



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Karolina Bamanova

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Member - Czechoslovak Roma Association in Canada

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Testimony of Karolina Bamanova

"Human Rights of the Romani Minority"

June 8, 2000

Ladies and Gentleman,

My name is Karolina Banomova. I want to thank your organization for inviting me here today to speak on behalf of the Czechoslovak Roma Association in Canada. Let me start by quoting one of the guiding principles of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights:

"Every human is born free and equal with dignity and respect."

The mandate of the Czechoslovak Roma Association in Canada is to preserve Romani tradition, language, culture, values, our identity. This mandate is intended to ensure the realization of this key guiding principle as outlined in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights.

Today I will be providing you with an overview of the current status of Roma people in Canada, historical and present conditions in the Czech Republic and Western countries, recommendations and concluding remarks.

Analysis of Romani Position in the Czech Republic:

There is a long consistent history of persecution and discrimination of Romani people in the Czech Republic starting in 1300 (700 years ago) resulting in negative economic, social and cultural consequences. During World War II the Romani people were almost wiped out due to genocide: almost 100% killed in Germany, 95% in Czech republic and 75% in Poland. We consider the current situation in The Czech republic as the second worst time in modern history for the Romani people. Roma are exposed to immense racism in everyday life starting from birth. They are often not allowed to visit public places, for example restaurants and stores. They are unable to find a job because of their ethnic origin and 90% are unemployed. They are the first to be fired and the last to be hired. Roma students are often placed in segregated special education schools on the basis of their ethnic origin only. The courts, justice and police have a tendency to minimize racially motivated attacks causing injury or death of Roma people, as documented by Amnesty International. The protection of Romani people is highly unsatisfactory. The tendency to ghettoize Roma people is increasing (as illustrated in the City of Plzen) as well as the effort to isolate them by building walls. The wall in the city of Usti nad Labem has become a symbol of hate. Although the wall was finally removed, only after intense international pressure, the underlying prejudice remains.

There were 33 Roma killed in the Czech Republic since 1989 due to racial, nationalistic and fascist pogroms according to the Centre for Analysis of the Roma Democratic Congress. The printing of fascist press is not punished in the Czech Republic. The results of public opinion polls show that 80% of the Czech population has negative attitudes towards Roma.

There is a tendency to support immigration of Roma in order to get rid of them. Under

current conditions where Roma have lost their faith and trust in Czech justice they have increased their effort to immigrate, mainly to West European countries. The exodus is not caused by social and economic conditions, as most Czech people assume, but by the political conditions in the Czech Republic, the lack of respect for our own laws, and hatred towards the Romani minority.

Situation of Czech Roma in Canada:

It is estimated that 1500 Roma from the Czech Republic are in Canada. We can say that all of them are convention refugees. We are getting our permanent residence papers and next year we will apply for Canadian citizenship. The Roma people have adjusted well to life in Canada. For example:

The school performance and language acquisition of Roma children and youth compares well to other immigrant groups. Families have managed to access housing and are viewed as good tenants. Many adults have secured employment in construction and food services in addition to starting their own small businesses and no longer rely on social assistance. Why have Czech Roma fared so well in Canada? Because Canada is a multi-cultural country, and everyone has the same starting point and opportunities.

The Western Response:

With sadness we watch the action taken by Western countries.

These activities include discouraging legitimate asylum seekers, preventive arrest of asylum seekers in England, and forced deportation of asylum seekers in Belgium. In May 2000, there was a meeting of the British ambassador and the Czech minister of Internal Affairs to establish a temporary British immigration Control Checkpoint at the Prague Airport. What lengths will the cradle of democracy, Great Britain, go to keep the Roma out of their country.

This is an outrage! The U.S. should not just pressure the countries of Eastern Europe to change their fundamental policy towards Roma, but the U.S. could show to the world that they will accept Roma political asylum seekers from Eastern countries. We are asking the United States to establish a definite quota for Roma political asylum seekers.

Solutions/Recommendations:

Currently the Czech Cabinet is engaged in discussions with Romani intellectuals to improve the position of Romani people in the Czech Republic. This followed criticism by Western countries and institutions watching human rights violations. It is our opinion that partial steps of one branch of the government does not go far enough.

An integrated approach by the ministries of education, social services, labour and internal affairs is required. This, coupled with a public education campaign targeted towards Roma and Czechs that teaches tolerance and mutual respect, will begin to address the issues and remove racial barriers.

Conclusion:

We see the situation as one of coexistence of two different cultures whereby all that is dissimilar to the majority culture is rejected, scorned and considered less than valuable, bad.

We reject the approach of assimilation.

We support cultural integration while preserving our identity, including our values which we must not and do not want to give up. The Czech Republic must grow from a set of mono-cultural to multi-cultural values.

In this time Europe has become a continent of complicated and painful struggles by all Roma for their rights. This is similar to the situation of African-Americans in the 1950s and '60s, under the leadership of Martin Luther King. We Czech Roma will not be passive in this process.

I would like to conclude by quoting a well-known Jewish intellectual from Prague, Fedor Gal:

"For Jews, their suffering ended with the end of World War II, but Roma wear the Star of David forever."