

## Monetary and Non-Monetary Remittances within Marginalized Migrating Families

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I am using the research experience among Czech Roma families with the migration experience and taking a look on what is being exchanged between „those who went abroad“, and „those who stayed home“ and what can be the function and consequences of it.

Sending money, things, ideas etc. back and forth is the mean of closing the range between people within family and thus it facilitates the formation of transnational social ties. As individual examples of those remittances are lying open in front of us, we can see how they are part of the strategic reproduction of the “trans-nationalized” family.

Thus, I understand remittances in a broader sense than the economics does. I am proposing to aim not only on salary to be sent abroad to relatively poorer environments. There are not only monetary remittances, but also material, symbolic, social and emotional ones.

**Keywords:** *Ethnographic research of migration, social marginalization, strategic reproduction, remittances.*

### I.

This paper is based on my ethnographic-sociologic research among Czech Roma migrants who claimed the asylum for discriminatory reasons between 1993 and 2004 and their relatives “back home”. One of my main motives was to go beyond the media presentation of the topic and bring more analytical, alternative account.

The delimitation of the research interest time period reflects the political and structural changes that shape possible migration activities in the social sphere. In the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1993 the Czechoslovak Federation split up and consequently hundreds of Slovak Roma living in the Czech Republic lost their citizenship. The Citizenship law of 1993 was considered by European community as discriminatory, because the conditions for gaining the citizenship complicated the possibility for Czech Roma (e. g. clean criminal record) and thus it became legitimate argument, together with other evidences of racial discrimination, for claiming the asylum abroad. In the 1<sup>st</sup> May 2004 Czech Republic joined the European Union and this act

cancelled the possibility to ask for asylum in the EU and significantly hardened it in other democratic countries too.

During this time period, there existed quite emotional public debate in the Czech Republic questioning the legitimacy of Czech Roma asylum claims in western countries. My research concerns rather the daily life perspective of the claimants and their relatives on the migration events than commenting this debate.

In 1999/ 2000 I spent five months in Toronto and after three months of preparation I visited six households and families of Czech Roma immigrants among whom I was doing intense one month ethnographic research that presented a base for my diploma work. I remained with the same topic for the PhD, where I am adding the aspect of distant relationships within the family, out of which only some of the members migrated. The general research question is “What is the position of the migration within Czech Romany families in their daily lives, what migration means for them and how it can be observed/ what are the evidences for that?” My basic research method consists of visiting households and being part of their daily life in several hours’ long sequences. I was also doing unstructured interviews, most of them unrecorded; sometimes it is one-to-one, but most of the time it is rather chatting in the group. Further, I was part of some special events and rituals, like Saturday party and citizenship ceremony in Toronto. As an accompanying material I was talking to local relevant institutions in Czech Republic and in Canada, like NGOs and social services.

## II.

During my research, it happened to me that I became part of the process of transporting things back and forth. When I went to Toronto I was given some presents for the relatives and on my return I brought the presents from Toronto to Czechia. If I would be allowed by the plain company, I brought 30 kg of things including the beddings back from Canada. This was in contrast to two plastic bags I took with me to Toronto. On the other hand, looking at the content of this cargo, the presents were of quite different quality and this quality is not so easy to assess, which one is “more” or “less”, as we can do it with the weight or size. Out of many presents from Czechia I would emphasize three – Czech team hockey dress, jewellery that was worn by one of the family members and the Czech-made pharmaceuticals the emigrating relatives were used to take. I will mention possible interpretations of it later in the text.

The term “remittance” can be understood in two slightly different meanings. One is the transfer of money and this economic understanding predominate contemporary social sciences (McCormick – Wahba 2000). Second possible meaning of the term “remittance” is any kind of consignment, not necessarily monetary. Within the scope of the research I emphasize that family who is experiencing migration of some of its members is dealing with physical, social and cultural distance in their everyday life. This “transnationalized” family is dealing with not only physical distance, but also socio-cultural distance. The siblings who were brought up in the same material conditions might suddenly have markedly different maintenances and means for consumption that can jeopardize the solidarity and understanding within the family. Although I did not notice any expressions of conflict provoked by it, I was personally taken with the differences in snack offered to the visit in the households of one family in Toronto and Czechia. I suppose that because the Canadian households are provided with relatively cheap food, they are for the first sight materially much better off. Relatives are sending each other pictures and videos, where they can see the material standard differences between them and their relatives and they have to deal with this socio-cultural distance.

Remittances in the broader sense thus present the mean of closing the material and socio-cultural range between people who have close family relationships. People may not only feel closer to each other, but they can also come close to each other in material standard. Mother of the new born baby in Czechia told me: “He has almost every dress from Canada.”

That means not only spearing of money for baby cloths, but also possibly bigger amount and more expensive baby cloths than there would be if Czech parents bought it themselves.

One of the important aspects of remittances is the circumstances under which they are being sent. It can be said, that there exist several triggers of remittances. 1. When there is the need for help. The transfers are initialized by ask for help. For example, relatives in Czechia may be threatened by inability to pay the rent, so there can be some money from relatives in Canada coming. Many Romany families in Czechia got dramatically poorer after 1989 and have debts on paying the housing. I suppose that some of the Romany families that have somebody abroad did not fall that deep at the social bottom, thanks to the money from emigrating relatives that could ward off a crisis. 2. In the moments of ritual of passage, like in birthday, Christmas, baptism of the kid. In these times not only money, but people and symbols

get to travel. 3. In random occasions. Sometimes people go here and there and following by that, things randomly appear in the households. One of the examples of it is the situation when I went to Toronto, so I was given the presents by the relatives and bring some back as well. 4. As a part of the daily routine. In the families I visited I found mainly the phone calls, computer chatting and using the web cameras quite important aspect of daily life.

Looking at diverse things that are being transported and used for closing range between relatives, I found out that the exchange is almost equally numerous. Considering the money, we can see that in the particular case of Czech Roma families with westbound emigration experience at the edge of 20. Century the exchange is at least two-way if not equal. Nevertheless, the research purpose was not to make the monetary sum-up, rather the diversity of remittances and context of enjoying them. There are five different kinds of remittances presented in following figure– money, material objects, virtual social ties, bodily social ties and symbols. At the same time, it is not possible to completely separate provision of money and the material objects from providing the social ties and symbols.

**Figure. Forms of remittances within the families with migrating members.**

	“Home community” gives	“Emmigrant community“ gives
1	money as help to cover debts in Czechia	money as a general support
	money to pay an emigrants’ flat in Czechia	money as a substitute for present
		money on purpose on buying food stock
2	Czech hockey team dresses as present	cloths as present
	medicaments as domestic product	cloths as material support
		beddings as material support
3	video tapes as a way to keep in touch	video tapes as a way to keep in touch
		phone calls as catch-up with daily routine
	web chats as catch-up with daily routine	web chats as catch-up with daily routine
4	housing for visits	housing for visits
	visits to deal with mutual homesickness	visits to deal with mutual homesickness



	visits in Canada to look after kids	service for visiting working relatives
		strategic information on migration options
5	symbol of continuity of identity	symbol of prospective family social progress

I will now shortly describe each group of remittances from the “domestic” and “emigrant” side.

Despite the presupposition that it is always the emigrants who provide their relatives with money I faced two examples of the opposite. One of the emigrants left the debts of several thousand Euros in Czechia and the rest of the family paid it, so he did not have to move back from Canada and resolve the claim. Further, in the occasion of short term emigration, the relatives paid the rent in order to save the flat in case the relatives will not succeed to settle and return. All the monetary supports of these “adventurers” who are trying their best out there in emigration are very important aspect of migration strategies of families with limited resources. One household does not have enough money to manage emigration, but if the family sticks together, someone can go abroad.

Besides the general monetary support from emigrating relatives I mentioned earlier I met with two analytically interesting examples. Monetary compensation for the birthday present is more usual in adolescent age, but in the trans-national family I met this practice also in the case of a child. This changes the form of relating to each other within the family towards less intimate relationship where taste and ideas about “what is good for the kid” can not materialize in the very presents, as Georg Simmel noted, money may have the standardizing and alienating effect on social interactions and in the same time support individualization (Simmel 1997: 11-13). Last example of monetary remittances shows how traditional and modern can be interlinked. The relatives in Czechia were given the money for the purpose of buying big amount of meat as a food stock. This reminds the rural “barter trade” with the nourishment, in this particular case transformed into a monetary remittance.

I already mentioned several material objects, I will only stop by the medicaments. They appear to belong to the category of hardly replaceable things; something a person gets used to and if not necessary is not willing to get rid of. In

this particular case it is visible, how the bodily and psychological experiences diffuse.

Virtual social ties are symptomatic for post-industrial era as such and so they are for contemporary migration experience. Both, “domestic” and “emigrant” households are recording home videos from parties and common daily activities and are delivering it to each other. When I delivered such a video tape to Canada I was surprised by the way it was consumed. Someone put it on without any special announcement and than the video just went on as we sat in the living room chatting. From time to time someone made a note like: “Oh, look at him, he lost weight since last time!” It seemed rather like opening another “virtual” living room than like watching the video. There are other, more interactive forms of the virtual family gathering. Because of relatively cheap prices of the phone calls from Canada to Czechia, people usually call in this direction, which is not the case of internet chatting and, once it is installed, also talking while using the web cameras. It might happen that in the future the video recording will be replaced by seeing each other through web cameras completely.

From time to time, the dispersed family gathers in a physical world. When they visit each other, they provide accommodation. It is more likely that “the Canadians” come, since they do not have to deal with the visa obstacle. It is interesting to look at the other dimensions of visits besides dealing with the homesickness. Here is the story approaching significantly these processes. One of the dispersed families has young grandmother who is living in Czechia but from time to time travels to Canada for several months. Because of her status it is likely that she gets the visa, which is not the case of the migrants’ siblings. The Canadian relatives are happy to have the grand/ mother in Canada for a while. One of her daughters talks with me and her daughter:

“Mother: My mum was here. It was nice feeling to have someone around.

Daughter: You know, when grandma comes, she is always cleaning up everything. And my mum tells me, you will have to watch everything, clean up by yourself, not only when I tell you.

Mother: Yes, because I know my mum and I know she would than ask me – how do you bring up your daughter?”

The presence of the grandmother serves as a social control that is part of the family identity and socialization process of the new coming family members – kids. In the same time, once she is in Canada she takes occasional jobs that her emigrant relatives help to organize for her, so she earns some money to take with



her back to Czechia. Similarly, when someone decides to migrate to Canada the emigrant relatives provide her with initial support and important information.

This brings us to the last category of remittances – the symbols. The “domestic” community gives the migrant relatives sense of continuity of identity and social control, as it was presented in the story of “educatory grandmother”. In the same time, the awareness of existence of possible second home “over there” may symbolically serve as strengthening safety pin “if I cannot make it here I have a place to go”. Interestingly enough, it works similarly on the other direction too. During democratization changes and with the restructuring of the economy many Czech Roma families got dramatically poorer. People lost their well paid manual workers jobs and have difficulties to find the new ones. After years of becoming poorer they often loose hope for the possibility of better living for themselves and for their kids. In such a situation one of the adolescent girls told me about her dream: “I might go to Ireland, because my aunt is there.”

No matter if she finally gets there or not, her relative abroad gives her one very important thing in the presence: the life perspective.

### III.

As it is already clear, I suggest considering remittances as something that is happening rather within families, than as a linear process from a sender in one state/ locality to a receiver in another one. Stephen Vertovec emphasizes one of the important general objections to the trans-nationalism studies:

- trans-what?: research and theory have not adequately problematized the difference between trans-national, trans-state and trans-local processes and phenomena (Vertovec 2003: 3).

I agree that the difference between nation, state and locality should be analytically grasped more profoundly, nevertheless for the purposes of this paper I remain with common intuitive delimitation. It can be said that remittances are taking essential part in creating trans-national/ state/ local family bonds. I found the way Ayse Caglar understands trans-nationalism suitable:

Current scholarship on transnationalism provides a new analytic optic which makes visible the increasing intensity and scope of circular flows of persons, goods, information and symbols triggered by international labor migration. It allows an analysis of how migrants construct and reconstitute their lives as simultaneously embedded in more than one society (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller et al. 1995; Guarnizo and Smith 1998; Vertovec 1998). Most importantly, it

connects the narratives of the processes and formations of immigration with those of the transnationalisation of the economy and finance within the same framework. (Caglar 2001: 607)

Ayse Caglar seems to me quite optimistic in the idea that the concept of transnationalism may present a promise of putting together the economic and household perspectives. I am not sure if we can go that far, whether these perspectives can really be effectively connected in the migration research, although it is up-dated and analytically challenging topic (Morawska 2003).

Speaking of interweaving analytical perspectives, I find Bourdieu's and Passeron's notion of strategic reproduction (Bourdieu – Passeron 1970) useful for thinking about functions of remittances within “transnationalized” families. They regard five strategies of reproduction – strategies of fertility, strategies of marriage, strategies of heritage, economic strategies and strategies of education. This is supposed to answer the question, how families/ households/ primary socialization groups are trying to at least keep their social position, but even better, ameliorate it. In the previous part of the text there were several examples of economic and educational strategies that operate in trans-local physical and social space.

Not all the primary socialization environment can be really denoted as family and most of the families in the modern societies do not live in one household. Sometimes these slight differences may have analytical relevance. It is also important to keep in mind that families consist of adult men, adult women, children, adolescents and seniors. Especially in researching migration processes, experiences and decisions it is important not only analytically, but also methodologically. Thus I suggest try to reflect all the important aspect of family life during the research process and not to ask, explicitly or implicitly, only the leader of the group.

In the particular case presented here, the circulation of remittances is characterized by the social marginalization that the families are experiencing. I understand social marginalization as lived cultural diversity (Stonequist 1937) and as a field of negative symbolic capital or lack of positive social capital people have to deal with (Bourdieu 1998). The social marginalization can be grasped on three levels. 1. Marginalization as a scarcity of resources. The concept of marginalization is describing complex situation of socially “weak” living conditions. In such a situation the economic decisions of family include concentrating resources, so at least someone can go abroad or not risking unsuccessful visa requirement for Czech relatives in productive age that influences the dynamics of distant family gathering.

2. Marginalization as racialist (Šmausová 1999) defined stigma for which there are many evidences in contemporary Central Europe. Practically all of the emigrant Romany families I spoke with expressed the release in moving around in the public places once they moved to cosmopolitan cities of Toronto or London. But it is not the case that more open, democratic and wealthy environment automatically eliminates the social marginalization. 3. Thus I understand the social marginalization also as an unproductive habitus that is the life style and value system that does not priory provoke you to be productive on the market. Here is an example of a lady, who traveled with three kids and husband to England, speaking about the work experience of her husband and herself (Janků 2004):

„They took him for a trial to house cleaning. Well, and myself, I had my cooking and cleaning done, kids were OK, so I went to help him”.

If the value system of a person is such that she/ he can go to work only after anything else that is seriously important for the family is ready, it might in presence become unproductive for ameliorating family social position, even though it can be seriously important for functioning of the family and may have positive effect in the future.

#### IV.

I was trying to present here the potential of bringing the notion of remittances outside purely economic discourse. Whilst admitting the analytical relevance of economic discourse, I was presenting another point of view that appeared to be more relevant in my research of the Czech Roma families with migration experience at the edge of 21<sup>st</sup> century. In this particular case it is evident that geographic and historical realm create a family social structure of people whose material living standards are not that far from each other, as it is usually the case in the remittances studies (Gammeltoft 2002). Further, it appeared as highly relevant to take into account the family life dynamics and individual case-history of the family members. Using this perspective, it becomes evident that remittances are not only single-direction subventions, but rather they are devices used by the “transnationalized” families in the realm of strategies of reproduction all over the places of family residence.

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