

Researching and Writing about Poverty in Slovakia

Zuzana Kusá

Senior Researcher, Department of Sociology,
Slovak Academy of Sciences
zuzanakusa@stonline.sk

The paper gives some insights into the state of research and public debate about poverty in Slovakia. It suggests that the idea of personal responsibility and the diminution of the state, and the practical need to reduce the public expenditures frame the public debate and the research orientation substantially, and that there is the tendency both of the poor families and politicians to avoid the discussion about everyday livelihood troubles of those living on social support. The author introduces some findings of the family history research History of Poverty in Slovakia that was the part of the international project designed and co-ordinated by Julia Szalai to present survival strategies of poor households and discusses the outcomes of their tendency to veil their poverty and include themselves by trying to pretend major consumption standards.

Poverty is a marginal issue in research and policy in Slovakia. This article explores why, despite an unemployment rate of 20 per cent and the existence of some 500 wretched Roma (gypsy) settlements, social scientists, journalists, intellectuals, and politicians speak and write about poverty only rarely. It is a kind of case study of the politics of transition, of how pervasive problems become 'invisible', because they do not fit the requirements of liberal democratic discourse, and, worse still, because they have the taint of communism attached to them.

Social problems are personal troubles experienced by many people; but the new liberal ideology expects individuals to be responsible for their own troubles, and to leave it to the authorities to deal with those incapable of doing so (Clarke and Cochrane, 1998). Indeed for mainstream Slovaks, their version of civic virtue is to resist the urge to give to anonymous Oliver Twists, and hence to decrease the deficit in the national budget. Pity and sympathy have about them something of the Hammer and Sickle – and this helps many Slovaks resist such sentiments. It also helps them to dismiss protesters against the World Bank and International Monetary Fund as unfortunate misled beings, who should be strictly policed and then quietly ushered away.

The statistics show that Slovakia is a poor country, with GDP per head the lowest of the four major Central European applicants for EU membership, and with 10 per cent of its households living beneath the minimum income line. But these statistics do not translate into public debates about poverty, or even into recognising poverty as a problem. On the contrary, the dominant voices call for restrictions in public expenditure. Seen from the capital, Bratislava, the stereotype of poverty is of passive, listless people, living in shabby blocks of flats or sordid huts, indulging their fantasies of better lives by

watching third-rate soap operas on satellite TV. Public opinion polls reveal that city dwellers are unwilling to contribute more to support what they regard as the idleness of the small-town and rural population.

A further paradox is the situation of the Roma population. While the media and academics remain silent about poverty in Slovakia, Slovak gypsy settlements appear in photographs in the National Geographical magazine, or in foreign TV news programmes, and Roma feature as applicants for asylum in the Czech Republic and the EU. Yet within political discourse in Slovakia, Roma are presented either as victims of discrimination, or as involved in criminal acts, as the hard core of unemployment, as having high birth rates, as careless about hygiene and education, and so on. They are represented as a national problem and a national shame, but not primarily or principally as poor. If poverty occurs in the description of their situation, it is not as the cause but the consequence of their lifestyle and culture, a secondary characteristic.

However, the international publicity given to Slovak Roma poverty does indirectly reinforce the typical response of white Slovaks to their own impecunity – to try to conceal it from public view. As I shall show from our research on intergenerational poverty in Slovakia, the absence of this topic from policy debates is in large part a reflection of the coping strategies of poor people and the idea that investigating or writing about it is intrusive and offensive. This is not something that has come into our culture since the fall of communism; it is deeply ingrained, from the period before the Second World War, and has survived through to 1989 (the year of what one of our research respondents indelicately called ‘the coup’).

In this article, I shall draw on our research study of the family lives of poor people in Slovakia (Kusá, 1997), which was part of the large-scale project *Social History of Poverty in Central Europe*, funded by the programme on the Social Costs of Economic Transformation in Central Europe (Ferge, 1997). This gives many indications of how poor people themselves contribute to their invisibility in Slovak society, and how they draw on intergenerational material and cultural resources to do so. By way of conclusion, I shall argue that little is likely to change in the way this issue is handled in Slovakia, until a far later stage in the transition process, because of this fit between mainstream fastidiousness about poverty, official parsimony over its relief, and shameful privacy amongst its sufferers.

Researching poverty in Slovakia

The study was carried out in 1995–6, and was inspired by Julia Szalai’s (1995) hypothesis that the origins of Central European population’s helplessness in the face of transition to a market economy should be sought in the pre-transition period. Certainly poverty was not a new experience for many families in Slovakia, though the memories of it had faded somewhat during the 1980s, when the economy grew most rapidly. In the pre-war period the agricultural population (62.5 per cent) made Slovakia one of the most backward regions of Europe, with rural poverty commonplace. Emigration represented the only chance to escape from poverty; mass emigration occurred between 1869 and 1935, and its decrease after 1918 was due to lower quotas in the receiving countries (Svetoň, 1969). During the communist years, the proportion of low-income households declined, from 21 per cent in 1958 to 9.6 per cent in 1988 (Analýza, 1992: 47): ‘about a

quarter of all children up to three years of age . . . lived in below social-minimum income families' (Analýza, 1992: 51).

The research aimed to trace families which had experienced poverty for three generations – before the Second World War, under communism, and after 1989. The sampling was based on areas of known poverty, and official data, using social surveys, statistics, and historical data (Feglová, Kusá, and Radičová, 1995). In our model, the *grandparental* generation were expected to have only basic education, and to have been born into the families of agricultural workers or small peasants; the *parental* generation were anticipated to be unskilled or semi-skilled workers in agriculture or industry, with only one partner in employment; and the *children's* generation to be people over 16 without General Certificate of Education. Interviewing was done by trained students from Comenius and Nitra Universities, resident in the districts identified as containing concentrations of poverty (Faltan, Gajdoš, and Pašiak, 1995). Three-generation interviews were achieved with eight families, half of whose middle generation lived in towns of over 10,000 inhabitants. All but one of the families had more than two children, and two had eight and seven respectively.

It proved easy to identify families who seemed to conform to our model, but far more difficult to fulfil our research design – to interview two family members from each of the three generations about their lives, following the family-history approach of Schutze (1977). Eight of the first ten families contacted about the research refused to take part, and it proved extremely difficult to get both partners of any generation to speak separately about the family's history. Furthermore, no Roma family was recruited, because the interviewers were afraid to knock on doors in what were effectively 'no-go' areas of towns where Roma lived.

Already aware of the stigma conveyed by the word 'poverty', the interviewers described the project as a study of 'common people's living standards in Slovakia'. But this was only one part of the resistance encountered. One interviewer recorded, 'The people contacted were deeply worried about the possible publicity of their narratives, and that was the main reason why they refused to take part in the research.' Tape recorders presented a symbolic threat and people were worried that their life histories would not end in archives but become accessible to 'the public'. Far from wishing, as we had anticipated, to draw the attention of the authorities to their plight, they considered it indecent to publicise their most intimate affairs. Perhaps some considered 'the public' to equate to the Department of Labour and Social Welfare (if they were claiming benefit and doing undeclared work). Yet, most resistance seemed to concern the violation of privacy and family co-operation (for instance, speaking about excessive drinking). It was particularly difficult to get the second member of a couple relationship to speak, once their partner had been interviewed. Members negotiated with each other about who would give an interview, and the outcome often reflected family power relations. One interviewer recorded that an older woman would not let her husband be interviewed: 'she probably considered it disrespectful, and I think she used this opportunity to humiliate him'.

It became clear that some family members (mostly women in the second generation) insisted on being present during interviews with other members, to 'keep an eye' on the version given, and try to correct deviations from the authorised story. For instance, Mrs S (from Rimavská Sobota) sat in on the interview with her husband, her son-in-law, and his mother; and the wife, mother-in-law, and sister of the young man interviewed at length

in Nitra came to check up how he was doing. When he was asked in front of them what he considered his most important life achievement, he replied – in contrast with his openness on earlier topics, when alone – ‘This cannot be broadcast.’

The interviewees regarded speaking near a microphone as being interviewed ‘in public’, and it was apparent that they had had few opportunities of speaking about their private lives. Often, instead of expanding on their joys and sorrows, they gave the briefest ‘official curriculum vitae’. In one household, a fairly talkative grandmother, speaking very positively about her family, was barracked from the next room by her sister, shouting ‘Don’t blab’. It was often unclear whether refusal to expand on answers was self-protection against intruders, or the lack of experience of speaking, or a combination of both: ‘I am not used to entrusting anything to anybody’, said one young unemployed respondent from Martin.

It was also interesting to note that the interviewees behaved submissively, as if they were embarrassed at the prying nature of their task. When interviewees did not wish to ‘wash their dirty linen in public’, they delicately avoided difficult topics. They seemed unable to endure the silences that might have led to more reflection or disclosure, or simply to the speaker rounding off a narrative. They treated pauses as resistance and embarrassment, and gently passed on to a completely different topic – ‘helping the respondent out’, as it were (cf. Jordan *et al.*, 1992, ch. 3). Local interviewees often knew of painful incidents in the family histories of interviewees that were passed over unmentioned, but never raised such issues, or challenged omissions, euphemisms, or unexplained shifts. The accounts given have an air of edited or sanitised versions, usually regulated by a matriarch, for the sake of presenting the family as a co-operative unit (Jordan, 1997).

Such presentations were clearly purposeful and in some sense functional for the families. In terms of Friedmann’s (1996) empowerment model of the moral economy, their primary concern was over providing a ‘safe life space’, with adequate shelter, food, and household income. They lacked the secure supply of resources to move on from this to invest in education or participate in community-based organisations (Friedmann, 1996: 168). Food was frequently mentioned, both as an indicator of relative want or plenty, and as a medium through which sharing and trust were expressed (for instance, a mother-in-law who marked foodstuffs and wrote her name on eggs was disparagingly described as a ‘typical peasant’). Recent price inflation in food was seen as a result of government policies, and official callousness: ‘shall we really eat nothing else but garlic soup all the time? Has somebody planned that? Let him eat it if he does so. . .’.

Family histories provided much evidence that the struggle to secure a separate dwelling influenced the priorities and rhythms of household life. Members recalled with pride the construction of such dwellings, and the extremely demanding co-operative labour it involved, including the long hours worked by children after school. This was not confined to the poor, as Šmídová’s (1993) research reveals, but for the poor it had a special significance among both the older generations. Before World War II, it was a tradition for large families to build themselves a house as a way of separating from their parent’s home, and to construct this on their own tiny plot of land, where they raised a few pigs and poultry (Botíková, Svecová, and Jukubíková, 1997). However, only two of the grandparental generation were raised in such self-built dwellings. The interesting finding was that this tradition continued under communism, when unskilled workers’ higher wages provided more resources for construction, and despite the extensive

provision of state apartment blocks in larger and small towns. During this era, ownership of a house seemed to be the strongest indicator of social status for a family. Hence, they were willing to make enormous sacrifices, of time, energy, and other opportunities, to build one.

The life stories made it obvious that this construction work was also often at the expense of other interactions between parents and children, and especially of the children's educational activities (time taken off school in some cases; neglect of homework, reading, etc. in most). Instead of linking their present lack of opportunities – due to poor educational achievement – to these housebuilding activities, they honoured their parents' achievements, and recalled their own part in them with pride. Indeed, this hard work and responsibility was part of the social construction of good parenthood, especially motherhood, as Pine (1996: 9–10) found in her study of Polish village communities. The 'good parent' was defined in terms of hard work, and no respondent complained of being neglected by their families. Significantly, all but one of the present young generation still lived with their parents (despite several being in their twenties and having children), reflecting the worsened chances of getting separate accommodation since 1989. One single mother, who was among the four with a post-school vocational qualification yet had never worked, was criticised by her stepfather for her 'lack of effort to get a flat', while her mother felt 'she doesn't want to leave me, because she knows she would be lost alone, she wouldn't be able to bring up her daughter' (Helena, Martin). Other families emphasised solidarity in adversity; 'there is room for good people to live together' (Alžbeta, Nitra). In this large family, the overcrowding crisis had been partially solved by the son radically reconstructing the flat of his divorced sister, taking on her substantial rent arrears.

The interviews provided massive evidence of the low priority given to education in these families, as would be predicted by Friedmann's (1996) model. Though the chief objective of the communist regime was to 'raise the working class and to abolish social differences', this ideological objective was not implemented in educational policy. The law on compulsory school attendance remained unchanged from the 1930s until 1984 (eight years' basic education). It seemed that the communist leadership feared the 'destructive impact' of education, and instead preferred to produce unskilled labourers, who now are amongst those finding the greatest difficulties in getting employment. Until 1984, basic education provided the key letter of recommendation for the ninth and tenth years (professional training), but since there was no vocational counselling other than teachers' personal involvement, pupils who were passive and did not show interest in learning had virtually no chance of getting involved in further education. Among the middle generation, education was seen as a luxury – 'we were short of money, we couldn't afford it'. They seemed unaware of the possibilities for 'sponsored mobility' (Ferge, 1997: 5) afforded by the communist regime. Lydía (Rimaňská Sobota) explained that her parents were upland farmers and that the teachers condoned absences, for instance during the harvest season ('they could have understood us – upland farm children'), and 'never even mentioned this subject' (further education). There was plenty of employment for unskilled male and female youths to contribute to family income. Only two of this generation, raised under communism, mentioned a desire for further education – two sisters from Presov, one of whom wanted to study hotel service for its domestic science training (useful for the moral economy of the household), but eventually became a trainee in another trade and now has children in further education.

The other (slightly handicapped from birth) who did excellently at school, but then married two weeks after finishing compulsory education. This woman, now working as a cleaner, was the only one who expressed regret for not pursuing further education and took full personal responsibility for not doing so.

Families saw education as a privileged world to which they had no access. They criticised the system under which pupils' parents offered side-payments for their offspring to be enrolled: 'I was told if I wanted to study I had to pay some bribe' (Julia, Prešov). However, this generation now recognised the importance of education for their children. This is ironic, given the gradual decline in all the advantages and opportunities for working-class children from low-income families. Since 1989, school attendance has become increasingly costly, and this fact is strongly criticised by parents of school children. The family from Likavka faced acute problems of continuing in education because of poverty, and the mother was in tears about this. The daughter, doing very well at a textile apprenticeship college, was about to leave because her mother had been made redundant. The daughter's secret dream of getting a General Certificate of Education would probably never come true. But most families' choice of studies was based on more practical interests and – like the earlier generation – they chose courses which would be of advantage either in their future households or in the 'grey economy' of informal activities, to supplement social benefits or cut family expenses. Thus, they followed the tradition under communism of adding to family income by self-help work, everything from food preparation and preservation, through horticulture and clothes-making to mechanical repairs (Botíková, Svecová, and Jubíková, 1997).

The other side of the coin of this massive amount of informal economic activity was that virtually all the respondents could be classified as 'voluntarily unemployed' in the legal sense – 'being satisfied by their regular social benefits and health insurance being paid for them by the state' (Rievajová and Krausová, 1996: 14). The level of these benefits certainly did not cover family living expenses, and they formed a taken-for-granted background condition for the 'real' work of informal production and reproduction. Typically of such strategies (cf. Jordan *et al.*, 1996, chs. 4–6), interviewees emphasised that the work available was not worth taking, after travelling and other expenses were deducted: 'to travel there every day, it is absolutely unprofitable' (Jan, Rimavská Sobota). The youngest generation also emphasised that job and training offers should be 'interesting', have 'good prospects', and be in a 'developed environment' – demands not reflecting their educational achievements. In other words, they in turn were adopting the same strategy as their parents, of maximising their benefit claims, and seeking informal opportunities.

Finally, it was family, rather than community networks that provided the basis for these households' strategic activities. Though trust in God and going to church could be found in all the generations' narratives, no social, cultural or community activities related to church membership were mentioned, nor did the church provide any support for them as needy members of their parishes. Only one young woman mentioned any participation, and that was singing in the church choir and attending meetings. Apart from this, in only one family (Levice) did long-term membership of the local football club, youth union, and council strengthen the family's access to friendship networks and information – and thus help the man's wife to claim unemployment benefit. For all the others, family life was life, the whole life, and outside activities were used for funding it.

This meant that individuals were especially vulnerable to two kinds of crisis,

associated with illness and family break-up, which caused rapid deterioration in their circumstances. Healthy bodies were their capital for the labour market, and illness closed them out of the labour market. However, this was a form of capital that depreciated over time, and several of the middle generation had experienced work-related deteriorative illnesses. Where a long-term disability afflicted a family member, others had to take time out from employment to provide care; the rural economy of co-operation and self-help supplied the basic strategy for survival, a 'necessary complement to the exchange economy of the market' (Friedmann, 1996: 167). As one respondent said, 'Who will help you if not your own people?' (Julia, Prešov). Young workers of the middle generation were expected to hand over their earnings to the 'family treasury', but this expectation was loosened for the present generation. Now it is the oldest generation, with their relatively more generous pensions, who support the youngest, often working part time while their grandchildren are unemployed. In one family, the grandparents 'lent' 2,000 crowns a month (£40, half of their total pension), the only reciprocity being help in the garden (Izabela, Galanta). Help from the middle to the oldest generation usually took the form of practical care, and the youngest generation joined in some of this. Although generally the impact of ill health was very destructive, there was some converse evidence that the middle generation could turn relatively minor illnesses and disabilities into a form of capital, by using them as the basis for benefits claims that then allowed intensive informal activities as the main family survival strategy.

There was plenty of evidence too of the catastrophic impact of family break-up and divorce. Alcoholism, very prevalent in rural Slovakia, was never frankly discussed except as a reason for divorce, and then its destructive effects were fully described. Women forced to return to the parental home, after parting from alcoholic and violent husbands, got relief from one form of stress, but instead found low status and financial dependence. They were required not only to share in the common household economy, but also to accept the authority of their parents in decisions about allocations of work roles and resources. It was particularly hard for the middle generation, required to meet the higher material expectations of their children, fuelled by capitalist consumerism, but with fewer work opportunities under the post-1989 regime.

Conclusions

Such public discourse as there is about poverty in Slovakia is structured around the idea that it is the poor themselves who are a problem. Their behaviour disturbs 'normal life' and something should be done about them (they should be cared for, retrained or punished). Freedom of choice for the mainstream can only be ensured by constraining their freedom. Apart from the Roma of course, the poor are fortunately largely invisible and, as our research shows, strive to stay out of sight. Like those suffering from unsightly illnesses, they make sure that their affliction is not displayed, and discreetly avoid the bad taste of allowing it to reach the public view. Thus, what was hidden under communism (because it would have been a reproach to progressive, scientific socialist planning) is now hidden for almost aesthetic reasons, associated with the ideology of choice and self-responsibility. Furthermore, there is continuity in the survival strategies of poor people. Now, as then, massive amounts of informal family activity (amounting to self-exploitation) compensate for labour-market disadvantages, poor initial endowments, and bad luck. Far from being (as in the stereotype) 'lazy', the most disadvantaged Slovak

citizens chronically overwork themselves – to the long-term detriment of their health, and especially of their educational potential. They make heroic efforts to reach a standard of living that, in passing for ‘normal’ (i.e. not like the openly impoverished and defiantly deviant Roma poor), spares the mainstream embarrassment or discomfort.

However, along with the continuities from communism comes one radical discontinuity. Under the old regime, hard manual work really did get as great an economic return as a university degree, often greater. As a result, many of the interviewees in our research still did not see their lack of qualifications as the root of their current problems, or their past labours as having been a bad long-term investment. The fact is that, under the new regime, further education and training get a much higher payoff than under communism – and the material gap between the educated and uneducated is growing. This is true in all the post-communist countries of Central Europe, and the absence of a political discussion is as marked elsewhere – for instance in Hungary (Szalai, 2001). The time when this issue can be discussed, as a question of social justice and the minimum good that should be accessible to everyone who lives in this country, cannot be indefinitely postponed.

References

- Analýza** (1992), *Analýza štruktúry chudého obyvateľstva v československu v roce 1988* (Analysis of the structure of poor people in Czechoslovakia in the year 1988), Bratislava: VUPSV.
- Botíková, M., Svecová, S., and Jukubíková, K.** (1997), *Tradičie slovenskej rodiny* (Traditions of the Slovak Family), Bratislava: Veda-BICFS
- Clarke, J. and Cochrane, A.** (1998), ‘The social construction of social problems’, in W. Saraga (ed.), *Embodying the Social Construction of Difference*, London: Routledge, pp. 4–42.
- Faltan, Ľ., Gajdoš, P., and Pašiak, J.** (1995), ‘Marginálne územia na Slovensku – história a súčasnosť’ (Marginal regions of Slovakia – history and present), *Sociológia*, 27(1–2), 31–38.
- Feglová, V., Kusá, Z., and Radičová, I.** (1995), ‘Conceptualisation of poverty in Slovakia’, *The Social History of Poverty in Slovakia*, Budapest: Max Weber Foundation, pp. 291–302.
- Ferge, Z.** (1997), ‘Poverty’, *The Social Costs of Transition*, Vienna: Institute of Human Sciences, pp. 73–92.
- Friedmann, J.** (1996), Rethinking poverty: employment and citizen rights. *International Social Sciences Journal* 148, 161–172.
- Jordan, B., James, S., Kay, H., and Redley, M.** (1992), *Trapped in Poverty: Labour-Market Decisions in Low-Income Households*, London: Routledge.
- Jordan, B.** (1996), *A Theory of Poverty and Social Exclusion*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Jordan, B.** (1997), ‘Moral regulation of family life’, in Z. Kusá (ed.), *Past and Present Poverty: Second International Workshop on Social History of Poverty in Central Europe*, Bratislava: BICFS, pp. 66–69.
- Kusá, Z.** (1997), ‘Poverty in family lives and family histories’, in Z. Kusá, *Past and Present Poverty*, 70–92.
- Pine, F.** (1996), ‘Identity on the margins: gender and work in socialist and post-socialist rural Poland’, paper presented at EASA Conference, Barcelona, July.
- Rievajová, E. and Krausová, A.** (1996), ‘Sociálno-ekonomické aspekty dlhodobej nezamestnanosti’ (Socio-economic aspects of long-term unemployment), in *Problematika dlhodobej nezamestnanosti v Slovenskej republike* Bratislava: Fredrich Ebert Stiftung/Economic University of Bratislava, pp. 122–35.
- Schutze, F.** (1977), ‘Die Technik des narrativen Interviews in Interaktion-feldstudien dargestellt an einem Projekt zu Erforschung von Machtstrukturen’, Bielefeld, Department of Sociology, Bielefeld University.
- Šmídová, O.** (1993), ‘Byty za (post) totality’, *Sociológia*, 25(6), 573–584.

- Svetoň, J.** (1969), *Vývoj obyvateľ'stva na Slovensku: Vyber z drila* (Development of Population in Slovakia: Selection of Work), Bratislava: Epona.
- Szalai, J.** (1995), 'Power and poverty', *The Social History of Poverty in Central Europe*, Budapest: Max Weber Foundation, pp. 203–218.
- Szalai, J.** (2001), 'Power and poverty: socialist second economy and self-protection against poverty in Hungary', paper given at a EURESCO conference on Social Capital, Exeter University, 15–20 September.