

Jan Ort

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# Facets of a Harmony

The Roma and Their  
Locatedness in Eastern  
Slovakia



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I arrived in Jolany having just been awarded a bachelor's degree in Romani studies. Seven years were to pass before I completed this book, during which time I began (but did not complete) a master's degree in General Anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University in Prague, completed a master's degree in Romani studies at the Faculty of Arts of the same university, successfully defended my thesis, which was based on the research I had conducted in Jolany, decided to publish it, and gradually discovered that I would need to rethink the entire project and rewrite the book. This book is not only a report on a specific research



situation, but also reflects the development of my thinking about Romani studies, anthropology, and research conducted among the Roma and the social implications thereof.

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# Introduction

## **A Village of Harmonious Coexistence**

A newspaper report from 2010 depicted Jolany<sup>1</sup> as a village in which Roma and non-Roma lived side by side in perfect harmony.<sup>2</sup> The journalist intimated that in this respect Jolany was unique in Slovakia. The explanation she offered for this idyllic state of affairs was that the local Roma were more “civilised”. They were, she wrote, regular readers of newspapers and did not overstep the socially accepted norm of three children per family. The report described Jolany as a functioning community in which the social roles of Roma and non-Roma complemented each other. The non-Roma tended to be older people, who would ask their younger Romani neighbours for help in the garden, thus providing them some much-needed extra income.

I reread this report in October 2014 while looking for a village in eastern Slovakia where I might carry out long-term fieldwork. Back then, the subject of my research was very loosely defined by questions pertaining to the sociability of the Roma and the negotiation of their position in a particular community. Leaving aside the irritation I felt at the patronising tone of the newspaper report, it did at least confirm to me that Jolany could be an ideal location for my research, since it subverted entrenched

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1 Throughout this book I use fictitious names of villages (not cities) and people. For more on anonymisation, see below in main body of the text.

2 For the sake of anonymisation I will not provide a link to the newspaper article. In the interests of context I would merely point out that it appeared in a publication that styles itself a “Romani newspaper” (*noviny Rómov*). As well as the opinions of the Roma themselves, the article makes great play of the activities of the local mayoress, who pushed through the construction of the council flats for the Jolany Roma and was recognised for her outstanding contribution to the Romani community (see Chapter Two).

ideas of strictly segregated Romani settlements in eastern Slovakia (see for example Jakoubek and Hirt 2008, Scheffel 2005). Jolany is a small village that at the time I was conducting my research had a population of some 150, of which the Roma officially accounted for just over 30% (Mušinka et al. 2014). In reality the Roma accounted for approximately half of the total number of inhabitants. After my previously agreed accommodation in another village fell through, I set off for the north-east of Slovakia and the Svidník district near the border with Poland, where the municipality of Jolany is situated.

Upon arriving in Jolany I fell into conversation with a man who, after only a few words had been exchanged, invited me into the pub for a drink. The man was Peter, a Romani inhabitant of the village, whom I later informed over a beer of my intention to spend a longer period of time in the village. Perhaps recognising a certain interest in the Roma and encouraged by my knowledge of the Romani language, Peter was soon echoing the narrative of the report referred to above, assuring me that in Jolany “it’s not like elsewhere in Slovakia – here we live side by side with the *Gadžé*”<sup>3</sup>. Though I have always tended to take such claims with a pinch of salt, things did indeed seem genuinely different in the Jolany pub to how they were in some other places in eastern Slovakia, where racial segregation was very much the norm in local pubs. The practice elsewhere was for such establishments to have segregated areas for Roma and non-Roma, or for Roma people to avoid them altogether. However, in the small pub in Jolany we were gradually joined by other men, both Roma and non-Roma, who, upon hearing of my plans to remain in the village, concurred with what Peter had said regarding the harmonious relations that pertained there.

When emphasising those features that set Jolany apart from other places, these men, and later on other residents of the village too, touched on two separate topics that gradually formed the backbone of my research and, in the fullness of time, this book. On the one hand they spoke about people, namely, the relations between Romani and non-Romani villagers. And on the other they spoke about place, emphasising how important was their sense of belonging specifically to Jolany, which in this respect, they claimed, represented an outlier when compared to other villages in eastern Slovakia. This book addresses the following fundamental questions arising from these themes. Firstly, how might the narrative regarding the

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3 Interview with Peter (b. 1953), conducted in Romani, 17 October 2014.

harmonious relations between Roma and non-Roma be read, and how did individual actors deal with the categorisation of people into Roma/Gypsies? Secondly, to what extent has the concept of harmonious relations contributed to the construction of Jolany as a specific place? And finally, how did individual actors negotiate this sense of belonging to a given place in light of the categories “local” and “outsider”?

## **Place**

Jolany is located in the Svidník District, a somewhat forgotten part of eastern Slovakia said to be the only region in the country without so much as a kilometre of railway track. The marginalisation of the area is bound up with the fact that the majority of its inhabitants were not ethnic Slovaks but Rusyns, a close-knit ethnic minority on the tripoint of north-eastern Slovakia, south-eastern Poland and Zakarpattia in south-western Ukraine. The ethnic composition of the population means the region also differs from the rest of Slovakia in respect of religion. The Greek Catholic Church predominates here (which under the communist regime was forced to be Orthodox). Like the rest of eastern Slovakia, at the time I was conducting my research (2014–2020) the region was experiencing a depopulation of rural areas, whose inhabitants were relocating in a search for work to larger towns and cities in Slovakia or the neighbouring Czech Republic, and even to the countries of western Europe. As I will show later in this book, these demographic changes also affected Jolany and created an important context for the functioning of relationships between the villagers.

The county town of Svidník only came into existence in 1944 with the merger of Nižný Svidník and Vyšný Svidník. However, a large number of local villages were also rebuilt that had been devastated during the Second World War, especially during the fighting that took place in the Battle of the Dukla Pass (the Carpatho-Dukla Operation) in autumn 1944. One of the municipalities most affected was Jolany, which was razed to the ground at the end of 1944. The only visible reminder of the pre-war period was a wooden church, a local landmark that had miraculously survived. When I began my research, in addition to the church there were around fifty other buildings in Jolany. On the hill on which the church stood was a small cemetery, in which the graves of the Roma were conspicuously segregated from those of the non-Roma. A path led down from the church to the village square, where a small grocery shop was

connected to a room that served as a pub. Here you could buy bottled beer or a glass of lemonade and a shot of Juniper brandy or vodka. The shop sold basic foodstuffs and toiletries, though for anything else you had to travel to Svidník or to the Polish side of the nearby border. The shop adjoined the House of Culture, which had been built in the 1970s and now housed the municipal authorities. A stone's throw from the municipal office, on the other side of a stream traversed by a footbridge, stood eight council flats in two long blocks, which were part of the area known by the locals as the "(Romani) settlement" (*cigánská osada* [Slovak], *vatra* [Romani], *vatrisko* [Rusyn]). At the beginning of my research there were also three Romani families living in a built-up area alongside non-Romani villagers. This development lined the main road that passed through the village in the shape of an "L". The road was connected at one end to the busy highway leading from Svidník to Poland, and on the other end disappeared into the woodland between the hills surrounding the village. One of the buildings right next to the main road had housed the school, but was now dilapidated and no longer fit for purpose. The village children attended school in the neighbouring Drevany.

The local chronicle, which contains both a brief history of the municipality and describes what it calls the "culture of the locals", is particularly illuminating in this respect. According to this text it was processing wood from the nearby forests that had traditionally served as a source of livelihood for the villagers of Jolany, an activity dating back to the 17th century and the very first mention of the village. In addition to a detailed description of the events of the Second World War, the chronicle devotes a considerable amount of space to a more general evocation of village life prior to the war. After a section on the development of education since the end of the 19th century, the author proceeds to organise her chapters along the lines of a glossary of folklore, in which she explains the individual terms pertaining to the culture of housing, alimentation, traditional costume and agricultural tools. The glossary comprises an explanation of Rusyn terminology, which itemises artefacts of the traditional village culture. The chronicle makes no mention of the Roma or their language whatsoever, even though, in a survey conducted by the Ethnographic Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in the early 1950s, the Svidník District reported that the Roma had lived in Jolany since time immemorial (Jurová 2002). The chronicle also overlooks the diverse ethnic composition of this small "Rusyn" municipality, which censuses show was, prior to the war, home not only to the majority Rusyns, but also ethnic Slovaks, Jews, Gypsies (*Cigáni*) and, depending on the period,

Ukrainians and Poles (Majo 2012). At the time of my research, it was language especially that highlighted the diversity of the village population, with Rusyn, Romani, standard Slovak and local dialects thereof, and sometimes even Polish, Ukrainian and Czech to be heard on a daily basis. However, the chronicle ignores this historically rooted heterogeneity in its image of a unified local culture.

The chronicle makes no claims to represent a detailed history of the municipality and under no circumstances could it serve as the cornerstone of an analysis of local relations. All the more so given that it is a one-off record from 1988, in which the author retrospectively captured the entire previous period. However, the way the chronicle is organised basically corresponds to the impression given by the newspaper article that persuaded me to spend time in this particular village. In both cases the characteristics associated with the Roma were implicitly separated from descriptions of the way of life of the local population. The chronicle, which combines a certain type of event and information within a dominant aggregate of the experiences and lifestyles of the villagers, is silent on the topic of the Roma. In contrast, the newspaper report sets out to show how the Roma became part of the local community by means of the appropriation of certain characteristics of the “civilised” local culture.

The categorisations referred to above are thus clearly interconnected: on the one hand, the distinction between the Roma (or “Gypsies”) and non-Roma (or *Gadže*: see below for a more detailed explanation of these appellations), and on the other, the distinction between “locals” and “outsiders”. The Jolany Roma exhibited many characteristics that marked them out as locals, and others that branded them as “Gypsies” (*Cigáni*) and disbarred them from a normative “whiteness” (cf. Šotola et al. 2018). And so despite being perceived as members of the village community, in their capacity as Gypsies they occupied a subordinate position in its social hierarchy. These two modes of categorisation thus overlapped to a large extent – an identification with the category of Gypsy implied segregation from the local community, and to the extent that the Roma were able to participate in the local way of life, they did so *despite* their Gypsiness.

The ambiguity of Romani belonging to a given place is a theme that runs through this book. However, the individual chapters will not simply follow the dominant discourse, which distinguishes the Roma/Gypsies as somehow alien. I will not take this categorisation to be fixed, but more the result of specific historical processes and subject to ongoing

interrogation and negotiation. When tracking these processes, I will focus on the agency of those who identify as Roma and are thus identified by their surroundings. Rather than examining the process of their exclusion and differentiation, I will examine how the Roma themselves understood their position within the local community and how they negotiated the categories referred to in their everyday dealings. Before introducing the topics of individual chapters and placing them within a broader theoretical and comparative framework, I would like to clarify the context and methodological basis of the research on which this book is based.

## **Methodology**

### **Romani studies and anthropology among the Roma in Slovakia**

There is a long tradition of anthropological research into the Roma of Slovakia. A central figure in this respect was Milena Hübschmannová, whose comprehensive interest in the Roma embraced the spheres of history, sociology, cultural anthropology, folklore, general linguistics, sociolinguistics, art, etc. (see *Romano džaniben* 2006). Hübschmannová, a qualified Indologist, explained the particularities of Romani culture largely by tracing it back to its Indian roots (Hübschmannová 1972, 1998). In anthropology, this emphasis on the origin of the Roma when explaining the dogged persistence of their distinctive culture was later dropped, and the authors of modern ethnographies of the Roma preferred to examine the context of specific European communities (see Stewart 2013; Olivera and Poueyto 2018). However, Hübschmannová, who began her research into the Roma in the 1950s, did not restrict herself to a diachronic perspective and the search for cultural and linguistic links with the presumed ancestors of the Roma on the Indian subcontinent. It is clear from her texts that she was attuned to the complex formation of the Romani identity in European society. For instance, she drew attention to the importance of power asymmetry in relations with non-Romani surroundings, the role played by the unquestioned dominance of non-Roma, and the various strategies deployed by the Roma to deal with their own marginalised and stigmatised social position (e.g. Hübschmannová 1970, 1999). It is in her emphasis on the agency of the Roma and her knowledge of the Romani language, not only as a vital mode of communication for research among the Roma but also the key



to understanding their position in society, that her main contribution to the sphere of anthropology itself resides.

In addition to Hübschmannová, ethnographic research amongst the Roma of eastern Slovakia was carried out from the 1950s onwards by the ethnographers Emília Horváthová<sup>4</sup> (e.g. 1964) and Eva Davidová<sup>5</sup> (e.g. 1965). Even given the adoption of an evolutionary view of Romani culture,<sup>6</sup> their work remains important, above all as a relatively rich seam of ethnographic material and a secondary historical source. The British sociologist Will Guy then offers an ethnographically informed historical study on the basis of research carried out in the early 1970s in his compendious thesis (1977). A more widespread interest on the part of anthropologists in Romani settlements in (eastern) Slovakia can be observed around the turn of the millennium, since more broadly based research took place in individual regions (see Jakoubek and Hirt 2008, Kužel 2000).<sup>7</sup> The anthology by the Slovak ethnologists Tatiana Podolinská and Tomáš Hrustič (2015) presents the results of interdisciplinary research conducted among the Roma in eastern Slovakia.

It is against the backdrop of Czech and Slovak Romani studies and the focus of researchers from both parts of the former Czechoslovakia on the lives of Roma in Slovakia that this book represents a bold attempt to present a comprehensive ethnography of the Roma in one particular eastern Slovak municipality. For its objectives and theoretical starting points it draws primarily on the outcomes of long-term anthropological fieldwork in specific villages published in individual texts from the start of the millennium onwards (Belák et al. 2017, 2018; Grill 2012, 2015 a,b, 2017, 2018; Hajska 2015, 2017; Hrustič 2014, 2015a; Kobes 2009, 2010, 2012; Kubaník 2015, Skupnik 2007). Its diachronic sections (especially Chapter Two) are based on historical studies of the negotiation of inter-ethnic relations in specific communities (Grill 2015a,b; Sadílková 2017, 2020; Scheffel 2015; Šotola and Rodríguez Polo 2016; Guy 1977).<sup>8</sup>

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4 Horváthová also published under the name Čajánková.

5 Davidová also published under the names Zábranová and Davidová-Turčinová.

6 However, Horváthová's participation in the period discourse on the Roma was ascribed to censorship (see Mann 1996).

7 This interest was also connected to the humanitarian organisation People in Need (*Člověk v tísni*), which in the latter half of the 1990s provided assistance to Romani settlements affected by flooding (see, for example, Kobes 2017).

8 This list of writers who have been involved in anthropological research into the Roma in Slovakia is far from exhaustive. I cite those authors whose work I deem relevant, especially in

I attempted to spread my own research symmetrically between the Romani and non-Romani inhabitants of Jolany, which is not usually the case in this kind of work.<sup>9</sup> However, as I show below, I too was not always successful in this endeavour. On the contrary, many of the authors cited above (though not all) are linked by a knowledge of the Romani language and its use in their research amongst the Roma (or Romani speakers). I believe that not enough thought has been given to the implications of a knowledge of Romani when conducting anthropological research in Slovakia (and among Roma in general), even though it has a huge influence on the character not only of the data acquired, but also the relationship between the researcher and the research participants (Červenka 2000). At this point I symbolically return to the beginning of this section and admit to my own grounding in the tradition of the Romani Studies Seminar established by Hübschmannová at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University, from which I graduated in 2017. I later had the opportunity to supplement and confront this tradition while studying general anthropology at the Faculty of Humanities of the same university. As an active speaker of Romani I was able to use the language not only as a research tool (as it has also been embraced by many anthropologists), but also as a subject of research in its own right as I monitored its daily use and the language preferences of its speakers (Chapter Three).

An emphasis on language as a research topic is related to the multidisciplinary approach that Hübschmannová consistently promoted right from the establishment of Prague-based Romani studies (see *Romano džaniben* 2006). This approach is manifest here not only in sociolinguistic analysis, but also in the inclusion of a historical perspective (see Chapter Two especially). In contrast, the anthropological tradition provided me with a broader conceptual and theoretical framework than that offered by the multidisciplinary understanding of Romani studies. Finally, both traditions came together for me personally in the ethical and methodological imperative to respect research participants as full partners in the entire research process.

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respect of a long-term focus on a specific location and an emphasis on the agency of the Roma themselves.

9 Of the anthropological studies of the Roma published up till now only Engebrigtsen, who conducted research among Roma and non-Roma residents of a village in Transylvania, Romania, has systematically attempted this (Engebrigtsen 2007).

## **Positionality**

This book is based on research conducted over a long period in the village of Jolany, where I lived with one Romani family for ten months (from the start of October 2014 to the end of July 2015) and to which I regularly made shorter trips right up to August 2020. I arrived in the village as a twenty-three-year-old non-Romani student from Prague, a recent graduate with a bachelor's degree in Romani studies studying for an MA in the same discipline. I opted for longer-term research in order to acquire hands-on experience (which at that time I regarded as a precondition for entering into anthropological debates), to improve my knowledge of the Romani language, and to become acquainted in detail with the everyday lives of the Roma (and their neighbours) in a particular location.

My interest in the Roma inevitably led to a considerable disparity between the data obtained from the Romani and from the non-Romani villagers, and the research as framed in this way was ultimately one of the reasons the distinction between Roma and non-Roma was largely confirmed. During the research period I lived with a Romani family and the Roma were my key informants. I communicated with the Roma in their native language, Romani. I had only a passive knowledge of Rusyn, the first language of most of the local non-Romani villagers and often the main language for communication between all the locals. I communicated with the non-Romani villagers in Czech<sup>10</sup> and they usually replied in Slovak (i.e. not their native language but one in which they were fluent). However, these disparities of linguistic competence only explain part of the imbalance of the data acquired. I spent most of my research period in the company of Romani villagers, not only in Jolany and its immediate surroundings, but, in the case of young Romani men especially, in various Czech towns during their short work-based trips to the Czech Republic. In the case of the Roma I was able to use unstructured and semi-structured interviews as well as participatory observation as research methods, whereas in the case of the non-Romani population I relied mainly on more formal, semi-structured interviews arranged in advance.

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10 For older generations of Czechs and Slovaks especially, the Czech and Slovak languages are completely comprehensible by both parties. In addition, the participants in my research were in regular contact with Czech (see Chapter 3).

Given the widespread belief amongst the Jolany population that I was there to study the lives of the Roma, the non-Roma may have felt that the research concerned only their Romani neighbours. At times I had the impression that some of the non-Roma were steering clear of more focused conversations in order to avoid becoming guinea pigs, as it were. In addition, during the interviews I conducted with the non-Roma, I often failed to relinquish the position of researcher interested in the Roma. Conversations therefore usually took place against the backdrop of the relatively sharp Roma/non-Roma dichotomy, and my presence often necessitated an explanation and defence of my position and relationship with the Roma in general and with my immediate Roma neighbours in particular. Furthermore, interaction between non-Roma and Roma villagers only took place sporadically. Apart from meeting Romani and non-Romani men in the local pub, I often found myself interacting more intensively with non-Roma in the role of escort to my Romani friends, often when they had been invited to do some work for a non-Rom.

As the duration of my stay increased, it became clear that the research conducted among non-Romani villagers would be crucial to an understanding of the complexity of local relations if I was to avoid a merely homogenising assertion of the presence of non-Romani dominance. At the same time, however, I began to feel more and more accepted by the Romani villagers and did not feel comfortable communicating with the non-Roma, to the extent of sometimes avoiding them. In addition, the latter group restricted their movements around the village and tended to remain in their homes and fenced properties. Although I gradually supplemented the limited number of more focused interviews with non-Romani villagers with interviews with representatives of local institutions (the doctor, school headmaster, the mayors of surrounding villages, and the coordinators of projects undertaken in the vicinity), I was unable to make up fully for this asymmetrical research structure.

However, the Roma themselves did not form a homogenous and clearly delimited group. Even within the relations that pertained between them I was situated in a certain way. During the course of my research I lived with Maroš and Katarína, whose family was one of those that lived outside the local Romani settlement in the immediate vicinity of non-Romani inhabitants. It could be said that this was the family with the strongest ties to the non-Romani inhabitants of the village, but also to other non-Roma in the surrounding region. Although I was in contact with all the Romani families to varying degrees (which at the start of my research meant a total of eleven households), the fact that I belonged, as