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## Unwanted Neighbours, Unwanted Memory. Slovak–Roma Relations in Marek Vadas’s *Six Strangers*

**Abstract:** In contemporary Slovakia, the Roma population are often seen as unwanted neighbours – a marginalised community, which experiences discrimination in various spheres of life. Anti-Romani sentiment, which constitutes the basis of negative attitudes toward the Roma minority, is hardly a new phenomenon; its manifestations, including specific acts of violence, can be found in the past. One of the examples of this kind of violence – the bloody pogrom in Pobedim carried out against the Romani populace by their Slovak neighbours in 1928 – offer a starting point for Marek Vadas’s *Six Strangers* (*Šesť cudzincov*, 2021). The historic site of the massacre, which is not commemorated in any form, has become a non-site of memory, while the tragic events have been pushed out of Slovak historical consciousness. Vadas’s prose is an attempt to bring them back to the collective consciousness and raise a number of important questions concerning the operation of cultural codes that permit and justify violence, the position and responsibility of the bystanders, as well as silence as a form of complicity in acts of aggression. In addition, it introduces a contemporary perspective, pointing to the persistence of mechanisms of discrimination, stigmatisation and exclusion of the Others, understood in many different ways, from the community.

**Keywords:** Roma, racism, Slovak-Roma relations, Marek Vadas, Slovak literature

**Abstrakt:** We współczesnej Słowacji Romowie często są postrzegani jako niechciani sąsiedzi, stanowią marginalizowaną społeczność, która doświadcza dyskryminacji w różnych sferach życia. Antyromskie uprzedzenia, będące podstawą negatywnego stosunku do tej mniejszości, nie są zjawiskiem nowym; ich przejawy, w tym konkretne akty przemocy, odnaleźć można w przeszłości. Jeden z przykładów tego rodzaju aktów – krwawy pogrom w Pobedimie, dokonany na Romach przez ich słowackich sąsiadów w 1928 roku – stanowi punkt wyjścia dla utworu Marka Vadasa *Sześciu obcych* (*Šesť cudzincov*, 2021). Historyczne miejsce masakry nie doczekało się żadnej formy upamiętnienia, stając się nie-miejscem pamięci, a tragiczne wydarzenia zostały wyparte ze słowackiej świadomości historycznej. Proza Vadasa jest próbą wprowadzenia ich do świadomości zbiorowej, a jednocześnie stawia szereg ważnych pytań, dotyczących funkcjonowania kodów kulturowych dopuszczających i usprawiedliwiających przemoc, pozycji i odpowiedzialności świadków, a także milczenia jako formy współudziału

w aktach agresji. Ponadto wprowadza perspektywę współczesną, wskazując na trwałość mechanizmów dyskryminacji, stygmatyzacji i wykluczania ze społeczności różnie rozumianych Innych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Romowie, rasizm, relacje słowacko-romskie, Marek Vadas, literatura słowacka

In the diverse space of contemporary Slovak literature, one can point to a number of texts addressing issues concerning the shape of the community and its memory, human rights and individual freedoms, as well as the phenomena and processes that endanger them. Using a variety of artistic strategies, the authors create narratives with subversive and deconstructive potential by introducing perspectives which have been absent or barely present in literary discourse to date. This is achieved by going back to traumatic historical events or by showing contemporary forms of oppression and their systemic conditions. The works that have a potential to be involved and engaged are characterised by their sensitivity to issues of discrimination, marginalisation, various forms of exclusion and violence. The Slovak-Roma relation has been recently added to the list of topics that writers have explored to date, including mainly various forms of oppression against women and non-heteronormative people, the inadequate reckoning in the collective consciousness with the events that transpired in the period of the clericalist-fascist Slovak state, the Holocaust, and the communist regime after 1948.

The following reflections are based on Marek Vadas's work *Six Strangers* (*Šesť cudzincov*, 2021) – an important attempt to engage in the process of reminding the violence against Roma, as well as to build reflection on the impact of these forgotten traumatic events on the functioning of society. Vadas created a space to discuss the persistence of discrimination, intolerance, racist mechanisms and a number of other problems, which provides justification for reading his text as an example of engaged literature. Before moving on to the discussion of the key problems raised in the text, some background information on the current issues concerning the Slovak Romani community and the past events that inspired Vadas's work is worth mentioning. The two interlinked dimensions – contemporary and historical – constitute important contexts required for reading his text.

The situation of Roma nationals and citizens, as well as their social, political and cultural status within the community are some of the key challenges in contemporary Slovakia. The Roma community is one of the largest national minority groups in Slovakia. In the 2021 census, only 1.23% of people declared themselves to be of Roma nationality (Štatistický úrad Slovenskej republiky 2023); however, this data should be contrasted with the results of a study conducted by the Bureau of the Government Plenipotentiary for Roma Communities of the Slovak Republic. The Bureau periodically runs the *Atlas of Roma Communities* project, the purpose of which is to describe the living conditions of the Roma in various aspects, from subsistence through access to healthcare and education, to issues of political and economic participation, opportunities for cultural development, religious worship, and many others. The collected data is then used to organise spe-

cific social, educational, and integration schemes. The latest *Atlas*, featuring the results of a 2019 survey, estimates the number of Roma people at around 450,000 (Ravasz, Kovács, Markovič 2020, 17), while in the aforementioned census, even after taking into account the declarations of Roma as a second nationality, which was possible in the questionnaire, resulted in just over 156,000 Roma. There are many likely reasons for such a significant difference, but one in particular seems to stand out – the reluctance to declare Roma nationality stems from the racism present in Slovak social life, also referred to as anti-Romani sentiment (Hrabovský 2015, 44 et seq.), which has various forms and manifestations significantly affecting the lives of Roma on an individual and collective level.<sup>1</sup>

Regardless of which figure one accepts as the correct one (since ignoring the declarations made during the census is problematic from an ethical point of view), one has to say that in each case they refer to a group that is subject to systematic (and often systemic) practices of exclusion, marginalisation and violence. Despite existing legal regulations, including the 1991 act which aligned the status of the Roma with that of other national minorities in Slovakia, along with other acts banning discrimination, the Roma still suffer discrimination when it comes to access to education, the labour market, as well as political and cultural representation. Part of the political scene, especially Marian Kotleba's neo-fascist People's Party Our Slovakia, consistently promotes anti-Romani sentiment; there are known cases of police harassment and unjustified use of violence (Zálešák 2020), and the country sees the highest level of intolerance towards Roma in society compared to other nationalities, religions, etc. (Mesežnikov 2020, 65). Ongoing projects and programs are not yielding the expected results, and a significant proportion of the Roma live in isolation and generational poverty, which makes them *unwanted neighbours* for the vast majority of the Slovak society.<sup>2</sup>

Rejection and resentment as essential elements of the attitude of Slovaks toward Roma are hardly a new phenomenon; in the past, they have led to various types of actions against this community, which were rarely fairly assessed and analysed, and never resulted in adequate reparations or even commemoration.<sup>3</sup> One such forgotten event, which transpired in the time of the interwar democratic First Czechoslovak Republic, inspired Vadas's prose.

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<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that racism is often treated as a non-existent or marginal phenomenon in their native cultural space by the people of Central European countries: "...we often deny racism, claiming that there are no Black people in our country, that we did not have colonies, we did not participate in the slave trade. However, racism also means our local hatred of the Roma, even though we do not usually call it racism" (Kościańska, Petryk 2022, 22).

<sup>2</sup> Mesežnikov cites the results of a 2017 survey by the Institute for Public Opinion Studies, which saw 79% of respondents declaring that they would not want to have a Roma family as neighbours; the author notes that in 2008, the same response was picked by 70% respondents. Cf. Mesežnikov 2020, 65.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the issue of remembering the violence against the Roma does not only concern Slovakia. The most vivid example of international indifference to this group is the exclusion of Roma and Sinti from the debate on the victims of Nazism, which was the case for nearly 40 years after the end of World War II. It was not until 1982 that the Federal Republic of Germany recognised the genocide of the European Roma and Sinti populations, and the first official commemoration of the liquidation of the Zigeunerlager at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp was organised only in 1994 (Talewicz-Kwiatkowska 2021, 45–46).

On the night of 1–2 October 1928, in the village of Pobedim in eastern Slovakia, a group of about 40 men, armed with firearms, bats, pitchforks and stones, headed from the local inn, where a local festival was being celebrated, toward a Roma settlement located on the outskirts of Pobedim. After the settlement was surrounded, an attack was launched. The men threw stones, smashed windows, and then barged into homes, vandalising the interiors, as well as beating and shooting their residents. The people fleeing toward the nearby forest were pursued, and those who were caught, were brutally beaten (Pivoň 1999, 39–40; Baloun 2022, 177–178). Six people were killed, including a young child, and many were wounded. The losses were also significant. In total, 33 men were charged with crimes, of whom only 10 were convicted. The highest sentences amounted to two years and three months in prison.<sup>4</sup>

Recalling the events of the pogrom – an act of collective violence against a specific ethnic group (Baloun 2022, 173) – was the starting point for the presented work:

The neighbours were brutally tormented and killed by the flawless and timid officials, teachers, clerks, the mayor and city councillors. After a few hours, the assault ends, as if the curse was suddenly lifted. The air clears up, the streets and fields are quiet. The tools are washed, and the corpses end up... no one knows where. The inhabitants are unable to explain this incident. No one remembers the details. What is certain is that the whole event transpired without a hitch, without as much as a single attempt to stop this madness. (...) After years, nothing commemorates the events of that night. The symbolic crosses for the six victims are missing, no memorial plaque was installed, and the city chronicle is devoid of any mentions of what happened (Vadas 2021, 7–8).<sup>5</sup>

The atrocity is virtually non-existent in the Slovak collective memory – this fact was emphasised on a regular basis in reviews of the book and during meetings with the author.<sup>6</sup> The tragedy was never commemorated, as Vadas pointed

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<sup>4</sup> The course of the trial and the court's decision were influenced by a number of factors, mainly the bias towards the defendants, who presented the story that the pogrom was a form of self-defence of honest farmers against an organised "Gypsy" criminal group – corroborated by the local priest and representatives of local authorities, exploiting the popular racist constructs. An additional factor was their promise to pay compensation to the Roma, which influenced the testimonies during the trial. These issues were thoroughly analysed by Pavel Baloun in his monograph *"The Scourge of Our Countryside!"* (*"Metla našeho venkova!"*), based on extensive archive materials. Cf. Baloun 2022, 178–188.

<sup>5</sup> The excerpts in the Slovakian language were translated by the author into Polish and subsequently into English [eds. note].

<sup>6</sup> For the sake of argument, one should note that the description of the events in Pobedim was sporadically mentioned in scholarly works; it was also brought up in Slávo Kalný's collection of reportages *The Gypsy Cry and Laughter* (*Cigánsky plač a smiech*, 1960). In contemporary literature, Vadas is not the only author bringing up the pogrom – it was also mentioned by Katarina Kucbelová in *The Bonnet* (*Čepiec*, 2019). Part of the text is devoted to the current situation of the Roma community and Slovak-Roma relations, while the mention of Pobedim and the trial held after the pogrom serves primarily to highlight the persistence of racist patterns and acquiescence to violence: "All the stereotypes that would undoubtedly resonate today were brought up in the court – the Roma are lazy, they do not want to work, they lie, they cheat and terrorise other villagers, they live in sheds. The defender drew a picture of whites being upstanding citizens, heads of families who pay taxes and take an active part in the functioning of the village, decent citizens, pitting them against parasites. The Roma were blacksmiths, they made horseshoes, chains, as well as bricks, they made a living with their music or

out in the quoted passage. The places where the Slovak residents of Pobedim murdered their Roma neighbours back in 1928 may bring to mind non-sites of memory, referring to Roma Sendyka's theoretical proposal, which are "inconvenient for the local community in the sense that their commemoration is a greater threat to collective identity than the lack of such commemoration, which also exposes it to criticism. ... the community, which is topographically linked to a particular location, has no need or will to focus its memory in the object – it wants to forget it and un-remember" (Sendyka 2021, 49). In the world depicted in the work, there are elements the scholar believes to be characteristic of non-sites of memory that feature particular characteristics: "an ominous aura, unclear identity, unrecognised meanings, missing meaning, unspeakable experience and apparent safety. These are places where one cannot settle down" (*ibidem*). This aspect reinforces the work's relationship with the given space; on the other hand, even though *Six Strangers* refers to the events of 1928, it does so indirectly – it is not a report reconstructing that day, and the author uses the letter "P" to refer to the town, rather than its full name. The assault is mentioned in the opening chapter, and the remaining ones merely refer to it in passing, showing certain traces, disturbing dreams, forming "a distinct, pulsating red thread" (Domorák 2022) in the complex fabric of the text. The tragedy is hardly ever mentioned; instead, its spectral presence can be felt in various ways by the residents of "the quiet and boring town of P, which lies somewhere the news agencies never go to, on the outskirts of the civilised world" (Vadas 2021, 7).

A brief third-person exposition is followed by seven separate parts, which are interconnected thanks to motifs, characters and the subject matter, presented using first-person or personal narration – the latter was chosen for one of the chapters. The narrative structure in some passages has been supplemented with elements characteristic of the spoken monologue, a form particularly suitable for presenting problematic and obscure issues that require an attempt at understanding or reckoning, often also associated with an effort to persuade the silent addressee of the monologue to accept the interpretation or rationale presented in the text. The methods employed by the writer – numerous narrative perspectives, combining different temporal perspectives (historical and contemporary), the intermingling of elements of the real world, projections, hallucinations and dreams, references to the poetics of horror – can be seen as attempt to test various ways to refer to the forgotten issue that has become a taboo, as well as seek answers to questions about the causes and traumatic consequences of the tragedy that inspired the work.

Another important issue is the status of the characters acting as narrators in the subsequent parts – their positioning in relation to the events. Referring to the classic triad of the perpetrators, victims and bystanders, which was mainly used in Holocaust studies (Hilberg 2007) one may conclude that among the voices in the work, one is missing – the voice of the victims. On the other hand, the place and role of the characters who speak, or whose experiences are presented in the

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manual labour, they built railroads in the area, they had their own jobs, yet they lived to see the *final solution*" (Kucbelová 2019, 25–26).

narrative, are hardly clear – mostly due to the fact that the perpetrators belong to the same community as the bystanders, and thus are linked by a particular sense of solidarity and loyalty. The story titled *One Word*, featuring a young protagonist, contains the following passage:

After a while, armed men came to the park. They were heading towards the river, but... I couldn't help myself – I stopped them with a gesture and pointed to a barely visible gap in the hedge. I think I might have said "There!" at the same time. That one word was enough (Vadas 2021, 29).

The situation experienced by another character, a young civil servant, plays out as follows:

He walks up to the window and notices a young woman making her way through the bushes, her long skirt getting in the way. She tries to hold it up at the waist. A group of men emerges from around the corner. Gunshot. She falls in the mud. The men surround her and start smashing her body with bats. Tomáš is not able to take his eyes off them, until one of the men looks up, right in his direction. Tomáš drops to the ground in an instant. ... He walks on all fours to the other end of the office, slips into the closet and slams the door behind him. ... Sitting in the dark closet, he has enough time to think whether there is a way to cover his tracks. He has nothing to do with what he saw, he is not complicit and he is absolutely not to blame for what happened (Vadas 2021, 63–64).

Another character obsessively recalls waking up on the edge of the village after a drunken night out and seeing "an innkeeper with blood splattered on his shirt walking back to the town, with a long knife in his hand" (Vadas 2021, 53). The protagonist says: "Ever since I saw that, there has not been a single day that I did not want to tell the innkeeper about everything I saw" (Vadas 2021, 53); however, all he actually does is repeating that he "saw it all" in a drunken stupor. From another part, the readers learn of his death during one of his subsequent visits to the inn; the description suggests that he was shot, while the story circulating among the locals suggests that he allegedly committed suicide.

The various narratives, as the cited examples show, are presented primarily by (mostly unwitting) witnesses of the unfolding events, those who knew what was happening or what had happened. They confirm the ambiguity of the bystander, a concept originally described by Raul Hilberg, as well as the varying scope of their agency and responsibility.<sup>7</sup> This leads to several questions – how to interpret the gesture of showing the direction in which the victim ran away, especially since the protagonist would regret it almost immediately? How to evaluate the lack of immediate reaction to the observed violence? And what is the relationship between violence and silence? This final question concerns the entire community of the town of P, as well as Slovakia in general,<sup>8</sup> and seems particularly relevant in the context of the entire work.

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<sup>7</sup> There were numerous important debates concerning this issue in recent years, with new suggestions concerning the position of those who are neither victims nor perpetrators. Cf. Dauksza, Koprowska 2019 and others.

<sup>8</sup> This interpretation is made possible thanks to the statements in the text, which say that the events presented in the work could have taken place in any other location, as well as thanks to the

The awareness of the existence of the Slovak history of violence is explicitly expressed in one of the monologues:

Others always ruled and gave us orders – Hungarians, Austrians, Czechs or Russians, and we were quiet and obedient... It is not easy to become a murderer when you are a prisoner yourself. We have the Jews and the Roma, and that is it. We are a small nation, surrounded on all sides by large ones. Some could call it cowardice, but in reality, it is about being aware of what we can do. We had to decide where we could direct our hatred without too much effort and risk of retaliation. Someone was always responsible for our failures... Preferably a foreigner, someone different, and not too numerous – so that they could not defend themselves (Vadas 2021, 37).

On the other hand, violence is a subject that should not be brought up – the same narrator praises silence, which is presented as a condition for the continued survival of the community, the preservation of its cohesion and the mythical image of a peaceful nation. Silence is the wisest of answers to all the difficult questions about the past, for if guilt and responsibility “came to the surface, it would not let us breathe” (Vadas 2021, 36).

By creating the right conditions for erasing the memory of violence, silence thus becomes another form of violence, practised by the entire community to pursue certain goals, for the good of all. It is worth noting that in this chapter the narrative is set in the present. In addition to historical references to pogroms against the Roma, and the Holocaust, other groups of Others (homosexuals and immigrants) are mentioned, which suffer due to similar practices of exclusion, stigmatisation and violence, mainly verbal, which can always be a starting point of a process leading to a pogrom. That part repeatedly highlights the role and power of words. The line of violence is thus continuous in nature, with a certain attitude to memory contributing to this outcome. Silence, praised by the aforementioned narrator and by the caricatural depiction of the writer, allows the community to persist and function in peace – but that is only apparent. The life of P’s residents carries on as usual – they meet, talk, celebrate important occasions, try to solve family problems, the inn continues to be the heart of the town and so on. The tabooed and repressed elements manifest themselves in unexpectedly discovered traces of the crime (the body of the murdered girl), nightmares and hallucinations (severed heads, the blackened hand of one of the victims), generalised anxiety and a sense of impending doom, as well as self-loathing.

The work contains a dual gesture – on the one hand, the attention is focused on a specific attack against a specific group, while on the other hand, the problem of aversion to otherness is shown as one of the key cultural codes of the Slovak community; however, it should be noted that this is also applicable to other communities. This is an element of the famous folk wisdom, the role and importance of which the aforementioned writer argues for in his megalomaniac monologue:

When people are united, they can achieve great things – they start revolutions, hang the rich, burn stores, and change the world. This is the best that will be left behind. Folk wisdom

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author’s own statements, including: “The reader can place the events of the story anywhere on the map of Slovakia” (Janáč, Vadas 2021, 33).

allowed us to get to where we are now. Blood is thicker than water – who could argue with that? This is an indisputable fact that remains true in any situation (Vadas 2021., 108–109).

Therefore, the residents of P remain silent in solidarity, downplaying the suffering of those excluded from their collective, pushing aside ethical dilemmas, denying their individual responsibility; however, their neutrality is an illusion, and their silence emerges as complicity and involvement in the violence.

Learning about and introducing the unsaid history of the Roma community into the Slovak consciousness is a difficult process, which requires multifaceted and prolonged efforts. It is difficult for a number of reasons – due to the lack of understanding and acceptance of the fact that it is part of the history of the entire community, due to the unacknowledged, yet persistent anti-Romani sentiment, as well as the scant interest in this issue in the Slovak academic community.<sup>9</sup> The role of literature is to participate in this process and to amplify its impact due to its potential. Vadas's work has been widely covered in the Slovak cultural space,<sup>10</sup> received a nomination for the most important Slovak literary award, *Anasoft litera*, and was shortlisted for the René Prize, awarded by high school students. It would be difficult to gauge its impact at this time; even though it has undoubtedly introduced new concepts into the discussion of Slovak *unwanted memory* and its implications for the way of understanding Slovakia as a community. In a review of the work, Patrik Garaj provocatively asked: “Have you heard about the anti-Roma pogrom in Pobedim? Try to see what you can learn about the attack from the description of the town's history on its website or on Wikipedia. Let me tell you what – nothing!” (Garaj 2022). A few months later, the Wikipedia article was supplemented with information about the events of 1928; the town's website still does not mention the pogrom in any way.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that the most in-depth analysis of the events in Pobedim was written by Pavel Baloun, a Czech historian, quoted in this article. The collected testimonies of Slovak Roma from World War II, edited by Milena Hübschmannová, were also released in the Czech Republic. The first volume features memories and stories categorised according to the issues they raise. Some examples of chapters include: *Ghettoisation and Exclusion of Roma*, *Roma in the Armed Forces*, *Roma in Labour Camps*, *Roma in the Guerrillas and in the Slovak National Uprising*. The second volume is still awaiting publication. The title of the released volume features the slogan of the officers from the clero-fascist Slovak state, “After the Jews, We'll get the Gypsies.” The testimonies are presented in Roma language with Czech translation. Cf. Hübschmannová 2005.

<sup>10</sup> The majority of the reactions were positive, but there were also critical comments; Magdalena Bystrzak accused the author of lacking empathy: “His attention is not focused on trying to get into the world of those who are either silent or have the opportunity to speak out; instead, he focuses on his own creation and building a plot. The massacre turns into an abstract literary construct...” (Bystrzak 2022).

<sup>11</sup> As of 18 March 2023.



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