

## GYPSIES IN CANADA: THE PROMISED LAND?

### Introduction

On August 6, 1997, a television documentary with implications for Canada aired in the Czech Republic. The program suggested that for refugees, entering Canada was not difficult, and that, in fact, assisted settlement costs, such as housing and access to employment, would be offered. The documentary was specifically aimed at the Gypsies living in the Czech Republic, an ethnic minority that prefers to be known as *Roma*.

The Roma claim they are subject to institutional discrimination in the Czech Republic. Indeed, many are without citizenship, as a result of the division of Czechoslovakia into two nations in 1993, four years after the fall of the communist regime. The Roma also cite racially motivated acts of violence directed toward them as reasons for wanting to emigrate. In addition, they are a people economically displaced in the Czech Republic. Many Roma in the Czech Republic are unemployed, uneducated, and live in crowded, cheap housing. In a nation with an unemployment rate of four per cent, over 70 per cent of Czech Roma are unemployed. The majority of Roma children are educated in schools for the mentally handicapped, which effectively prevents them from continuing their education at the post-secondary level.

After watching the television documentary, many Czech Roma spent all their savings to come to Canada. They began arriving in Canada in great numbers, and upon arrival they claimed refugee status. Canadian immigration officials were overwhelmed with the sudden demand. The new arrivals were put up in shelters, but soon the space available as emergency shelter for the municipality of Toronto, the city to which the majority of them arrived, was filled. The numbers of Roma arriving in Canada in 1997 represented a significant increase over the previous year, in which 189 Czechs entered Canada to claim refugee status. (Only nationality is recorded by Immigration Canada, as opposed to ethnic group.) In 1997, however, 1285 people in total from the Czech Republic arrived and claimed refugee status. Half of those arrived in August and September, immediately after the broadcast of the documentary.

One reason Roma were able to come to Canada without difficulty was the lack of a visa requirement for Czech citizens to this country. This requirement had been lifted by the Canadian government in April 1996. However, with the sudden arrival of so many Roma claiming refugee status, the Canadian government reinstated the visa requirement for *all* arrivals from the Czech Republic, on October 8,

1997, in an effort to curb the flow of refugees.

In 1996, Canada granted refugee status, and therefore permanent residency, to more than 10 000 people from around the world; about 10 per cent of all immigrants accepted each year. At the present time, another 15 000 refugees from numerous areas of the world still await the processing of their claims. Because of the movement of refugees throughout the world, since 1978 Canada has had a system in place for processing all refugee claimants. The recent arrival of large numbers of Roma exemplifies why a process was put in place, but the sudden increase in numbers also highlights the demands placed on the Department of Immigration from time to time. The sudden influx of Roma also raises the question of how the Department of Immigration can or should handle an unprecedented rise in refugee claimants from a particular region in both a humane and just manner.

Some Canadians felt the government was too quick to react when it reinstated the visa requirement. Others felt it was necessary to regulate such a sudden and unexpected increase in refugee claims to avoid an abuse of the system. The Roma who have arrived in Canada express surprise and shock at the welcome they have received. It wasn't quite the open arms they had been led to expect. Some of them have returned home, but others remain to wait out the processing of their refugee claims. Migration is never an easy choice, but sometimes it is the only choice. In all likelihood, these Roma made what they thought was their only choice.

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### Images of a Better Life

#### Locating the Story

To help you understand the context for the story you are about to watch, locate the Czech Republic on a world map. Although the news story is about the Roma coming from the Czech Republic to Canada, the majority of the Roma today currently live in Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, and Hungary. Locate these countries as well.

#### Promises

Now view this News in Review report and, as you do so, jot down notes about reasons that led large numbers of Czech Roma to try

immigrating to Canada as refugees.

### Conflicting Events

At the end of the viewing, summarize orally or in written form the actual events that occurred when the Roma began arriving in large numbers in Canada. Summarize also the differing points of view in this news story. Pay particular attention to statements made by Roma refugees, Canadian government officials, or non-Roma.

What is the most significant difference between the points of view expressed? For what reasons might someone support one point of view or another in this issue? Suggest many reasons or influences that might determine one's perspective on the issue.

### A Second Look

Bearing in mind that most issues tend to be multidimensional and somewhat more complex than they might appear at first, watch the video a second time. After this second viewing, summarize in your own words what you think are the larger issues in this News in Review report.

### Follow-up Discussion

1. This news story was precipitated by a television documentary. A documentary is a narrative that tells a story. Like the television camera itself, a documentary gives a point of view. A good documentary tells the story in as honest and neutral a fashion as possible but also strives to give the viewer a real sense of the truth. Discuss how a documentary can both educate viewers about a subject, but can also be a powerful medium for shaping opinions and even influencing behaviour. Why is this especially important to the story of the Roma? In what ways has television often been the medium of hope? Can you think of examples when television has offered false hopes?

2. Around the turn of the century, the Canadian government actively advertised in Europe for farmers to come to the Canadian prairies to homestead and to help develop the West. Suggest the differences between this kind of advertising and the television

documentary the Czech Roma saw.

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### A Roma History

#### A Roma History

The Roma people have often been compared to the Jews, who, like the Roma, had no homeland until one was created for them in the state of Israel. And like the Jews during the Second World War, many Roma were killed in Nazi concentration camps; some estimates put the number as high as 1.5 million. As you read the following information on the history of the Roma, list the elements or general themes of their history that, in your opinion, are common to the history of any group of displaced people.

#### The Roma Migration

The Roma arrived in Europe more than 500 years ago, migrating in several waves from northern India by way of Asia Minor. The most significant waves were during the 11th century, when they travelled across Iran into the Byzantine Empire. Some scholars say they came with Kubla Khan's armies, which had travelled through Central Asia at the same time as the Roma migration from India to Central Asia. Others say they moved on into Europe with returning Crusader armies in the early 13th century. By the early 16th century, the Roma had reached the most distant areas of Europe, including Russia, Scandinavia, the British Isles, and Spain.

#### The Roma in Czech Republic

The Roma arrived in Czechoslovakia in the 13th century. It was thought that they were Turkish spies, and fears of the invading Turks spurred anti-Roma sentiments among

the Central Europeans.

Sedentary Roma in Slovakia were castle musicians and metalsmiths. When the increasing anti-Roma sentiment grew, the Roma metalsmiths were restricted in the trades in which they could work. They were prohibited from working in the finer, higher-paying work and were only allowed to make farm tools. They were also restricted to living on the edges of villages and towns. In 1538, the first anti-Roma legislation in the Czech region came into effect. In 1541, they were expelled from the country after several fires broke out in Prague, the cause of which were blamed on the Roma.

### Prejudice and Persecution

Anti-Roma sentiment was exacerbated by the increasing destabilization that occurred as a result of the wars of the Protestant Reformation and the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Following these conflicts, the Roma were severely restricted in terms of what they could do to make a living and where they could live, which led them to begin living a nomadic lifestyle in isolated areas.

In 1697 and again in 1701, the Roma were declared "outlaws" by Leopold I, the Austrian emperor. In 1710, all adult male Roma were to be hanged without trial, and it was ordered that women and young men were to be flogged and banished. In Bohemia, their right ear was to be cut off; in Moravia, the left ear; in parts of Austria, they were to be branded on the back. These mutilations would allow any Roma to be easily identified upon re-arrest. In 1721, adult females were ordered to be executed, and in 1726, all Roma children and women re-entering Bohemia were to meet the same fate. Administrative reforms in 1737 put new

tax burdens on the peasantry, and any Roma with a tent, wagon, and horses were taxed twice as much as those without.

During the 1760s, attempts were made to assimilate the Roma. All males between the ages of 12 and 16 were to be taught a craft, and those over 16 were eligible for the draft. There were also attempts to create Roma settlements, and to place children in foster homes, in schools, or in jobs.

Within a few decades, the assimilation attempts stopped. An 1887 regulation that all nomads be registered and that all Roma 14 years and over be registered was still being adhered to in the 1920s despite the fact that the Czechoslovakia Constitution of 1920 included a Bill of Rights for National Minorities, giving them all the same rights without distinction as to race, language, or religion.

The 1921 census showed 61 Roma in the Czech region, and 7967 in Slovakia. In 1926, the Slovak census accounted for 60 315 settled Roma and 1877 nomadic Roma, most of whom lived in the Slovak region. Government census figures of the number of Roma have not been precise.

### The Second World War

As many as 1.5 million Roma died in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. The worst atrocities occurred in the Czech region, Romania, Croatia, and the Soviet Union. Recent studies show that in 1938 there were between 3000 and 4000 Roma in the Sudetenland, 6000 in Bohemia, and 8000 in Moravia. (These are all regions of the Czech Republic.) It is estimated that between 6000 and 8000 Czech Roma died.

### Post-war Czechoslovakia

Following 1945, 1.8 million Germans and 68 000 Hungarians were forced out of Czechoslovakia, many of them from the Sudetenland. In turn, 1.5 million Czechs, many of them Roma, moved into the area from other parts of Czechoslovakia. In the 1947 census, there were 85 000 Roma in Slovakia and 16 500 in Czech lands.

The 1950s saw renewed attempts to force settlement as a means of assimilation. During the 1960s, attempts were made to address educational and housing issues. By 1968, Czechoslovakia had the largest Roma population of the Soviet bloc: 165 000 in Slovakia and 60 000 in Czech lands. During the 1970s, official government programs were implemented to encourage sterilization of Roma women, including financial reimbursement to those women who would undergo the procedure. The Roma population growth rate between 1970 and 1980 was 25.5 per cent in Slovakia and 47 per cent in the Czech region.

As the government got rid of substandard housing in Slovakia, many Roma moved to the Czech region. Others moved in search of better job opportunities. By 1988, an estimated 391 000 Roma lived in Czechoslovakia, a 35.6 per cent increase from 1980.

### The Velvet Revolution

Since 1989 there have been significant political changes in Czechoslovakia; the “Velvet Revolution” saw the end of Communism in that country. Paradoxically, however, with democracy came the increased expression of racial prejudice. Thirty-five Roma have been killed since 1989 in what the Roma claim are racially motivated deaths. In anticipation of the break-up of Czechoslovakia, Slovak Roma began to

move to the Czech region. Czechs reacted to this migration and protested the general increase in crime that was occurring because of the higher unemployment and increase in poverty, blaming the Roma, with little statistical basis for their accusations. Prague alone saw an increase in crime of 181 per cent. When the country divided into Slovakia and the Czech Republic on January 1, 1993, all residents of the Czech Republic had to re-register for citizenship. Residency requirements meant that between 10 000 and 25 000 Roma lost their Czech citizenship because, having moved from the Slovak region, they did not have official Czech residency and therefore were caught between the two countries.

Public opinion surveys have recently shown that Czech anti-Roma sentiment is the highest in Europe. Some say the Roma have become the scapegoats for all that is wrong in that country, as well as elsewhere in Eastern Europe. Those who express concern about the Roma point to their growth rate, which is much higher than the national averages of the countries in which they live, and express fears about the increase in crime rates occurring across the Czech region since 1989, implying that the phenomenon is occurring because of Roma.

The total number of Roma in the world today is estimated between seven and eight million, with most of them living in Romania, Bulgaria, Spain, and Hungary. Since the demise of Communist regimes in Eastern Europe, there has been an increase in Roma cultural and ethnic unity. In the Czech Republic, 30 Roma cultural organizations were started and programs in Romani Studies were set up at the universities. As a result, there now exist Roma political parties and associations, and the word Roma, which means the people, is gradually replacing the term Gypsy.



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### Was None Too Many?

Migration is almost always the result of war, famine, political oppression, or economic hardship. Most Canadians migrated from some other country for one of these reasons, or to join family already living in Canada. Canada has a reputation for admitting refugees who could not otherwise qualify for immigration status. That reputation, however, may not be totally justified. As you read the following information, consider why this story raises important issues for a country like Canada.

#### The Reputation

**1776-83** Canada provides sanctuary to United Empire Loyalists fleeing the United States.

**1830s-60s** Canada serves as the terminus for the Underground Railway, a network that helps runaway slaves from the United States seek asylum in Canada.

**1956** Canada welcomes 37 000 Hungarian refugees following the Soviet invasion of Hungary.

**1968** Canada welcomes 12 000 Czechoslovakian refugees following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

**1972** Canada provides refuge for 5600 Ugandan-Asian refugees expelled from Uganda by dictator Idi Amin. This is the first significant resettlement effort for non-whites into Canada. Primarily, well-educated Ugandan-Asians are accepted.

**1978** Refugees are recognized as a distinct class of immigrants, and a percentage of each year's immigrants is set aside for refugees.

**1979** Canada accepts Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees through a program of private sponsorship. Over 60 000 are accepted, giving Canada the highest per capita acceptance of this group of refugees.

**1985** Singh et al. v. Minister of Employment and

Immigration is heard by the Supreme Court. The Court rules that all refugees have virtually the same social and legal protections as Canadian citizens under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, meaning all refugees are entitled to a full oral hearing before the Immigration and Refugee Board.

**1986** Canada is awarded the Nansen Medal by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

### Also For The Record

**1847** Canada receives over 100 000 Irish famine refugees after the United States imposes severe restrictions on Irish immigrants. More than 11 000 die at hospitals across Canada. After imposing its own restrictions, Canada receives only 30 000 in 1848.

**1872** The entry of any immigrant with a record of criminal conviction is prohibited.

**1879** The entry of paupers and destitute immigrants is prohibited.

**1885** A \$50 head tax is implemented to reduce Chinese immigration. This is increased to \$100 in 1900 and to \$500 in 1903. This is also the same year construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway is completed.

**1896-1905** Under the administration of Sir Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior, Canada begins screening immigrants to satisfy its own settlement needs. Farmers are the first choice, with preference for immigrants from the British Isles, then from Germany and Scandinavia, and finally from Slavic countries.

**1908** The Continuous Passage Act is passed, which states that all immigrants must arrive from their country of origin in one continuous journey. Since uninterrupted transport from Asia is not possible, this Act prevents Indian immigrants from entering Canada.

**1910** The Immigration Act is passed, allowing the government to regulate volume, ethnic origin, or occupational composition of immigrants. Though no groups are specifically mentioned in the Act, Section 38 gives the

government the power to restrict any immigrant of a race deemed unsuited to Canada's climate. (This remained on the statutes book until 1978, even though by 1967 virtually all discriminatory legislation had been repealed.)

**1919-1922** The entry of Doukhobors, Mennonites, and Hutterites is prohibited because of "their peculiar customs, habits, modes of living . . ." and their assumed inability to assimilate.

**1923** The Chinese Immigration Act is passed, prohibiting almost all Chinese immigrants from entering Canada. This is not repealed until 1946. A total of approximately 25 Chinese enter Canada between 1923 and 1946.

**1930** European immigration is suspended, except for those who have sufficient capital to support themselves on farms, and to those families of whom the head of the family is already in Canada.

**1931** Only British subjects and U.S. citizens with enough capital to sustain themselves until employment is found are permitted to enter Canada, including farmers with enough means to establish themselves, farm labourers with guaranteed employment, miners, loggers, and lumberers with guaranteed employment, and families of men already in Canada.

**1933-45** Canada allows 5000 Jewish refugees to enter, compared with 200 000 by the United States, 70 000 by the United Kingdom and 15 000 by Australia.

**1942-45** Canada interns 23 000 Japanese-Canadians, 13 300 of whom were born in Canada.

**1945** After decades of being shunned, Italian immigrants are welcomed to help with the post-Second World War construction boom.

**1978** Amendments to the Immigration Act officially end Canada's ability to select on the basis of race. However, with the establishment of the "points" system in 1967, whereby one's job skills, education, and language skills are rated, a system that selects eligible immigrants according to ethnic categories is effectively replaced by a system that is based on

economic factors.

**1994** The immigration processing fee (\$500 per adult, \$100 per child) is extended to refugees applying for permanent residence.

**1995** A Right-of-Landing Fee in the amount of \$975 is imposed on all new immigrants and refugees, making Canada the only country to apply this fee to refugees.

### Follow-up Discussion and Activity

1. Review each of the time periods mentioned above and suggest reasons for Canada's actions in terms of refugees arriving in or being welcomed to this country.
2. Is it possible to reconcile the reputation with the record?
3. In his book *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe 1933-1948*, Canadian author and labour historian Irving Abella traces the racism in Canadian society and in the upper levels of the Canadian government that led to Canada having the worst record of any Western or immigration country in providing sanctuary to the Jews of Europe during this time period. Locate and read this book and prepare a report on Abella's findings.

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### Ethnic Identity and the Roma

The Roma, like other groups, are an example of minority cultures that struggle to maintain an identity and a way of life within a larger culture. Identifying an ethnic group, however, is not always an easy task, and such identification can be fraught with problems. In particular, the intentions of the person doing the identification need to be examined. History has seen many minority groups that have been identified or labelled for very negative and prejudicial reasons. And yet, it is also important to be able to define positively distinct cultural groups.

Although today the term is considered irrelevant when discussing issues that involve equity and justice, *race* in the

past usually identified a person by biological characteristics passed on genetically. However, on a genetic level, all human beings are essentially the same despite physical differences such as skin colour and eye shape. *Ethnicity* is a preferred term today and is usually seen as “environmental” in that it reflects the social, cultural, and geographical environment from which an individual or an individual’s ancestors have come. Such an environmental determination includes factors such as language and culture that are passed down through learning. Antiracist educators today emphasize the positive aspects and implications of ethnicity. The approach in antiracist education is one of *inclusiveness* as opposed to exclusiveness.

The *Gage Canadian Dictionary* defines ethnic as “having to do with various groups of people and their characteristics, customs, and languages.” A usage note in this dictionary points out that “while the word is useful in that it recognizes that different nationalities have individual qualities and customs, it becomes insulting [in a Canadian context] if it is used to refer scornfully to people not of English or French descent.” In the same dictionary, *ethnicity* is defined in terms of “ethnic quality, character, or status.” *Status* is a particularly significant and important part of this **News in Review** story.

As you read the following information, note where and how ethnicity has played a significant role in the history of Europe.

### The Early Growth of Nationalism in Europe

In Europe, where the Roma have always faced a status problem, *national* identity is actually a fairly recent concept. Prior to the 16th century, European political states tended to be based on dynastic and religious relationships. Individuals found their collective identity in their loyalty to the king or to the church. However, the breakdown of the feudal system lessened the power of the nobility over their feudal serfs. And when the Protestant Reformation diminished the control of the Holy Roman Empire, church loyalty was dispersed among several Protestant denominations.

Education, communication, and trade brought people from various villages and regions into contact with each other. As people began to interact more with the world around them, they realized a common cultural and linguistic heritage that extended their sense of community beyond the village. The turning point in the evolution of nationalism was the French

Revolution. With the abolition of the French monarchy, political loyalties were transferred to the patrie or “fatherland.” The establishment of a representative form of government abolished regional differences and formed a national territory with one law and one government. The Industrial Revolution and its consequent growth in class-consciousness cemented the new political and economic relations.

### Nationalism Expressed

The Revolutions of 1848 in Central Europe entrenched the nationalism of that region. Germans and Italians began campaigns for unification and the creation of their respective nation-states, which subsequently occurred in Italy in 1861 and in Germany in 1871. The Poles, whose territory had been split among Russia, Germany, and Austria, also agitated for unification, as did the Czechs and the Hungarians, who had been subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire since the early 16th century, and the people of the Balkan regions who had been under Turkish rule since the late 15th century. The late 19th century marked a turning point for Europe. Individual countries were carved out of the formerly powerful religious and dynastic empires of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. And from the carnage of the First World War arose a number of newly created nation-states: Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary.

### The Communist Era

Following the Second World War and until recently, Communism kept ethnic and national sentiment in check in countries in which it was the political system. But the last 10 years have seen the fall of Communism across Eastern Europe and with that, the former monolithic political powers have no longer been able to hold back the ethnic alliances that fuel the current wave of nationalism. The break-up of the Soviet Union into a variety of nations based on ethnic identity, the ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia, and the unification of Germany are all expressions of renewed ethnic and national identity.

The problem with renewed nationalism is that there may be no

cleanly drawn dividing lines. As is evident in the former Yugoslavia and in other arenas of ethnic conflict around the world, identifying accurately which group “belongs” where is a highly problematic task. The purposes for making such identifications must also be examined.

Canada, the United States, and Australia are examples of nations in which ethnicity has played a significant role in the development of the nation’s character. Whether the nation is a melting pot or a vertical mosaic, establishing a national identity has required integrating (some would say overriding) ethnicity. The reasons for doing so is another question. Most observers agree, however, that the new nationalism seen in the world today has resulted from political and geographical allegiance.

### Ethnic Identity

Ethnicity is a biological, ideological, and socially constructed concept. It is biological in the sense that ethnic characteristics are generally passed down through biological family members who are part of a larger biological family group. In terms of ideology, ethnic groups also pass down values, ideas, and principles that shape the norms and behaviour of their group. And, as a component of the larger human society, a distinct ethnic group is a social unit that is defined as part of the larger social unit.

Ethnicity is based on similar characteristics that usually change over time. It is also a term that defines a *relationship* that is identified by both the commonalities within the group and by the differences between it and other groups. Once again, it is important to examine the intent of defining ethnicity and the effect of doing so on the various relationships. Usually when ethnic groups are displaced, and consequently disadvantaged politically and economically, their ethnic identity may become, of necessity, a factor that makes the group all the more cohesive. Immigrant groups in an adopted country where there is a majority and dominant culture or cultures, are often a good example of this. As a result of their ethnic separateness from the mainstream culture, they may often find a renewed sense of identity ethnically. Most importantly, however, it must be remembered that ethnic groups *contribute* their cultural and linguistic characteristics to the new culture and thus shape it.

In a reciprocal fashion, immigrant groups collectively tend to change over time and to integrate and reflect their new homeland and its predominant lifestyle. Ethnicity is a concept that is fluid; it evolves, and what is identified as a particular ethnic group at one point in history may be identified differently at another point. Whereas it is sometimes useful to use ethnic identity to construct a national identity, there are also limitations. And for those ethnic groups without a nation, the limitations are all too obvious.

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### The Gypsy Myth

The Roma, perhaps more than any other ethnic group, continue to be identified by stereotypical images popularized by folk tales, oral history, other literature, and media of all kinds. A nomadic lifestyle is usually the main image of the Roma that most people have, despite the fact that most Roma live in permanent housing as other Europeans do. Another common stereotypical image of the Roma is that of an uninhibited, flamboyant lifestyle. Stereotypical images can be harmful. It is difficult also to determine what is “typical” about an ethnic group without oversimplifying, exaggerating for prejudicial reasons, or diminishing the importance of ethnic characteristics. Are the images we have of ethnic groups positive celebrations of their strengths and contributions to human culture or are they put-downs that are unintentional or deliberate? Ethnic humour, for example, is at its best when it satirizes *human* foibles. But there is a thin line. What many people take for ethnic humour is very thinly disguised aggression and prejudice. Language, like humour, frequently reveals stereotypical attitudes and prejudice. The word *Gypsy* is as erroneous and misleading as is the word *Indian*, which, as a reference to to aboriginal Canadians, came into being through an error of history and then became institutionalized. Because the origins of the Roma were unclear, at one point it was assumed they came from Egypt, hence the term *Gypsy*. Because of a prejudicial stereotype, *gyp*, a slang term, came to mean to cheat or to swindle. Like many such terms, people may be unaware that they are using offensive and prejudicial words.