

The History of the Bock Family

‘...At school we did learn about the war but not about the Holocaust - and who would be bothered about what happened to a Gypsy? ...’ – Valeria Bockova

The Roma and Sinti are descendants of people who travelled from India into Europe a thousand years ago. At least 200,000 Romany people were killed in the Porrajmos (translates as The Devouring- the Romany word to describe the murder of the Roma and Sinti under the Nazi regime). In the Czech Protectorate, at most 600 Roma and Sinti were left alive at the end of the war.

The Bocks were a German-speaking Sinti family of travelling horse dealers. In 1928 the extended family split in two, and one half moved into Czechoslovakia while the other half continued travelling in Germany. During the Second World War, 39 of the Bock family were incarcerated in Auschwitz, including 11 children. Three survived. The family continued working with horses up until 1958 when they were forcibly stopped from travelling by the Communist regime. Vilém's father was known as František Bock and was born in 1932. After surviving Auschwitz as a young child, he became one of the first in his family to go to school. He later worked in a brush factory, making industrial-size brushes. František's parents – the paternal grandparents of our witness Vilém Bock - died in Auschwitz. Vilém's great-uncle Jan Entner joined the Partisans, and Vilém's maternal grandfather Antonín István died under Nazi occupation as a political prisoner. Antonín was overheard speaking out against Hitler, denounced to the authorities by a relative and executed in Prague's Pankrác prison. Within the next week Antonín's wife and children were taken to Hodonin, a Czech-run internment camp for Gypsies which was later closed and its inmates deported to Auschwitz. The extended family of 50, all Sinti travelling around Prostějov in South Moravia, were all sent to Hodonín. Older family members were then sent to Auschwitz. Three of the Istváns' daughters managed to escape from the camp: Marie, Berta and Hilda Istvánová. One - now Marie Kristofová - is still alive in Prostějov and was interviewed recently on Czech TV. Among the younger survivors, Berta was Vilém Bock's mother.

After the war the survivors went to Banská Bystrica in Slovakia, and later back to the Czech-speaking lands.

Vilém Bock

‘The horse was sacred to us Sinti, we depended on it for everything. It could never be eaten.

If anyone ate horse meat, they became *deges* - outcast – and no one would speak to them or know them. If someone committed a sexual offence, they were never allowed back into the community, even when they'd served their sentence in prison. In that way, we Sinti were stricter than the Czechs. We spoke Sinti Romani, including German words. We could use it as a kind of secret language

even from other Roma. I can still understand German Roma people when I meet them, though it takes some time to get accustomed to the accent. Our parents spoke about the way they were brought to Auschwitz from Ústí nad Orlicí. My father was seven or eight when he was deported. His brother and sister Josef and Róza survived with him. He told us how they looked through the window when their parents and elders were taken to the gas. Twenty-five members of their family were marched away – they turned back to say goodbye. This happened after they had been in the camp for some time. The 25 family members were taken to the gas chambers towards the end of the war. The Nazis were desperate to gas as many as possible, so that there wouldn't be any memorials or traces of what happened.'

The Zigeunerlager ('Gypsy Camp') ' in Auschwitz-Birkenau was kept separate from the other buildings. Every one of the remaining 2,897 inmates was exterminated on the night of 2-3 August 1944; the date that Roma still visit Auschwitz today with flowers to remember their dead. Before the extermination many able-bodied prisoners were sent to other camps, including young boys and men to Buchenwald and young girls and women to Ravensbruck. In this way the Nazis hoped to remove those who could resist. But memoirs of Jewish survivors often recall the desperate fight and piercing cries that lasted all night from the Zigeunerlager.

'After the war no-one spoke about it. There were no memorials. I only knew what had happened through my father. If my father hadn't told me I would never have known - everyone carried on as normal. Dad told us all about his family, how much they had loved each other. He wanted us eight children all to love each other as they had.'

There were two Czech-run camps for Roma, Hodonín and Lety. Both were used as transit camps for Auschwitz. Many inmates of these camps died of malnutrition before they could be deported. After the War, Lety became a pig farm and for 15 years after the Velvet Revolution the Czech government was extremely reluctant to close the farm or permit a small memorial to the dead.

Vilém believes there were still 2,500 Sinti alive in Europe after the war. Historians have estimated the losses among Gypsies in the Czech lands are higher.

'There were possibly 5,000 of us before the war, and half that afterwards. We are now intermarried and mixed. Our laws are not so strict anymore, because the old people who insisted on the rules have died, and the younger people don't care so much.'

After the War four branches of the family went in four directions: one went to Ústí nad Labem, two went to Moravka, one went to Gottwaldov, now called Zlín.

'My mother and father went riding together. They met because their families worked together with horses, and they were in the same line of work. There were horse fairs in Litomyšl, Svitavy and Zábreh. In 1957 it all stopped.'

Travelling was forbidden and the wheels were knocked off the Bock family's wagons. Vilém's branch of the family first lived around Hrabušice and when they were settled they went to a village outside Šumperk. The official law to end nomadism and enforce settlement was passed in 1958 in the former Czechoslovakia. Vilém was four or five years old.

'The police and local authorities came up to us. They took our wagons and caravans and gave us a house, just like that. There were lots of empty houses at that time, after the expulsion of the Germans. We were given a nice big house to live together in Šanov, and I started to go to school there. I stayed for 2-3 years. We were used to moving. We went to Šumperk, in the village of Hrabušice.

I learned at the village school. There were mixed classes then. It was a one-room school, with all the grades together. I got good results at school. I stayed for three years and left at 16, as I had started one year late. At Sental, outside Šumperk, I went to work as an apprentice in roof insulation. I didn't finish that course but I worked in Šumperk mending roofs and also in the rubbish disposal team. In 1979 I met Valéria. As soon as I saw her, there was a spark – there was a spark then and now, for 30 years.'

Vilém's stepsister had a friend called Valéria Oláhová. Valéria came from Olomouc to visit, as her parents were working at the nearby spa in Budov.

When Vilém and Valéria met and fell in love, there was what they call a 'Big Problem'. Valéria jokes that, 'The Sinti behave like a royal family, who would not want their children to marry anyone but royalty.' Later she admits that her own family were also worried when she wanted to marry a Sinti: 'Well, they wanted me to marry someone like them.' Valéria and Vilém have been together for 30 years.

Darina Olahova

Darina is 70 years old and lived through World War Two as a small child. She is a widow and the mother of Valéria, who is married to Vilém Bock.

Slovakian Roma like Darina's family had a completely different experience from Czech Sinti and Roma, who were sent to Auschwitz. Under the Nazi-allied Slovak state, Slovakian Gypsies were expelled from towns and driven homeless into the countryside. Many were later shot and burned in German reprisals against the Slovak resistance.

'I was born in Slovakia at Vel'ky Krtis, which used to be called Nagykürtös. Our family spoke Romani, Hungarian and Slovakian. There were eight of us children in the family. My father Jan Kovac was a blacksmith who made chains and horseshoes. He lost one eye in the War. My mother was a seamstress. Her speciality was embroidering straps for baskets, and making embroidered blouses. We lived in the *ciganski colonia*, the Gypsy settlement, making the houses we lived in from whatever we could. The main skills in the village were playing the violin and working in local people's fields.'

In the autumn of 1943 Romanies across Slovakia were 'forcibly evacuated'. They were thrown out of towns, forbidden to live anywhere bordering on a public highway and told to build their own shelters where they could.

'In the war we went into the forest and hid. We slept out in the woods. Once we went a long way, and some white people let us shelter in their cowshed.'

In August 1944, units of the German army were invited into Slovakia to put down the Slovak National Uprising. In the aftermath Roma became prime targets for German revenge attacks. Whole communities were burned and many Roma were shot, whether or not they had been aiding the resistance.

'My Dad hid from the Nazis in cellars and in hangars. The Partisans were in the woods. Banska is a great forest with big trees where you could hide. The Partisans gave us food. My father took buckets to get food for the children. I remember white beans, and once we got a whole pig's head. We had no shoes in winter. We were very poor and the soldiers brought us food. The word we used for the Holocaust among ourselves was *koncentrako*. The whole family survived, no one in the family was shot or killed. We cooked our own bread, and gathered food in the fields. We were never sent to school. My children taught me to sign my name. My mum used just to put a cross beside her name. After the war five of us left and moved to Czech lands.'

One brother and three sisters live in Olomouc [a big industrial city in Moravia, the eastern part of Czech Republic]. I only moved to the Czech lands when I married at 16. My husband worked on the railways, so we had free travel. But it was the first time I'd seen a train! I never knew what coffee was, or fizzy drinks and sodas - they made fun of me over there. My husband was more travelled, because he'd done his military service. I was terrified of that train. But I told myself, we're married now and going to a better life.

Darina's husband died three years ago and she now lives in Manchester with the family of her eldest daughter Valéria. Darina returns to Olomouc when she can to collect her pension.

'My mother Darina is going back to draw her pension and return here to help us out', says Valéria. 'We are ashamed, it should be us supporting her but still, she's happy to be with us; she has no one else left now.'

Valéria Bockova

Valéria is the wife of Vilém and the daughter of Darina.

'My grandfather and grandmother talked about what happened in the war, and my mother told me all about it. They told me how they had to hide in forests, how their houses were set on fire; and how my grandfather went to the place where the soldiers were, to take food for his children. Their life was hard.'

Once the Nazis came to their house, and my grandmother pinched the children to make them cry loudly, hoping the Nazis would go away if they made enough noise. It was all dreadful. The Nazis shot my grandfather in the eye, so he only had one eye. After the war he became a swineherd.

Our family had been settled in houses for many years. We lived in two villages, Nova Ves and Sklabina. Before the war my grandfather looked after the peasants' horses and was a kind of house servant in their stables. My grandmother wove straps which were used for carrying things, both by the peasants and the Roma. She exchanged the straps for food both before and during World War Two. After the war she travelled from Slovakia to the Czech lands by train, selling these straps.

In wartime my grandmother was digging people's gardens in return for food, digging while pregnant with a baby on her back. She had nine children. At school we did learn about the war but not about the Holocaust – and who would be bothered about what happened to a Gypsy? I was born in Slovakia and moved to Olomouc at 8 months old. I grew up in a separate world from other Czechs. No-one at school was interested in knowing us. I was glad to go to school, but the children called me “smelly Gypsy” and no one would sit next to me.

My parents spoke to me in Romani and Slovak at home, so although I was good at Maths in school I was writing Czech with mistakes. No one took that into consideration, so after the third year I was sent to a special school. But my work was so good at the special school that I was immediately put in with 12-year-olds. My school sent me for tests in the Czech language [which I was bound to fail], but later it was automatic: every Gypsy child went to a special school. I was there till the age of 15. But it wasn't just me this happened to, it was my children.

At my special school the teachers were better to us than at the ordinary school. We got more attention, and teachers would punish children who called us Gypsy names. We worked a lot in the garden [which I liked, but] when I left at 15 I had no training. So I became a cleaner in a children's home. I met Vilém when I was 17. We had a Gypsy engagement ceremony and then lived together until we got married when I was 22. We had a small wedding with just the family, as we had no money for a big party. After I had my eldest daughter, my husband and I trained for diplomas in milking, so we could both work together on a farm. We went to Slovakia, where Vilem's father lived in Sturovo and my parents lived in Sklabina; my parents had moved back there when my father got angina, because the air was better than in Olomouc. We worked for 5-6 years at a farm in Vel'ky Krtis near Sklabina.

We sat our exams in Poltar, at the training centre and HQ for the co-operative farm. Around 1981 we had our children Stefan and Valerie. We then moved to Olomouc and worked in a state building enterprise.'

Vilém managed the heating system and took in the fuel and stoked the boilers. Valeria worked there as a cleaner and in the kitchen, and stopped work when her last child Maria was born.

Vilém Bock

'In 1989 I had a job in Olomouc guarding building materials, and was also applying for a permit to sell things. I'd had an earlier sales permit, which I'd used to make extra money by selling underwear and overalls at my workplace. The permit was an accepted way of topping up our child benefit. I got my permit just before the fall of communism, and started a shop moving around in a van. It was fine to start with, 1989, 1990, 1991. But then the fascist groups started in the villages. Sometimes the young skinheads snatched our goods and threw them around, stamped on them and destroyed them. There was no help if we complained to the police. In 1991 I was selling from the van in Slovakia, as I had a permit for the whole of Czechoslovakia. [The Czech and Slovak Republics split in 1992 and in that year]

I returned to Olomouc. Then the trouble started, really awful.

[In the new Czech Republic] there were problems all the time. If I went to a village in the van, I was hardly ever not attacked. As we arrived, it was "Gypsies, what are you doing here?'. We were living in the middle of the town of Olomouc. To go out after 7 or 8pm was dangerous. Our son Stefan was a schoolboy of 14 or 15 when he was beaten up by policemen. They beat up our boy. If we complained it would be even worse, there was so much corruption among the police.'

Maria Bockova, the Bocks' youngest daughter

'Our house in Olomouc was broken into and burned. I had to hide and I didn't know where. I'm still trying to forget.'

In May 1997 the Bocks' elder daughter Valerie was beaten up badly by skinheads when she was coming home from school. Valéria explains: 'She's dark like my husband, and she has a mole in the centre of her forehead. They beat her because they said she was an Indian.'

Vilém Bock

'In 1997 we decided to emigrate. It was just by chance we learned that Canada was taking people; Valéria read about it in a magazine at the hairdresser's in 1996. It was important for us to find a place to be together with our four children, even if it was a place where we

didn't yet speak the language. All the Roma who get to Canada say that it's like Paradise, where nobody beats you up or destroys your car.'

On 15 August 1997, as the family was preparing to leave, the Bocks were attacked by skinheads in a park. Valéria and the Bocks' three daughters - Valerie, Berta and Maria – flew to Canada on 16 August. Vilém travelled separately on 31 August, because it was too expensive to get a seat on the same plane. The Canadian government took the families case seriously and Vilem had managed to get documentation of the attack. But after just months in Canada, Vilem learned that his mother had throat cancer so Vilém, Valéria and Maria had to drop their asylum case in order to return to Olomouc.

The family spent four months back in Olomouc. Maria had problems at school with the other children. Valéria went to see the head, and said, 'I'm not letting my child go to school to be called a "smelly Gypsy" while her form teacher just sits and does nothing about it.'

Vilém Bock

'Wherever I looked for a job I was told that "Black faces" were not being employed. When we asked for benefits they told us they wouldn't give us anything and we should go back where we came from [to Canada], which couldn't be done.'

The Bocks drove to Holland in their car and asked for asylum. They met some Roma friends who advised them not to stay, as the Netherlands was sending Roma asylum seekers back immediately. So they drove on to Norway, where they spent 11 months.

'We met a Norwegian teacher who helped me get a work permit. They were very nice to us. I liked it there, and if they'd let me stay I would still be there. But our son Stefan, who came with us, was falsely accused of a robbery, and he had problems for ten years before the case was cleared up and he was declared innocent. So we got a letter from the Kingdom of Norway refusing us permission to stay. We were deported in our car to Sweden. In Sweden they did not even let us stay a moment, but pushed us over the border into Poland.'

At this point the Bocks decided to try to get to England. They left their car at a small Polish airport and flew to Copenhagen and then to England, arriving in 2000. Maria went to school in Colchester every day and studied English.

'There were three court hearings, and the barrister won the case for me. The court said I couldn't go back as I would be in danger. There were two weeks before the judgment became law. The Home Office counter-appealed, though my lawyer told me that the counter-appeal had been too late. But three months later I was locked up again. Valéria had a heart attack.'

Valéria

'I ended up in hospital. I had pain in my chest and down my arms but my GP just told me

"Go home". I cried so much. We had so many problems and my nerves were under so much stress. I just felt "Yes, let's go home". So in 2002 we joined our son Stefan in Slovakia. He was then badly attacked with knives and unable to use one of his hands.'

The family fled again to Belgium, where Valéria and Stefan got cleaning jobs. In 2004 the Bocks became EU citizens and were able to come to Manchester: first Stefan then Vilém , then Valéria with Stefan's wife Kristina and their baby daughter Nancy. They remain in the area. 'We don't take benefits - we don't like them. It's non-stop work. In five years, I've had one week of holiday', says Vilem.

He works double shifts for seven days a week cleaning for two firms, and Valéria does a night shift, with no let-up despite their medical conditions. Both are on medication and Vilém now has trouble breathing. Since the start of the banking crisis their agencies have twice closed down, only to reopen under other names but without paying the employees' back-pay. 'This is a good country with good people, the only thing I don't like is that the companies have started telling me lies', says Vilém.

The Bocks' elder daughters remained in Hamilton, Ontario where they married fellow Czech Romany refugees. Valéria sees her grandchildren on Skype: 'I have grandchildren in Canada and can't be with them; I can only see my family on a computer.'

Maria, the youngest daughter, is living nearby in Manchester with her Canadian husband and their baby Anthony. Determined to forget traumatic events in her childhood, Maria is a little worried about telling her family story: 'Sharing our experiences sounds good, but things could be taken the wrong way. People might laugh at us and say: 'Yeah, I'm glad that happened to you [Gypsies], you deserve it.'

Valéria says: 'Under communism we were partly protected from attacks, and at least we had work. Now we have to wander from country to country. It's so tense now. Two months ago in Ostrava a little Romani girl of two years old was burned over 80% of her body, and there was not even a report on TV.'

Vilém says: 'I wouldn't go home, whatever you gave me. I'm happy here. I've got a place to live and I've got work. I don't want to be rich, that only causes problems.'

For first-hand accounts and direct research into the Gypsy experience under the Nazi regime or Porrajmos see the three-part history *The Gypsies during the Second World War*, edited by Donald Kenrick (University of Herfordshire Press).

For the Czech and Slovak Roma experience since 1989, among the many UN and NGO reports on violent neo-Nazi attacks, extreme routine discrimination and human rights violations are: *Denied a Future* by Save the Children (2001); Report from the Czech Counselling Centre for Human Rights, (2000); *Minority Protection in the Czech Republic* by the Open Society Institute, (2001); and regular ongoing reports from the European Roma Rights Centre: www.errc.org

You can also listen to a podcast on the Gypsy experience under the Nazi regime here <http://www.hmd.org.uk/resources/podcasts/victims-of-nazi-persecution-roma-and-sinti-donald-kenrick> and learn about other victims of the Nazi regime here <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/victims-of-nazi-hatred/>

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