

Picking the Wild Poppies: Access, Funding, and a Researcher's Narrative in the Case of Neoliberal Philanthropy Supporting Roma Musical Talent in Slovakia

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Abstract

This article examines the fundraising discourse of the non-profit organization Divé maky (“Wild Poppies”), which provides individualized scholarships for Roma children who exhibit significant talent or proficiency in diverse fields such as music, theater, visual arts, sports, and general studies. Following Adam Saifer, I describe the fundraising characteristics of this program as features of (racial) neoliberal philanthropy that prioritizes individual empowerment and success over addressing the gaps in public services resulting from neoliberal austerity (Saifer 2023: 225). After analyzing the fundraising model, this article observes and reflects on an application process for a scholarship in the case of my child Roma interlocutor from a village settlement who would otherwise continue to lack access to music schooling and proper musical instruments. In this case study, I depict multiple crises that have influenced the journey of the membership of Divé maky and also an encounter with musical otherness that emerged from non-Roma perception of Roma household musicking. These experiences will be narrated and theorized under the framework of difficult knowledge (Britzman 1998). I will also comment on my ethnographic positionality as a non-Roma scholar and articulate how my identity, privilege, and ethnographic presence has shaped the relationships with the interlocutors and the potential for individual social change. Reflecting on the results of this intervention and issues that have resulted in the child’s removal from the program, I conclude that the charisma-based form of donorship of Divé maky with its rules of conduct is, by design, only able to help a specific group of Roma children while others remain marginalized in their education and opportunities for social mobility.

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Slovak Abstract

Zbieranie Divých makov:

Prístupnosť podpory, financovanie a výskumný naratív v prípade neoliberalnej filantropie podporujúcej rómske hudobné talenty na Slovensku

Tento článok sa zaoberá diskurzom fundraisingu neziskovej organizácie Divé maky, ktorá poskytuje individualizované štipendiá rómskym deťom, ktoré prejavujú výrazný talent alebo zdatnosť v rôznych oblastiach, akými sú hudba, divadlo, výtvarné umenie, šport a všeobecné štúdium. V nadväznosti na Adama Saifera opisujem charakteristiky fundraisingu tohto programu ako vykazujúce znaky (rasovej) neoliberalnej filantropie, ktorá uprednostňuje posilnenie postavenia jednotlivca a jeho úspech pred riešením nedostatkov vo verejných službách vyplývajúcich z neoliberalných úsporných opatrení (Saifer 2023: 225). Po analýze modelu fundraisingu Divých makov tento článok pozoruje a reflektuje proces podania žiadosti o štipendium v prípade môjho detského respondenta z rómskej osady, ktorý by inak naďalej nemal prístup k hudobnému vzdelávaniu a vhodným hudobným nástrojom. V tejto prípadovej štúdii popisujem viaceré krízy, ktoré ovplyvnili cestu nadobúdania členstva v Divých makoch, a tiež stretnutie s hudobnou inakosťou, ktorá vyplynula z nerómskeho vnímania rómskeho domáceho muzicírovania. Tieto skúsenosti sú komentované a teoretizované v rámci uvažovania o takzvanom ťažkom poznaní – *difficult knowledge* (Britzman 1998). V texte tiež poukážem na svoju etnografickú pozicionalitu nerómskej výskumníčky a popíšem, ako moja identita, privilégia a etnografická prítomnosť formovali vzťahy s respondentstvom výskumu a potenciál individuálnej sociálnej zmeny. Prostredníctvom reflexie výsledkov tejto intervencie a problémov, ktoré viedli k vyradeniu dieťaťa z programu, záver článku zhrnie, že na charizme založená forma darcovstva pre Divé maky s jej pravidlami získavania štipendií je zo svojej podstaty schopná pomôcť len určitej skupine rómskych detí, zatiaľ čo iné deti zostávajú marginalizované vo svojom vzdelávaní a možnostiach sociálnej mobility.

Introduction

Divé maky (“Wild Poppies”) is a Bratislava-based non-profit organization founded in 2009 which operates throughout the state. The projects and activities of this program are dedicated to Roma children who have demonstrated notable talent or capability in various disciplines – music, theater, visual art, sport, and general studies. According to an official declaration published on the program website,

Divé maky is a non-governmental organization that supports exceptionally gifted Roma children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds in the development of their education and talent. (Divé maky n.d.)¹

At the time of writing this article, this organization constituted the only form of scholarship support for young Roma musicians in Slovakia. Different organizations, mostly music and dance ensembles and folklore groups that work with Roma youth and are based in many Slovak cities, focus on community building and group activities rather

¹ All translations from Slovak to English are my own.

than supporting individual talent in pursuing a professional career in music. According to my child interlocutors from the program, membership in Divé maky gave them opportunities and resources that would otherwise be not have been accessible.

In this article, I will discuss how the fundraising discourse of the Divé maky constructs and frames its commitment to improvement, success, and access to education for the children involved in its appeals for donorship. Following Adam Saifer, I explain the fundraising attributes of this program as elements of (racial) neoliberal philanthropy. By this term he means a “paradoxical phenomenon” that legitimizes “the ‘post-racial’ ideological foundations of racial neoliberalism” (Saifer 2023: 220). Saifer states that neoliberal philanthropic activities grow out of “nonprofit marketization . . . and empowerment of private philanthropy as a social policy mechanism tasked with filling the gaps in public services created by neoliberal austerity measures” (ibid.: 225). The (racial) neoliberalism in the context of contemporary Slovakia can be characterized by the post-communist condition that was partially shaped by the economic reforms between 2002 and 2006 implemented during the rule of prime minister Mikuláš Dzurinda. According to Sharon Fisher, John Gould, and Tim Haughton, early post-reform Slovakia represents “a unique form of ‘social liberal’ capitalism” (2007: 979) that emerges from a fusion of the new neoliberal principles with the left-leaning conservative political tradition, later embodied by the populist leader Robert Fico and governments led by his party.

My aim is to explore how the current neoliberal philanthropic project of Divé maky that was developed in the post-reform Slovak Republic influences and publicly performs the children’s stories and identities, and how the children in turn navigate the landscape of this philanthropic order towards specific outcomes that may be predetermined by their disadvantages, location, and the social precarity of their families. Following this objective, I will comment on my positionality in research and the ethical dimensions of a researcher’s intervention which, in this case, allowed me to highlight deeper inequalities within the program and its charisma-based form of donorship dependent on school performance.

In the next segment of the article, I will explain the funding model of Divé maky and exemplify how the children themselves reflect on their talent development trajectories and changing identities during the training provided by the program. Then I will narrate my intervention that took place in the form of preparing a Divé maky scholarship application for my child interlocutor. I will theorize this experience within the framework of difficult knowledge devised by Deborah Britzman (1998; Pitt and Britzman 2003). Specifically, I will refer to the fieldwork instances that represent breaking points in my narrative and challenge my previous assumptions, offering a potential for reflecting on my positionality and expansion of my viewpoint. Finally, I will argue that the Divé maky program constitutes a necessary campaign and platform for young Roma musicians, while it also reinforces, or at least does not challenge the economic and cultural marginality of the Roma population in Slovakia. In the conclusion of this article, I will propose that with the specific rules of conduct regarding eligibility for scholarships (re-evaluated each year for every child), the fundraising strategy and the mentorship

model, the Divé maky program does not envision or promote structural change for the Roma and the self-sustainability of their communities – musical or otherwise, and instead places individual exceptionalism above group empowerment.

The Funding Model of Divé maky

The Divé maky program is run by non-Roma staff² and has its registered office in Bratislava. All the children in the program are supported by a financial scholarship (which I will discuss in more detail later in this text), and each of them is given a year-round mentor who oversees their activities, progress in their field of talent, and general performance in school. This mentor is usually a social worker or similarly skilled person who performs the task of a “study buddy” – the program does not provide a coach in the particular field of “talent,” such as a teacher of music, etc. The child and the family must figure out how to find a music teacher and enroll in a music program in the afternoon art school or alternative institution themselves.

A large portion of the Roma children and youth enrolled in the program pursue professional music careers, and some of them aspire to study at prestigious music colleges or win significant competitions. For instance, my interlocutor, the cimbalom player Darina,³ diligently pursues her objective to study at the Liszt Academy of Music in Budapest, and during our interview she expressed a strong determination to reach this career destination (Darina, interview, August 11, 2022).

To provide the care that the program offers to gifted children (reimbursement of education costs like school materials, school fees, and a small monthly fee for the mentor), each child must acquire a sponsor – a person who decides to support the child on a monthly basis for one academic year. Alternatively, people can donate any smaller portion of the amount necessary for one academic year. In that case, the organization continues searching for other sponsors to cover the full scholarship. The staff, various public events, travel, and other activities are supported by a variety of corporate and state sponsorships (one significant source of public finances is KULT MINOR – a fund supporting the culture of national minorities in Slovakia). The statement regarding scholarships on the website of Divé maky reads:

² This was the case in the time when this article was written but may differ in the future. Also, it should be noted that although the program staff is mostly non-Roma, Roma musicians run workshops during the summer school of music and arts that the program organizes each year.

³ Names of all my Roma and non-Roma interlocutors were changed to protect their identities. Although the identities of multiple children in the program may be trackable due to the fact that they are the only ones playing a particular instrument in the program and their profiles are publicly available on the program’s website, this may not be the case in the future. For instance, my key interlocutor has been removed from the program at the time of writing this article. He is no longer featured on the website, and he may not want to be associated with the program in the future. Therefore, I have chosen not to disclose the identity of any of the children and other interlocutors mentioned in this article.

Sponsors for new children are recruited gradually throughout the year through direct outreach, PR activities, personal contacts, etc. To become a sponsor in the program, they simply fill in the donation form, which is available for download on the website www.divemaky.sk, or contact us by email or phone. The sponsor can decide whether to donate the entire amount needed for the child for the school year or only a portion, depending on his/her means. (Divé maky 2021: [4])

The sponsor is anonymous to the public and often to the child as well – my interlocutors never met their sponsors, although the program does allow the sponsor to meet the child if they want to. Anonymity protects the relationship between the involved parties. Still, there are other issues of this fundraising approach worth pointing out – notably, the sponsors choose their children based on individual sympathy alone, meaning they don't need to support the program generally in order to be matched with a particular child in need of scholarship by the organization. Instead, the organization issues a call for a sponsor to support a specific child on their website and social media. A photo portrait of the child is displayed together with their story, which focuses on the hardship of their family and a brief statement about their talent and plans for the future (Divé maky 2022).

Sustained by a range of corporate donors and other sources of funding that includes crowdfunding campaigns and individual anonymous sponsors, membership in the Divé maky program is highly formalized and public. The organization's website displays all of the children currently enrolled in the program in the section entitled *Children*. Each entry comes with a portrait, a bio, and, in the case of children who have yet to find their sponsor or need a specific amount missing in their budget, a call for a specific amount of financial support.

When it comes to the conditionality of the talent scholarship, the most notable prerequisite for membership in the program is involvement in formal education – once a child drops out of school or graduate high school, they are no longer eligible for support. And they also lose their eligibility when they fail the school year. This was the case of my interlocutor, who failed his classes and was silently (without any public statement) removed from the program (more on that later in the following section of the article).

Additionally, a prerequisite for membership is participation in specific activities, including summer school and a public gala concert each year. Thanks to the summer school followed by the gala concert promoted as “Bašavel” (which means a music party in Romani), the program fosters a tight community of current members and alumni who spend at least one week a year together in a remote area. During the last few years, the summer school took place in a monastery located in a small town near Bratislava. Each year at the summer school, the children take part in intensive workshops to advance their musical craft (or skills in other disciplines) and attend social activities. One of the traditional highlights of the summer school week is a collective appearance on morning television that includes music, dance, and theatre numbers.

The final event of the summer school, “Bašavel,” is an annual concert free of charge for visitors in a public park on Hviezdoslav Square, a popular tourist location in Bratislava. According to a statement about this event on the Divé maky website,

the gala programme presents the richness and beauty of Roma culture and art and gives an opportunity to the majority society to get to know it better. In addition to the music and dance program, it also offers visitors a theater performance. The Gala Programme is a tool for promoting the social inclusion of marginalized Roma communities, and fights against poverty through the beauty of Roma culture. (Divé maky 2021)

“Bašavel” also provides a platform for the new members to be introduced to the public and, in some cases, to acquire sponsors instantaneously. Between the musical and theater numbers, the moderators interview all of the participating children individually, and those who are new to the program are introduced along with an appeal to the audience to get in touch if they want to sponsor this child. My interlocutor Jozef, a singer, found his permanent sponsor during his first appearance on “Bašavel.” He learned that someone wanted to be his sponsor right after his well-executed performance. The news that Jozef had found his sponsor was announced to the concert audience by the moderators right after the number, which was a moment that he described to me as miraculous and otherworldly (Jozef, interview, August 11, 2022). This instant match with a sponsor does not happen often, and acquiring sponsorship for newly accepted children usually takes time.

While the program offers support in many areas, the segment dedicated to music education is probably the most prominent, which comes as no surprise. Although many Roma families in Slovakia have cultivated sophisticated localized traditions of domestic musicking that has no equivalent in the majority population, the children often lack access to formalized training and quality musical instruments. In fact, music instruments like a double bass are so expensive that the Divé maky program runs separate crowdfunding campaigns (apart from individual donorship) to collect finances for purchasing the instrument alone.

As can be determined from this broad characterization of the fundraising structure of Divé maky, the success of a child in acquiring scholarship is highly individualized, and so is failure, if there is one, even though the reasons for success and failure are far from individual: children from remote Roma settlements often cannot access music education due to limited urban development, expensive public transportation, or compromised general health and chronic illnesses in combination with poverty and limited healthcare options. These are just some of the problems that the Divé maky scholarships cannot adequately address. Many such barriers result from decades of forced resettlements, abuse of Roma rights, and state violence against their communities by the Habsburg monarchy, the fascist Slovak state, state socialism, and finally by the fiscal austerity of today’s Slovak Republic. The perpetuation of these practices results in a sustained spatial division in the distribution of educational resources. Primary art schools in Slovakia have predominantly non-Roma staff and students, which may negatively affect the sense of belonging for the few Roma students who have made it to the school. Alžbeta, my other singer interlocutor from the Divé maky program, is the only Roma student in her primary art school (who also lives in an orphanage) and is often the target of racial aggression. “I am the little Gyppo [*cigánočka*] here,” is how she feels she is perceived in the art school (as opposed to the community in the Divé maky summer

school), and she also mentions the perceived unsuitability of her performing traditional Roma repertoire in public concerts on the school grounds. In fact, her teacher explained to her that it is “not appropriate to sing Roma songs in Romani language at school” and she must stick to the classical repertoire or to Slovak folk songs (Alžbeta, interview, August 11, 2022). This experience points to the racialization processes in school environments and the prominence of “the social geography of race” (Lewis 2003: 26) in everyday life at music school.

The Divé maky program indirectly perpetuates this racial division by its distribution of roles within the program: the management team is non-Roma, while the group on the receiving end of the philanthropist endeavor are the Roma children. At the time when this article was written, no Roma alumni of the program had transitioned to a management role in this philanthropist entity.

Adam Saifer draws attention to this division of roles within neoliberal philanthropy, explaining it as

a cultural shift in philanthropic discourse that has transformed citizens from equal rights bearers into two classes: the venerated (white) hands-on philanthropist/investor, and the less privileged person of color who consumes services/investment. This cultural shift has also elevated philanthropy above social and community values such as paying taxes, grassroots social organizing, caring for family and community, and public expenditure as social welfare tool. (2023: 234)

The Divé maky program attempts to supplement the missing social and urban structures in a narrow field of “talent” for arts and studies, while general support networks that represent broader forms of collectivity, investment, and care remain absent. This limited vision and individualization of access to education opportunities is often masked by a celebration of exceptionalism and hard work. For instance, the statement of the project administrator on the website of Divé maky reads:

Every day I witness how we are succeeding in helping to shape a new generation of Roma. Those who have seized this chance are today, by their example, giving a chance to others. The chance that even if you are Roma and face everyday prejudices, you can still be successful because you work hard. (Mistríková n.d.)

While the first sentence of the quoted statement highlights collective Roma empowerment, the following statement emphasizes the individualized overcoming of the obstacles of racist society by the virtue of hard work. This logic is emblematic of how the program reflects the general ideas of the Slovak majority society about oppression and its solutions. As Amy Brown writes, referring to Murray Edelman’s theories of political spectacle, “what counts as a ‘problem’ and what counts as a ‘solution’” upholds the “dominant structures of power” (2015: 4). In this case, the solution to oppression is *hard work*, which is consistent with the racist narratives about Roma as lazy and undeserving – narratives that are steadily present in the broad discourse of social policy in Slovakia (Drál 2008: 86). In the following segment, I narrate the journey of my ethnography that lays bare some of these structural limitations embedded in the Divé maky program.

Positionality of Fieldwork Intervention and the Narrativization of Research: Miloš from Dojč

It was laundry day. Miloš's mother led us through a narrow corridor filled with hanging wet clothes to the living room that was also the parents' and three children's bedroom, furnished with a TV, beds, chairs, and a table. . . . After some hesitation, Miloš agreed to play and sat down in the chair. I will never forget his dirty boots hanging from that chair, his legs too short to touch the ground while he was sitting. He lifted that adult-sized accordion, giant in comparison with his stature, and adjusted it in such a way that he could somehow play it comfortably. After the instrumental introduction of the piece, his father, sitting on the bed in the other corner of the room, shouted Miloš's name to get his attention. Their eyes locked, and the father started singing, slowly getting into the groove and synchronizing his voice with the accordion. As they communicated across the room, I realized that I had just witnessed an intimate musical moment between a father and a son. (November 24, 2019, Dojč,⁴ fieldnotes)

I visited the young accordionist Miloš (ten years old at the time of the first encounter) who lives in the Roma settlement in Dojč, a village near a major city of central Slovakia, for the first time in 2019. Two years later, when we met again after the years of heavy pandemic restrictions, I recorded a performance of Miloš for the *Divé maky* application, and noticed that his father made distinctive gestures with which he signaled phrasing commands to Miloš while he was playing. It was only then that I realized that he had also used similar gestures on the first occasion in 2019. I found this gestural vocabulary for subtle musical messages fascinating and strange.

From my personal view, the musicking developed as the “domestication of affective practices . . . through the route of ‘habitus’” (Gill 2020: 342) and intergenerational transmission in the small sonic and affective ecosystem of one household stood in opposition to the official regime of music education that is based on knowledge transmission outside the household and the family. After witnessing the pattern of musical gestures and the experience of navigating the *Divé maky* program with Miloš, I often reminisced about this strange affective technique of communication within the musical moment. It felt like an antithesis, not to institutional music education (quite the contrary – Miloš could only benefit from his family training in the formalized study of the classical accordion) but to the austere discourse of “talent,” “success,” and “motivation,” prominent in the *Divé maky* brand and public image.

Without context, the field note exemplified above may look as if it simply describes my fascination with music played in my presence instead of *for* me. But after returning to that moment, I realized that there were greater forces at play – expectations and circumstances that I did not anticipate nor had entirely in my control. A successful ethnographic experience is linked to an intimate connection with people and place (Warren and Kleisath 2019). However, such intimacy has historically been contingent on racial

⁴ The name of the village was changed to protect my interlocutors.

and gender hierarchies. During fieldwork, my (visible) whiteness has been an instrument of access, trust, and authority, and also a source of complex desires in the field. And my embodied ethnographic presence has many times reinvigorated the very relations I wanted to dismantle. In this part of the article, I want to deconstruct the notion of ethnographic narrative in relation to emotional involvement, anticipation of a specific outcome, and alienation in the ethnographic field.

I arrived in the Roma settlement in Dojč for the very first time with two non-Roma men who drove me there and knew the place. One of them was a photographer who had previous interactions with the family. After the visit to Miloš's family, I was overwhelmed by the magnitude of the parents' struggle to keep their lives and the lives of their many children functioning on a fundamental level, without options on the job market and means to provide school materials that they are expected to have in their school district.

Miloš did not want to play that day. After all, it was November, and in that part of the year, musicking, especially in a group, was not part of daily activities due to the weather and lack of space inside the house. Miloš's parents and my companion pressured him to play for me so I could hear him play for my "school project" (as my non-Roma interlocutor characterized my research to the family). After we left, one of my non-Roma companions mentioned – probably to express that we had done something charitable by simply visiting the family – that if a white person pays a visit to someone in this Roma community, it is a source of prestige and it grants them a higher place in the local social hierarchy. From my present perspective, I doubt that such a statement can be true in any capacity – besides the fact that it is offensive to assume that Roma families feel inferior to non-Roma people in such a way, this claim is not consistent with the fact that the family in Dojč includes a non-Roma man, husband of one of the daughters, whom I met during one of my later visits inside the house.

I am mentioning this comment to underline that my positionality is just one of the multiple non-Roma positionalities that have been included, tackled, or questioned in the narrative of my research. Although these perspectives are legitimate and worthy of reflection, I also need to pay attention to the various agendas of my non-Roma participants (myself included) and how their versions of the story may support or clash with the Roma perspectives – which, as I reflected on myself, I often did not have the capacity to understand or fully appreciate.

In his article, Amar Wahab writes about "the white ethnographer's craft of telling" (2005: 30), by which he refers to the solidified narrative templates of writing about othered peoples, developed from the position of whiteness. Although I was theoretically aware of the traps of writing from the position of whiteness, I still found myself subconsciously prioritizing the narrative of non-Roma interlocutors (including anticipation of a particular narrative outcome) over Roma perspectives on some occasions – this happened specifically in cases when my non-Roma interlocutors from the given locality were equipped with extraordinary epistemic dominance that was manifested in speech and vocabulary, comprehensive (albeit disputable) observations, and confidence in their opinions. These interlocutors were non-Roma missionaries and priests, artists,

and community managers – in other words, people with a lot of power in the structures where they participate and interact with their local Roma community. This pattern was broken during my visit to the Divé maky summer school, where I had the privilege to talk with many confident, well spoken, and comfortable Roma children without any patronizing or racially essentialist remarks from the non-Roma staff. I am thankful for this opportunity to talk directly with the children to the manager of the musical scholarships in the program. They provided me with a practical introduction instead of trying to “sell” a particular image of the scholarships and their recipients.

When I found out that the Divé maky program was accepting new applications every spring, I decided to propose to the family in Dojč that we should apply and try to get a music scholarship for Miloš. This happened in the spring of 2022, two years after I met Miloš for the first time. I wanted to make up for the time when I could not reach him because of pandemic restrictions and decided to visit the family alone, without my previous accompaniment of two non-Roma men from the nearby city. I felt that this small mission was something I needed to do alone, without the emotional burden that this company would bring. The application process itself highlighted many disadvantages that the family had which had kept them from applying before, like the lack of an internet connection, the possible lack of specific skills and experience to write an appealing motivational letter for the child, equipment for a performance recording, and, most crucially, knowledge about the existence of this program and the fact that they are eligible to apply. Indeed, families like this one from Dojč are not targeted in the Divé maky marketing, which relies on social media and word of mouth (participants and alumni of the program share the open call in their circles).

Mandatory parts of the application include a letter of recommendation from the child’s general school teacher. The parents assured me that they have a good relationship with their son’s teacher and she would be willing to write this letter. But when I got hold of the letter to attach it to the application, I was taken aback by its harsh tone and critical content, referring to what she described as the inadequacy and apathy of her student. Although she briefly mentioned that the ongoing Divé maky application was giving Miloš some motivation to study, which she had noticed, besides that she did not state any other reason why he should be selected for the scholarship, and the overall image that she painted was not very flattering. This was, I realized then, the glass ceiling for a child like Miloš – he can apply for a program that can grant him the necessary opportunity, yet the general environment in the relevant institutions is still hostile and unsupportive. In the end, the application was successful despite the teacher’s letter, which, I believe, proved that the organization is open to accepting children whose marginalization is fortified by pedagogical disapproval in their hometown.

I learned that Miloš had been accepted for participation in the program via email from the organization. For the following steps, the organization communicated directly with the family. A few weeks later, the manager of the Divé maky scholarships called me and said that Miloš was reluctant to participate in summer school, which is a prerequisite for entering the program. She asked me to reach out to the family and convince them that Miloš would fit in well in this community. When I called them, I asked

to speak to Miloš and tried to assure him that he would be in a safe space. I also pointed out that the Roma violinist Barbora Botošová, who was supposed to be his mentor at the music workshop would be a wonderful mentor to work with. During our call, Miloš agreed to go but was ultimately stopped due to a recent covid infection in his family. He started to participate in the program only later, in the autumn. His absence in the summer school and in the program of “Bašavel” where he would have experienced the glamor and pride that the other children described in my interviews was possibly a major disadvantage in his continuing presence in the program. Later on, the manager stated in a phone call that “he was not with us in the summer school, so he is undermotivated, and the family is not very motivated either” (Marína, interview, February 22, 2023). The fact that he missed this formative event that the other interlocutors describe as a transcending, self-affirming and “unreal experience” (Alžbeta, interview, August 11, 2022) was likely a significant drawback in his prospects of success in the program.

Overall, the process of entering the program had many hurdles and specific contexts related to the recent crises in our region: the pandemic and also the full-scale Russian invasion in our neighboring country. In the spring of 2022, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shook the family’s everyday life in the way its members were treated in institutions. When I visited them to pick up documents for the Divé maky application, the father expressed an aggressive frustration with the service and attention Ukrainian refugees get, claiming that he was denied service in the municipal office because Ukrainians had priority. He then reiterated how he had said to the official dealing with the crowd that he was “a citizen of European Union,” meaning that he should be served before Ukrainian refugees. I didn’t want to approve of his rant and left soon, avoiding it altogether. Only later did I realize that such emotional disapproval may have been justified in the given context, and I should have validated his feelings.

After the summer, I bought an accordion for Miloš so he could enjoy easy access to a fine instrument with professional features. Previously, he had to constantly borrow a simpler accordion from the former mayor of Dojč, once his father’s old accordion had become entirely worn out. This constant need to borrow an instrument was exhausting for Miloš, who was also losing his skills since he did not have many opportunities to play. After I said I was willing to buy a proper instrument, the selection was managed by Ján, the oldest brother of Miloš, who had extensive knowledge in accordion brands, learning levels, and was able to suggest a level of quality and weight of the instrument which was appropriate for Miloš.

In late autumn, the persistent conflict in the neighboring country sparked an energy crisis in our region that was devastating for the family. Ján, who provided a fundamental income for the family as a woodworker, lost his job because wood had become much more expensive and demand had fallen. This new level of financial hardship and the escalation of father’s health issues resulted in a desperate decision to use the accordion to get quick cash.

The accordion was pawned in a more distant town because pawnbrokers in the nearby city refused to lend money to the family, whether for racial reasons or simply because the accordion was not considered to be a desirable item. The family notified

me about the situation only after the debt to the pawn shop had grown to almost twice as much as the cash they got from the pawnbroker, and once they had run out of options to get it back soon enough for a carnival parade where Miloš wanted to perform.

When I negotiated about this situation with the *Divé maky* manager, she offered that the program would pay me back the cash I needed to pick up the accordion from the pawn shop. On the next day, I traveled to the city train station where the pawnshop was located and met three members of the family: the father, recently recovered from a heart attack, the adult son Ján, who at the time was in training for a new job as a bus driver, and Miloš who, according to his mother, had been mourning over the lost instrument during the previous nights, and had given up hope of getting it back. After I picked up the accordion, I gave them a perhaps unnecessary pep talk: to continue to fight, stay in the program, take advantage of the scholarship, and have more reimbursable expenditures – bus tickets for school, school materials, and clothes. The father replied that they didn't know what to buy anymore. Miloš had everything at the moment and did not need new clothes or school materials. I realized that this form of scholarship did not suit this particular family or families in similar precarity: it covers school materials and clothes but does not help them to meet more basic needs like food and medicine. Another major obstacle emerged from the fact that Miloš was failing in school which he was unable to attend during the winter months of extreme predicament, and according to the scholarship rules he could not stay in the program if he had to repeat the academic year. It was becoming clear that he would soon lose his membership.

At that point, I realized I didn't know how to deal with heartbreaking instances like the pawnshop episode in the way I structure this specific narrative of intervention in my research, in which I intended to reach a particular point of success or achievement that would seem like a logical outcome of not only my intervention but also of the storytelling of my research. Therefore, I had to restructure my thinking about expectations, outcomes, surprises, and failure in fieldwork. A number of scholars (McDermott and Hood 1982; Wong 2008; Bendrups 2015; Kušić and Záhora 2020) have articulated that fieldwork relies on emotional engagement, intimate involvement, and vulnerability. According to Dan Bendrups, fieldwork as a central method of ethnomusicology creates an “interpersonal terrain to negotiate” and requires “researcher vulnerabilities to be acknowledged and confronted” (Bendrups 2015: 89). In my case, this confrontation has to do with honesty about my expectations that were subverted and ideas about success and achievement that were crushed by the impossibility of overcoming the insurmountable obstacles of inequality and many disadvantages Miloš faced.

The last time I called Miloš's father, he told me that on that very same day a few hours before, Miloš had been experiencing heart issues and ambulance was called to check on him. He was waiting to be examined by a cardiologist. Another item of news was that the family had lost contact with the *Divé maky* staff and their mentor. When the manager of the program called in the beginning of summer, the parents could not speak and postponed the call, but were not contacted again. Miloš failed the school year due to attendance issues caused by a combination of health problems, financial hardship, and difficulties with commuting to school in the city from the peripheral Roma

settlement with poor public transport. Since he was no longer eligible for the program, he was simply removed from the website, and was not invited to participate in the summer school – the place where he was supposed to find a space where his identity and dreams about professional musicianship would be encouraged.

In her writing on narrative and ethical practice in music education, Juliet Hess (2021) discusses the potentials and pitfalls of the stories we tell about distressing experiences and trauma. Referring to Deborah Britzman (1998), she calls this type of narratives “difficult knowledge.” In my writing, I want to embrace and endure this difficulty as a narrator. Following David R. Roediger, I render my experience of privilege, convenience, and easy entrance into the ethnographic field through the notion of whiteness that refers not only to the way the dominant racial group treats the “racial ‘others’” but also to “the way that whites think of themselves, of power, of pleasure, and of gender” (Roediger 1995: 75). Due to my often limited capacity for nuanced understanding and empathy, I have to constantly reconsider how to let my interlocutors speak through my narrative without me imposing further division of misinterpretation, adjustment to a particular conclusion, and abuse of their delicate experiences by omitting the nuances of power, epistemic distribution, and agency.

This determination includes an epistemic shift of the center, as I am not a collector of knowledges who produces universal wisdom about passive subjects, but rather, my interlocutors are the constitutive and dynamic entities that drive my narrative and can also break it or change its direction at any time. Deborah Britzman effectively describes this difference in knowledge acquisition in the way she outlines the distinction between learning *about* and learning *from*. According to her, learning *from* “requires the learner’s attachment to, and implication in, knowledge” (Britzman 1998: 117) and “an interest in tolerating the ways meaning becomes, for the learner, broken, and lost” (ibid.: 118). Learning *from* can also be understood as learning *from a failure* that includes moments of alienation from the field. As Katarina Kušić and Jakub Záhora have pointed out, we imagine ethnography as being grounded in empathy, but alienation can also become a crucial part of the fieldwork experience and can emerge in unexpected contexts. As they write, we “feel detached not only from those we knew we would find disagreeable, but, at other times, we feel distance even from those with whom we would expect to build solidarities” (Kušić and Záhora 2020: 6). In the case of my fieldwork, a moment of alienation resulted from an unfulfilled ideation of success that *should have* come after the various investments into the Divé maky program had been made. Because of the anticipation of success that did not materialize, I found myself questioning the adequacy of my engagement. My positionality in the case of Miloš from Dojč was especially impactful and serious due to my involvement in his scholarship application. I was directly responsible for the dream and glamorous promise of success and social mobility that Divé maky promotes, and I need to take part in experiencing the failure to realize this vision. While my intervention did not bring the result that I envisioned as a logical consequence of the various investments in the program, and my intended narrative of success and inclusion in the program that I wanted to construct has collapsed, this experience has brought necessary knowledge about the structural factors

that significantly limit the effectiveness and equality of the opportunities offered by Divé maky scholarships.

While I am figuring out how to interpret the experiences I have gathered in a way that is not reductive or harmful to the individuals and communities I have encountered, I am trying to get better at navigating the fragile journey of my music ethnography. This commitment to recognize and de-instrumentalize the many advantages, conveniences, and positive biases that my positionality brings is an essential premise for my next ethnographic work.

Conclusion

Although the Divé maky program has proved to have some elasticity in dealing with the financial precarity and other disadvantages of my interlocutor Miloš, ultimately it did not ensure enough resources to allow him to fully enjoy the cultural opportunities it was offering – like the summer school, “Bašavel,” a morning television appearance, and the general pride and identity of Divé maky membership. I argue that this individual experience reflects larger issues and racial power imbalances that do not appear to be challenged by a program in which the non-Roma staff and corporate donors provide small-scale scholarships with strict rules of conduct for marginalized Roma children. It even seems that only the more geographically or socially privileged Roma children can muster enough strength and commitment to stay in the program for years. What may be harmful about the public brand of Divé maky is the fiction of its complete openness, accessibility, and equality of opportunities, while its scholarship rules effectively exclude children who live in extremely precarious conditions and may need support most. Through this subtle disguise and selective support of Roma children who are easily marketable as sufficiently achieving students who are not school slackers, the Divé maky program, in the words of Ann Arnett Ferguson from her book *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*, partially participates in “the processes by which well-intentioned individuals actually and actively reproduce systems of oppression through institutional practices and symbolic forms of violence” (2001: 73).

Over the years, the Divé maky program has individually empowered many Roma children in Slovakia who have become well-established professional musicians, and this legacy cannot be denied. But ultimately, the prospect of emancipated Roma musicianship should not rely on charisma-based forms of donorship and exposure in commercial and charity venues. This task perhaps goes beyond the capabilities of the Divé maky program, but ultimately, to give all Roma children tangible opportunities will require a force that will not lean on normative ideations of success (and failure), determination, and charisma. Such an effort would demand radical support and types of care that seem to be impossible to envision within the framework of neoliberal philanthropy. But they may not be inconceivable in alternative forms of music education that could emerge from various grassroots developments liberated from the constraints of a neoliberal philanthropic enterprise.

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