

This document is adapted from Fernando Gil Guimarães, *Tje Roma Community of Zavidovići*, Ald, 2004.

## Roma settlements in the Zavidovići area: historical notes

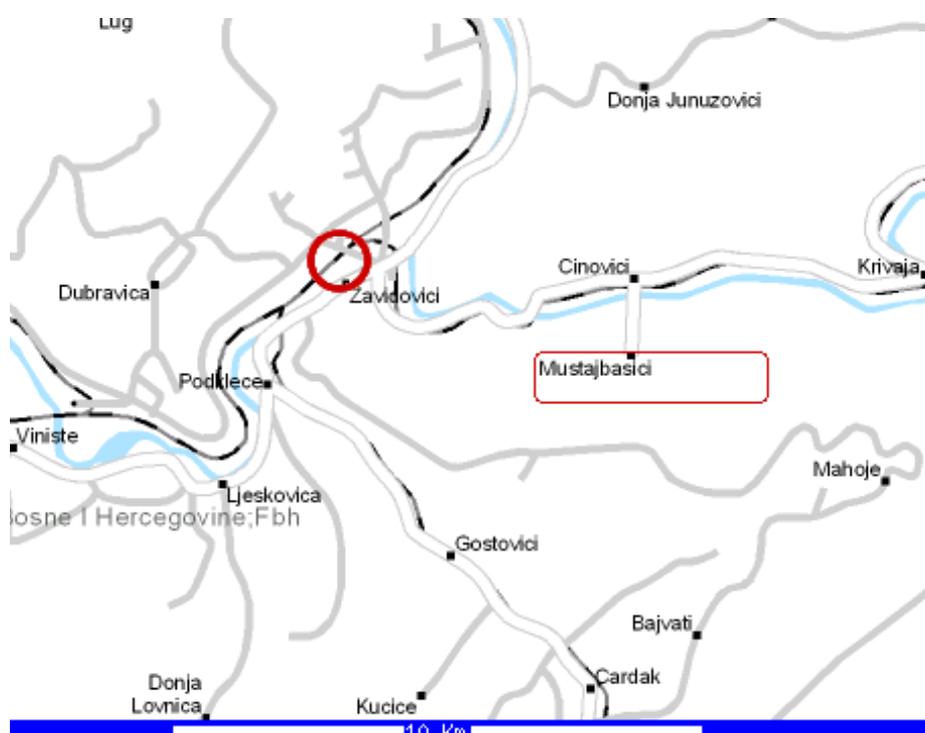
### Introduction

During the work and research done to complete the assessment of Zavidovići's Roma population funded by Council of Europe's Confidence-Building Measures Programme we tried to get some historical perspective in order to better understand the Roma situation in its local specificities. Although we did not pursue this aspect in a systematic way, we gathered a small amount of information that we summarize in the following pages.

### Mustajbašići

The work of Mejrić Fehim [Fehim, 2000] pp.54-59<sup>1</sup>, based on the observation of monuments and interviews with the older Rom still living in Zavidovići, indicates that a Roma settlement existed in a place named Plane – also called Cigani – inside the Mustajbašići ring of villages, in the Krivaja valley twenty kilometres West of Zavidovići's urban center. It is not clear from Fehim's text when the Roma first settled in Plane, but it is clear that they started leaving around 1955 and that in 1962 there were no more Roma in Plane. All that remains today is an abandoned cemetery up the hills<sup>2</sup>.

#### Geographical situation of Mustajbašići:



<sup>1</sup> - We are indebted to Mr Ibrahim Slipić's translation.

<sup>2</sup> - We presume that this was an exclusively Roma cemetery, like the Dragovac one (see below).

During the time of their settlement, the Roma inhabited about fifteen houses and laboured the earth, raised cattle and foiled tin<sup>3</sup>. The women went around in the valley to beg and people spoke of seeing Gypsy (ciganski) women everyday. A flute and drums band also existed and played in weddings and other events. The names of this band's members are all Muslim. According to Fehim the Roma children attended school regularly.

The economical success of a certain Rasim Bajrić is still spoken about among the older Rom consulted by Fehim. Rasim Bajrić made and sold souvenirs and his success was evident on the fact that he had two wives<sup>4</sup>, houses in Zagreb – where he moved to later - and in the seaside. It would also seem that he was president of the Roma Association of the Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

By 1962, all the Roma had left to Novo Naselje and Dragovac, nearer Zavidovići's center, or to the neighbouring municipality of Banovići.

## **Dragovac**

Dragovac is a small place up in the hills West of Zavidovići's urban center that has been completely abandoned by Roma, the only sign of their presence being an uncared for cemetery hidden by bushes.

We visited this cemetery and observed that the dates of death on the gravestones that can still be read go from 1914 to 1973. The older gravestones are in the old Turkish style and all the names are Muslim. The range of dates implies that Roma were present in Dragovac before the dates abovementioned for their abandonment of Plane, probably since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

According to Zavidovići's Roma Association the Roma arrived in Dragovac in 1937 as a group of around ten individuals and worked on tin foiling or in the Krivaja factory, until they left to Rupin Dol in 1949. This information is contradicted by the presence of tombs older than 1937 and, partially at least<sup>5</sup>, by the tombs more recent than 1949. Also, some documents refer ambiguously to damage provoked to Roma houses in Dragovac during the 1992-1995 war. There is also a Municipality project to build houses for Roma in Dragovac to accommodate those that illegally occupy housing units in the town, thus accepting the historical dimension of Roma presence in that place.

The reason for an exclusively Roma cemetery is also unclear. As mentioned above all the tombs are Muslim or old Muslim style. Is it because Roma were excluded from the majority cemeteries or was it because of practical and historical considerations, i.e., the cemetery began informally and after it was used out of habit? Nowadays, Muslim Roma are buried in

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<sup>3</sup> - None of these activities survives today.

<sup>4</sup> - Interestingly, the only Zavidovići Rom today that has two wives also worked – prior to the 1992-1995 war – on souvenirs, especially woodcarvings. The subject of these carvings is predominantly religious and Catholic, showing the importance of the Croatian market for Zavidovići's Muslim Roma. This importance is still seen today as the better-off Roma households – the ones that declared to us a monthly income of KM 3'000 to KM 4'000 trade in Zagreb.

<sup>5</sup> - Partially, because we are unsure if the Roma cemetery as a sign of exclusion from other cemeteries. See below.

all-Muslim cemeteries and no Roma has mentioned to us any case of exclusion of cemeteries be it in the present be it in the past.

**One of Dragovac's abandoned tombstones:**



**The most recent tombstone:**



**And one of the oldest:**



### **Other historical settlements**

There are references in some documents to Roma presence in Hajderovići on the right margin of the Krivaja river, further away from Zavidovići than the abovementioned Plane settlement, but nothing concrete is known. In any case, no Roma live in Hajderovići today. To be exact, no Roma lives more than 5 km away of the urban center.

## Final observations

The history of Roma presence in the Zavidovići municipality would deserve some more study, especially considering that most of its sources are oral and that they risk to disappear soon. The presentation this history in an accessible way – an exhibit, for instance – would allow to ground the perception that Roma presence in Zavidovići is not temporary but has going on for more than a century.

The above information shows that apparently Roma had a better life – crafts that were unique and profitable – and were better integrated – regular attendance to school and work in public firms – than nowadays. It maybe so and in that case further research would be beneficial to correct the image of the Roma as unable and unwilling to participate in the society. Nevertheless, we should approach this subject with caution, as that image can also be understood as a specific Romani way to Yugo-nostalgia. Indeed, this current is strong in the older Romani population and projects to (re)learn the old crafts that gave Roma pride and profits are immersed in this kind of feelings. Unfortunately, the economic sustainability of the this kind of projects is doubtful. The idea of building modern Roma identity on the image of the pre-industrial proud craftsman can also be questioned.

The pattern of separateness of the Roma settlements should also be noted but not too hastily characterized as exclusion but probably as a mix of the later and of self-exclusion or a will to stand apart. Also, from a practical point of view and considering that Roma probably arrived first as two or three large households, it would be surprising that they settle in the middle of a village. That separation continued throughout history and even today, when Roma live practically all over town, the largest concentrations have historical reasons or were motivated by the 1992-1995 war. The nagging question concerns the problem of the all-Roma cemeteries. As we saw above, it is difficult to attribute their existence to a precise reason. As we said, it can be a simple matter of practical and historical reasons. But it can also be a matter of exclusion.

## Bibliography

Fehim, Mejrić. *Grada za monografiju Mustajbašića. Društveno-ekonomska i kulturna događanja Mustajbašića*. Zenica: Dom Stampe, 2002.