

**PATRIK BANGA, EMIL
ČINA, EVA DANIŠOVÁ,
GEJZA DEMETER,
OLGA FEČOVÁ,
ILONA FERKOVÁ, VĚRA
HORVÁTHOVÁ DUŽDOVÁ,
MÁRIA HUŠOVÁ, MARTIN
KANALOŠ, STANISLAVA
ONDOVÁ, KVĚTOSLAVA
PODHRADSKÁ, ZLATICA
RUŠOVÁ, MARIA
ŠIVÁKOVÁ, MICHAL
ŠAMKO, MARKĚTA
ŠESTÁKOVÁ**

VELVET BLUES

**THE TWENTIETH CENTURY
IN THE STORIES OF
CZECHOSLOVAK ROMA**

Edited
by Karolína Ryvolová

English translation
by Alex Zucker

**KHER
KAROLINUM PRESS**

KHER, z. s.
Veverkova 1172/33, 170 00 Prague 7, Czech Republic
www.kher.cz, nakladatelstvi@kher.cz

Originally published in Czech as *Všude samá krása*
(Nothing but Beauty Everywhere) and *Samet Blues* (Velvet
Blues), Prague: Kher 2021

KAROLINUM PRESS
is a publishing department of Charles University
Ovocný trh 560/5, 116 36 Prague 1, Czech Republic
www.karolinum.cz, redakcenk@ruk.cuni.cz

Texts © Patrik Banga, Emil Cina, Eva Danišová, Gejza
Demeter, Olga Fečová, Ilona Ferková, Věra Horváthová
Duždová, Mária Hušová, Martin Kanaloš, Stanislava
Ondová, Květoslava Podhradská, Zlatica Rusová, Maria
Siváková, Michal Šamko, Markéta Šestáková, 2026
Afterword © Karolína Ryvolová, 2026
Translation © Alex Zucker, 2026
Cover image and illustrations © Tereza Šiklová, 2026

Edited by Karolína Ryvolová
Copyedited by Karolína Klibániová
Layout and set by Čumlivski&Horváth
Printed in the Czech Republic by Karolinum Press
First edition

A catalogue record for this book is available from the
National Library of the Czech Republic.

This publication was supported by the Ministry
of Culture of the Czech Republic and the foundation
Bader Philanthropies, Inc.

ISBN 978-80-246-6267-1 (Karolinum)
ISBN 978-80-87780-49-7 (Kher)
ISBN 978-80-246-6268-8 (pdf)
ISBN 978-80-246-6269-5 (epub)

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 8

BRAVE ROMANI

WOMEN Zlatica
Rusová **12**

ROMANE ROMŇA Zlatica
Rusová **18**

RUN FOR IT, MARGITA! Květoslava
Podhradská **24**

DENAŠ, MARGITKO! Květoslava
Podhradská **34**

MY DEARS Eva
Danišová **42**

MIRE KEDVEŠNE Eva
Danišová **60**

GOING TO THE MOVIES Ilona
Ferková **74**

ŠAR AMEN O ČHAVE PHIRAHAS

ANDRE MOZI Ilona
Ferková **81**

OPEN-SKY FLAT Olga
Fečová **88**

**MY WONDERFUL
FAMILY** Markéta
Šestáková **94**

THE WAY WE USED

TO LIVE Michal Šamko **106**

ČIRLATUNO DŽIVIPEN Michal Šamko **118**

GOING TO GRANDPA'S Emil Cina **128**

DŽAS KO PAPUŠ Emil Cina **132**

ČUKČA'S GREAT

MISFORTUNE Gejza Demeter **136**

LE ČUKČUSKERI BARI

BIBACHT Gejza Demeter **142**

ŽIŽKOVITE Patrik Banga **148**

INSIDE THE BUBBLE Stanislava Ondová **156**

THAT'S CAPITALISM

FOR YOU Maria Siváková **172**

THE NINETIES Věra Horváthová Duždová **180**

WHERE TO NOW? Mária Hušová **187**

A FEW PRESENTS Eva Danišová **194**

E KARAČOŇA IMAR

NADUR Eva Danišová **202**

THE HOUSE ON ŠTĚRKOVÁ

STREET Květoslava Podhradská **210**

YOU'RE LIKE ME Martin Kanaloš **217**

AFTERWORD Karolína Ryvolová **231**

**GLOSSARY OF CZECH,
ROMANI, AND SLOVAK
EXPRESSIONS
AND PHRASES 251**

INTRO- DUCTION

The volume in your hands is an anthology of contemporary short stories written mostly by Czech and several Slovak Roma from a region which was once Central European Czechoslovakia. It is a selection from two previous anthologies, *Všude samá krása* (Nothing but beauty everywhere, KHER 2021) and *Samet Blues* (Velvet blues, KHER 2021), which generated much interest upon their release and to this day rank among the publishing house's bestsellers.¹ The foundation of KHER, a press which caters exclusively for the needs of Romani writers, in 2012 was motivated by the belief that writers of Romani origin – due to their dramatic past linked especially but not exclusively to their merciless persecution during World War II, traditionally low social status and ongoing structural discrimination – enjoy a much harder position in the society to let their voices, stories, and grievances be heard.

The stories in the above-mentioned volumes are primarily dedicated to the writers' loved ones and their shared past in the pre-war ethnic settlements of Eastern Slovakia, their new homes in post-war Czech towns, and the surprising reality of post-1989 transition with its opportunities, but more importantly challenges and disillusionment. In the telling of these deeply personal stories these writers inadvertently convey a much more general picture of the Roma's twentieth century history.

The rise in neo-Nazism, which swept through the former Eastern Bloc countries following the fall of the Iron Curtain with its street violence, pogroms, and deaths, resulted in mass migration of the Roma to the West, where they would become an invisible minority, safe from physical threats and open to the advantages of equal rights. It is impossible to ascertain how many Czech Roma have left the Czech Republic since 1997, when the first wave of Romani migration hit primarily the UK and Canada, but to a lesser extent also the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and others. What we do know from eyewitnesses and authority reports is that these families

¹ Alex Zucker's English translation of Patrik Banga's "Žižkovite" previously appeared in *The Book of Prague* (Comma Press, 2023). Mária Hušová's "Where to Now?" is published in this volume for the first time and did not appear in the original Czech-language anthologies.

have blended into their host countries with remarkable ease, adopting their language, joining the job market, and entering children into the local schools, where they go on to become brilliant students, proving the Czech education system with its badly concealed practice of segregation discriminatory and ultimately crippling.

This new generation of Western Roma have partly lost their Czech and Slovak, which have been replaced by the local majority languages, but have retained their Romani as the language of the home and community. The chief intention of the present collection is to provide these Roma with their own ethnic literature which has flourished in their homeland in their absence and thus help them cherish and sustain their cultural background. To this end, all stories written originally in the so-called Slovak Romani are printed in Romani with an accompanying translation in English. English as the lingua franca of the world has been chosen as the main language of this anthology to make the literature of the Roma most accessible to audiences around the world.

Mainstream populations across the globe are the second envisaged readership of this book. It aims to provide them with the fact of the very existence of Romani letters and aid the development of an understanding for, and a sensitivity to a people scattered around the world but bound by a common Indian origin.

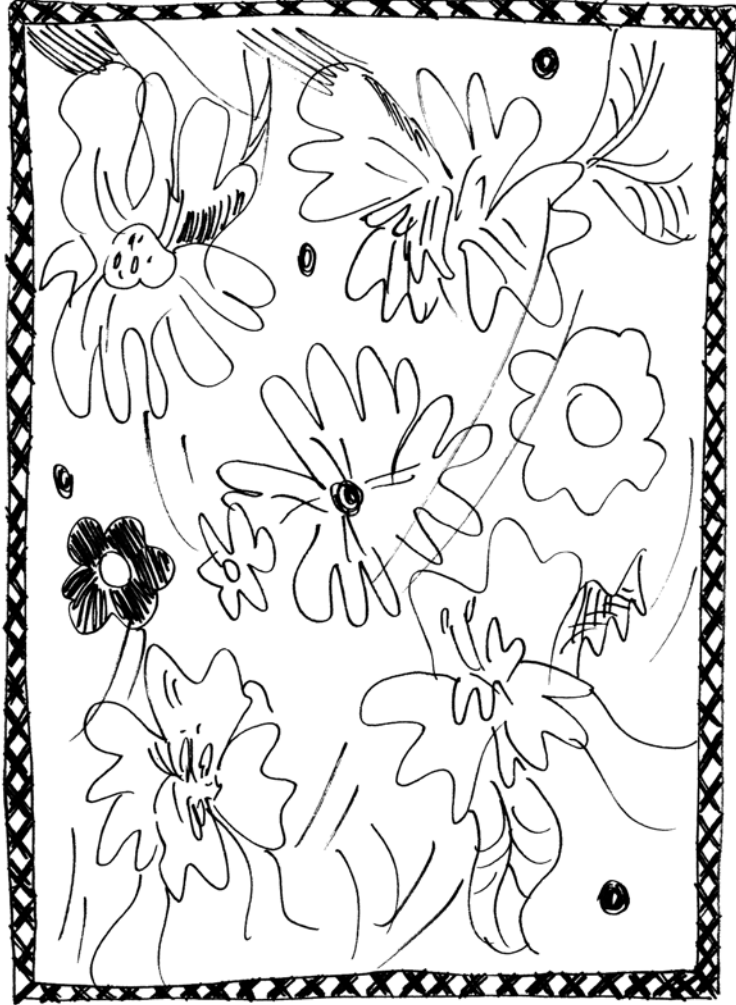
Velvet Blues has been chosen as the volume's title despite the collected works speaking of a whole array of topics and periods. The editors felt that it best describes the Czechoslovak Roma's hope that their destiny is following a positive trajectory with a natural climax in the post-Velvet Revolution freedom of the new democratic country. That this has failed to happen is a tragic paradox and a source of ongoing sadness for the local Romani communities.

The selection of the seventeen stories is the result of a long chain of debates between KHER editors and the Czech-to-English translator Alex Zucker, whose job in this book stretched far beyond the usual transposition of

one language code to another. Not only did he offer his expertise as to what Western audiences might be interested in and able to relate to, he also tirelessly battled on, trying to capture culturally specific terms and situations pertaining to the Roma. For his devotion to the project and willingness to deliver at any cost, KHER editors would like to express their heartfelt thanks.

The afterword entitled "The Untold Stories of Czechoslovak Roma" provides the factual and historical background to the development of a minority literature in an oral language. It is a case study of how the Roma began to write in the Czech Republic but will suitably serve as an illustration of similar processes in other countries with a significant Romani minority around the world.

MY DEARS



BY EVA DANIŠOVÁ

People used to call my grandfather Barovčák. My grandmother usually called him “a beggar and a whoremonger.” They both had a very hard life, like every other Rom. One day this, another day that. I loved my grandpa very much, since he and my grandma raised me together.

He wasn't living at home with us when I was born, since he had stayed in Opava. That was where he and my grandmother lived, but the two of them had a terrible fight and she ran away from him. She simply got on a train and rode it to Česká Třebová. My mom was already pregnant by then and went with her. Then I was born and they took care of me together. When my grandfather found out where we were, he came after us. I was about two months old at the time.

My grandmother told me the whole story. One evening my grandfather appeared out of nowhere, knocking on the window and shouting: “Haňa, it's me, Janoš, are you there?” Then suddenly he heard a child crying and thought: What is this? My grandmother let him in, but wouldn't talk to him. She was mad because he had stolen money from her back in Opava, which to her was as bad as killing her, because she was a clever homemaker and knew how to stretch one crown into ten. The poor thing saved all that money and never got to enjoy it. She just loved counting it over and over again. She kept it hidden away, and whenever my uncle, my mom's brother, needed money, my grandmother was more than happy to give it to him. She loved my uncle more than anything else in the world; she would have laid down her life for him. She didn't have any other children, just my mom and my uncle.

So my grandpa walked into the house and asked: “What's going on, Haňa? Whose child is that?” My grandmother still wouldn't talk. My grandfather thought that I was hers, that she had had a child with another man. He didn't know my mom was expecting. My grandma was still young back then, thirty-eight or so. My grandpa didn't know what to do next. He was furious. He started swearing like mad. Then he got up and walked toward her like he was going to beat her. “May every illness on earth devour you,” he said, pronouncing a curse on her. “You ran away from me, now you've got a child with another man, I'll kill you! Tell me who it's with, so I can kill him

too!”

My grandma was tiny compared to my grandpa, just a thimble of a thing, but she stood her ground. She laughed, but she knew it was no time for jokes, given what a hothead my grandfather was. So she said: “Don’t be silly, Barovčák. This is our little girl Julie’s daughter. Evie, we call her.”

My grandpa got even more enraged, since he hadn’t realized my mom was pregnant. “So where is our little Julie if this is her child?” he said. “How come she isn’t here with her? You can both go to the devil!” My grandma didn’t know what to say, since my mom had gone to a dance. “She’ll be right back,” she told him.

So the two of them sat together waiting for my mom. Unfortunately, it took so long, my grandpa didn’t believe my grandma anymore. He started back in with her again, calling her names and cussing her out. In his eyes, my mom wouldn’t have left me there like that. She wasn’t worried about me, though, since I had been more my grandmother’s than hers ever since I was born. She told me that when she was pregnant, my grandma bought her sweets and desserts, and she would always explain: “It’s not for you, it’s for little Evie in your belly.” From the moment my mom got pregnant, my grandma knew it was going to be a baby girl named Eva. She had never really liked my mother much, since my mom was too much like my grandpa.

My grandpa paced back and forth, swearing and cursing the two of them; he still had no idea what the story really was with the little girl. He was worried about my grandma, because he loved her. He was jealous of her being with other men, but meanwhile he never saw a skirt he didn’t chase. He had three wives in his life. One before my grandma, then my grandma, and then another one later on, after my grandma stopped living with him. His last wife was a young woman, and by then he was advanced in age, but he still had a child with her. In short, my grandpa was a man about town, and not only that but really handsome, he had an actor’s looks. He knew how to read and write, which in those days was unheard of among Roma. Everyone loved my grandpa, only my grandma couldn’t stand the sight of him. Whenever she talked

about him, she would curse him up and down. Sometimes just for show, but sometimes she was deathly serious.

My grandpa and grandma started to argue again. She even got a few slaps. My dear sweet grandmother just sat and sobbed. She didn’t know what else to say to make my grandfather understand. I was still a baby, so she didn’t want any shouting. So the two of them went on arguing until my mom came home.

The moment she walked in the door, my grandpa asked her how she could have a child without telling him, and peppered her with questions. My mom explained the whole thing. She was afraid of him, since he had gotten in a fight with my father’s family back in Opava. He didn’t want my mom to live with my father. She begged him not to be angry with her: “I was afraid of you, Dad, because you didn’t like him. I was afraid you would throw me out of the house, that’s why I didn’t tell you. But now I’ve got a little girl, just look how pretty she is, look at what a beautiful girl she’s growing up to be.” When my grandpa heard this, he burst into tears, picked me up in his arms, kissed me all over, and fell in love with me on the spot.

The way it worked out in the end, I stayed with my grandma and grandpa. My mom didn’t live with us anymore after that.

I don’t know which of them loved me more, my grandma or my grandpa, since as far as both of them were concerned, I could do no wrong. They never said a single hurtful word to me. They gave me so much love I still draw on it today. A lot of time has passed. Both of my beloved grandparents are with God now, but they live on in my heart, and every day they give me strength. When I close my eyes, I hear my grandpa playing the fiddle, I see him sawing wood, having a laugh, I hear him talking.

GOING TO GRANDPA'S



BY EMIL CINA

I've decided to reminisce about the days when the word *romipen*, meaning "Romaniness," was still a living concept among us Roma. It's a real shame it's disappearing now. But let me just tell the story.

In the nineteen eighties, I was still living in Prague with my first wife and two children: Lucka and Marek. They both went to school in the district of Karlín. I don't know how many times my daughter begged for us to go see her grandpa, my father-in-law, in Slovakia. The kids' holiday had just begun, I had just bought a Škoda 105, and all of a sudden I decided: We're going. My wife loaded everything into the car and off we sped.

By early morning, we were outside of Prague. Our dog rode with us, too, barking and barking while the kids made a racket, and in the midst of all that, my wife was talking into my ear, but I couldn't even hear myself think. Then, when we stopped at a parking area, she said to me: "I'd also like to visit my brother in Vsetín along the way." So she got her wish. My brother-in-law's face completely lit up when he saw us. My sister-in-law loaded up our plates with food and egged us on: "Eat, eat!"

We talked about all sorts of things, and then I told my brother-in-law: "We're going to see Grandpa."

He thought we had come to see him. And out of the blue he says: "All right, we'll come with you!"

My eyes popped out of my head, and in my mind I thought: How're we going to do that? My brother-in-law, his wife, and their two children to boot?

When my sister-in-law, dainty and light as a fawn, climbed into the car, everything tipped to one side. I wanted to tell them we couldn't all fit, but I couldn't refuse them or they might have been offended. So what could I do? We squeezed eight people into the car, the kids sitting on the laps of the people in back.

So I drove and drove. It was blazing hot that day. Just outside of Poprad, in northern Slovakia, a cop pulled us over. He came walking up, and the moment he saw how many people there were in the car, he rubbed his eyes and yelled: "For God's sake, how many of you are there in that vehicle?"

My sister-in-law, the hefty one, stepped out of the car, breasts bouncing, and angrily told the cop: "This is our vehicle and it's none of your business!"

She started to argue with him, so I shouted: "Pavla, stop!"

The cop was all red in the face and didn't want to hear it. She got him so worked up that suddenly he screamed: "Go fu-- yourselves!"

To which my brother-in-law replied, leaning out the window: "Thank you!"

My sister-in-law, satisfied, climbed back in the car, a stick of salami in one hand, and proceeded to gorge herself.

"You want some bread?" my wife asked, and she just said, "What for?"

We drove and drove. The children couldn't take sitting anymore; they wanted to go to sleep. We arrived after dark, exhausted, in the Košice suburb of Krásna nad Hornádom, in Romani known as Siplaka.

We knocked on the door, but nobody answered. We stood there for what seemed like half an hour. Finally, when my mother-in-law heard us speaking Romani, she came and opened the door. Suddenly the whole household was up and on its feet.

My father-in-law was delighted to see the kids again after so many years. He dug up a bottle of spirits from somewhere, and a few other Roma came by who also lived in the neighborhood. The conversation was never-ending.

Sometime around three a.m., my mother-in-law offered to put us to bed, but when I saw how many people were sleeping in the house, I said: "We'll sleep out in the car!" And so we did.

The next morning, we heard music coming in the windows. My father-in-law was standing next to our car, playing the fiddle. I'd never been woken up like that before.

I found out that the next day the local musicians were playing a gadjo wedding. The group had about seven people and one was a woman named Puci. She dressed like a man, though, with a brimmed hat on her head. As they were rehearsing, the first violinist kept telling her: "Puci, you're playing it wrong," and knocking her on the head

with his bow. To which Puci replied: "That's because I was up all night shagging Helka." Helka was her girlfriend.

I went to the store with my wife to buy some groceries and also picked up a liter of spirits. But what good is one bottle? You have to pour a shot for everyone. There was a woman who didn't get any, and you should have seen the stink she made! Her husband got a drink and she didn't. So she went over to the house where they lived and started busting everything up. She tore the pillows and duvets off the bed and threw them out the window, cursing her husband the whole time. As soon as I saw that, I ran straight out to buy more booze.

On my way back, I poured her a cup, the woman downed it, and instantly turned into an angel. She and her husband got drunk, wrapped their arms around each other, then lay down in the duvets beneath the window and talked about how beautiful it is to live in this world.

We stayed with my father-in-law for ten days. The money I had for holiday, and there had been a lot of it, was all gone. My wife had loaned some to my sister, who promised to send it back to us just as soon as her husband earned enough. I had forgotten about that. I asked my wife how much we had left. "None," she replied. What could you do? As soon as my wife's father found out we didn't have money to make the trip home, he got a loan from someone and gave it to us.

We made it back home just fine, apart from the dog being covered with fleas and bringing three puppies into the world a little ways from Brno, right there in the car.

I'm in line at the post office in Prague, sending the money back. It's more than my father-in-law gave us. The children plead: "Daddy, can we go see Grandpa again?" I didn't know what to say, so I reassured them: "Sure, kids, sure, how could we not?"

THE ANTHOLOGY IN YOUR HANDS

The current selection addresses certain important social and historical themes which are recurring in Czech Romani writing for their universal relevance to the lives of the Roma. The two opening stories by Zlatica Rusová (“Brave Romani Women”) and Květoslava Podhradská (“Run for It, Margita”) discuss the so-called “unknown holocaust”, that is the persecution of the Roma during World War II. They are both set in Slovakia as this is where the writers and their families come from, but let it not be forgotten that the reason why there are so few accounts of the suffering of the Czech and Moravian Roma in the same period is that the Romani population of The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia — the Czech lands occupied by Nazi Germany during World War II — was almost entirely wiped out.

Eva Danišová (in “My Dears”) and Olga Fečová (in “Open-Sky Flat”) touch upon the hardships of newly arrived Slovak Roma in the Czech lands after the war. People were poor, underprivileged, and uneducated, but their move to Czechia offered wonderful opportunities to those brave of heart and ready to persevere. Both narrators deliver their often hard-to-believe stories with a lot of humour and kindness.

If Danišová and Fečová speak about the early days of Romani migration, then the next batch of writers depict the times of relative peace and integration, when the Roma have already successfully settled in and were enjoying a moderate degree of prosperity. This is not to say that the socialist state pampered the Roma or treated them fairly — far from it. They were only tolerated insofar as they accepted their belonging with the working class and the radical divorce from any idea of Romaniness in favour of becoming Czechoslovak citizens with dying ethnicity.

In “Going to the Movies”, Ilona Ferková offers a nostalgic and funny reminiscence of childhood tricks used to get to the pictures. In “My Wonderful Family”, Markéta Šestáková talks about the shenanigans her husband’s mother and father used to play on each other. In “The Way We Used to

Live”, Michal Šamko paints an idyllic portrait of his growing up in a Czech village. In “Going to Grandpa’s”, Emil Cina reminds the reader that at some point, Slovakia ceased to be the Czech Roma’s home but instead became a holiday destination, where they visited their distant relatives once a year.

“Čukča’s Great Misfortune” by Gejza Demeter and “A Few Presents” by Eva Danišová show that the communities are sometimes plagued by internal problems and instances of pathology. After living a relatively good life in socialist times, Čukča is a selfish man who has forgotten about in-group solidarity. Danišová’s heroine, a Romani mother released from prison, longs to relieve her daughter from care but instead accepts the life of a sideroad prostitute, where she has been forced out of necessity. Květoslava Podhradská’s “House on Štěrková” brings yet another example of a good life sent to ruin, this time by the floods of 1997.

Maria Siváková’s “That’s Capitalism for You”, Věra Horváthová Duždová’s “The Nineties”, Stanislava Ondová’s “Inside the Bubble”, Patrik Banga’s “Žižkovite”, and Mária Hušová’s “Where to Now?” all depict — to varying degrees — the initial elation following the Velvet Revolution and the subsequent disillusionment and rapid social fall of working-class Roma in the wake of the post-Velvet transition. The rise in ultra-right violence in the nineteen nineties is particularly interestingly portrayed in Hušová’s story set in a Slovak settlement, which is a psychological probe into the minds of the Roma fearing the pogrom looming over their community.

The selection is symbolically closed by “You’re Like Me” by the up-and-coming Martin Kanaloš, whose story explores ethnic identity with unusual subtlety, offering a glimpse of how Romani literature may develop in the not-so-distant future.

The reader will find that the stories run straight from the heart. Far from being simplistic, they speak in everyday language of the essential values that every human being holds dear: family, home, community, solidarity, friendship, compassion and mutual support.

**GLOSSARY
OF CZECH,
ROMANI,
& SLOVAK
EXPRESSIONS
& PHRASES**

C = Czech
R = Romani
S = Slovak

bobaľki (pl., R) — a traditional Romani Christmas dish consisting of sweet dumplings doused in milk, sugar, and ground poppy seeds

bábovka (sg., C) — a popular homemade cake, round, with a hole in the middle and ribbing on the outside. In English, variously translated as marble cake, Bundt cake, or sponge cake.

čhaje! (R) — girl!

chiža (sg., R) — a wooden shack (from the Slovak *chyža*)

chlebíček, chlebíčky (sg., pl., C) — a traditional Czech appetizer or snack: small oval slices of white bread spread with butter or mayonnaise and garnished with a variety of toppings, including ham, salami, cheese, eggs, pickled fish, and/or vegetables

dikh! (R) — “See!” or “Look here!”

gadjo, gadjos (sg., pl., R) — the Romani word for a non-Romani person or people; in the north-central Romani dialect, spelled *gadžo* (masculine) *gadži* (feminine), and *gadže* (plural).

goja (pl., R) — a traditional Romani dish consisting of roasted pig intestines with a spicy potato filling (“Chalomas goja!” = “I could go for some goja!”)

halušky (pl., S) — a dish popular among the Roma found in many Central and Eastern European cuisines, including Slovakia’s: thick, soft noodles or dumplings served with salty cheese, fried bacon, cabbage, or sauerkraut

jarkos (sg., R) — a brook or stream

klobása (sg., C) — a dry, hard, spicy sausage

kozara (pl., R) — mushrooms

lokše (pl., S) — thin potato pancakes, baked on the stove with no fat

marikli, marikľa (sg., pl., R) — a pancake, or flatbread, made of flour and water and baked on the stove

OPBH (C) — abbreviation for the Communist-era *Okresní/Obvodní podnik bytového hospodářství*, or District Housing Management Company

pařiv (R) — honor, respect, merit, and social standing: an essential concept of Romani cultural identity

párek (sg., C) — a frankfurter-like sausage

pásky (pl., C, R) — a dish consisting of three sheets of leavened dough, spread across the surface of a pan and filled with walnuts, sweet curds, raisins, and plum jam

panelák (sg., C) — short for *panelový dům* (“panel house”), *panelák* is the colloquial term for a large block of flats constructed of prefabricated concrete, common in the former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech Republic and Slovakia). Paneláks are usually grouped together in what is known as a *sídlště* in Czech and *sídlisko* in Slovak (“housing estate”).

plňimen armin (R) — stuffed cabbages

Rom, Romňi, Roma (m., f., pl., R) — an ethnonym referring to the diasporic people of Indo-Aryan descent originating from northern India, incorrectly and offensively known as “Gypsies”

romipen (sg., R) — “Romaniness”: a set of positive cultural norms that define Romani identity

sídlště (sg., C) — a housing estate of *paneláks* (see above)

svadobný pytač (sg., S) — “wedding asker,” the person who asks the bride’s parents if the groom is permitted to marry her

tu hercona! (R) — “you actor, you!”

vajda (sg., R) — a Romani mayor or community leader

zajda (sg., R) — a strong and colorful canvas sheet used to carry things on one’s back