local public institutions (three local radio stations and the two local newspapers discuss it in advance; on the day after its official opening at which the District Governor and representatives of the town Municipality were present, it was visited by four groups of school children and over fifty individuals).

The visitors' responses to the exhibition indicate their perceptions of the gypsies. Although the percentage of those who showed a negative attitude to the gypsies was relatively high, the majority of the visitors thought the exhibition was useful and instructive. A family from Sofia which visited it on December 10, 1995 wrote the following in the book: "The idea of the Ethnographic Museum to organize an exhibition about the life of Bulgarian Gypsies is praiseworthy because we have known this ethnic group only in a negative light. Their way of life, culture and values reveals them as interesting people." Positive opinions of this kind were expressed also by visitors from Russia, Holland, Japan and Australia - this makes it clear that the problems of the relationship between Gypsies and the majority in the countries in which they live are international. Opinions of this kind were reiterated and, taken as a whole, they collaborate what another visitor wrote in the book: "It is important to learn more about the gypsies because they live in Bulgaria." And some schoolchildren wrote the following: Every people has its way of life. The Gypsies must be very strong people because they have survived in spite of the fact that they are scattered all over the world. Thank you very much for what you have shown us,"

An obstetrician from the town of Sandanski who visited the exhibition in Sofia wrote something which is related to the second successful achievement of the exhibition:

"I am very glad that there is a museum (*i.e. exhibition*) on the Gypsies but why don't they visit it. They have to know about it and they will then realize that they are people which deserve respect and conditions which will make it possible for them to develop and live a normal life." I do not know what the visitor's motives were but it is clear that she thinks that the Gypsies in our society

should have self-confidence. This was one of the tasks the organizers of the exhibition had set themselves and there was a response to it. Stoicho Vassilev a member of the Sofia Romany community wrote in the book: "I liked the exhibition very much and I am glad that one of my dreams - to see an exhibition about our past, has come true." Similar is the modest recognition of another visitor: "... I like it very much... because I belong to these people."

The unsupported conclusion that Gypsies did not visit the exhibition was also voiced in the media. The regular attendance of local groups of Gypsies at the openings, including representatives of the local authorities, and the opinions expressed by Gypsies in the visitors' books refute all kinds of suggestions in this direction. Exact statistics have not been kept, but they too could have been wrongly interpreted; besides they could have easily moved into the sphere of conflicts between the majority and the minority and the central idea of the exhibition was to work against the existing conflicts. In confirmation of this I would quote in translation what Sali-Asparoukh wrote: "Te oven bahtale so keren e romenge te del tumen o Del but bersa trujal o roma" - "May those who work for the Gypsies be blessed. May God give them many happy years together with the Romanies."

Taking into account the obligations of society to the Gypsies prior to the organization of a cultural event of this kind, one is justified in coming to the conclusion that the exhibition was necessary in the context of their self-confidence and awareness of their importance.

If what has been said so far leaves one of the impression of an idyllic lack of problems, then one should ask the question why is the situation in society different. The visitors' book raises these problems as well. The remark: "Why are not the Gypsies of today the same as those of the past?" (Varna, 1997) raises a question addressed to the organizers of the exhibition who are ready to present the Gypsies of today in a positive light, but it is also addressed to the whole society and to its institutional mechanisms - social workers, schools, museums and others in order to overcome the categorical statement of a visitor (a reflection of a certain social opinion): "I hate the Gypsies!"

Being fully aware of the limited possibilities a cultural event like an ethnographic museum has, the authors relied on the principle of a positive attitude and on the importance of learning more about other people which form the basis of tolerance and mutual respect. This is the task which the exhibition had set itself and its results are quite effective. Of considerable importance is the favorable reaction of society and also the coordination achieved in this case between the various institutions - museums, municipalities, Romany organizations and NPO which has become the practice in the last few years. This is the way museum workers can respond to some social problems - an important obligation they have as some of the visitors have observed. At the end I shall quote two opinions which give a positive appraisal of our experience and of the idea to question public opinion and public attitude in a provoking way.

- “We find the exhibition very interesting; it helps us understand the culture of people we come across every day and about whom we know very little. I am convinced that this is the way to cultivate tolerance for those who are different from us,”

- “I am filled with admiration! I hope there will be more exhibitions of this kind! They will help the consolidation of the Bulgarian nation!”

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