



Fragile Memories

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Kovíe leperibena

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Photography exhibition *Fragile Memories*, part of a project of the same name, offers a unique space to meet, a space for our eyes to meet the eyes of those whose faces have memory written into them.

These portraits are not merely recorded history. They are raw, embodied experience, written into lines, gestures and eyes. They capture the stories of older Roma women and men, whose lives were formed by World War II and the difficult period that followed. They lived through historic changes that transformed countries, regimes as well as values.

Photographer Barbora Haviarová is deeply respectful and sensitive in her approach. Her photographs are not a result of distance, but of close proximity, of trust and time given to people she photographs. She does not portray “others,” but distinct human beings, their stories, their lives, their present. Every portrait exudes quiet power of humanity and unwavering values.

Equally, these stories remind us of once natural, now lost connections between Roma and non-Roma population. Distance, not only in the geographical sense, but primarily the mental one, today often grows with mistrust and distorted notions. And thus, this project is even more meaningful. *Fragile Memories* strives to bridge this distance and once again make room for understanding.

Memory is fragile and yet immensely resilient. It persists, against all odds, and its strength is revealed in humility, endurance and the ability to carry on the experience. This exhibition not only bears witness to overlooked stories, but it is also a powerful artistic contribution to reflections on humanity and its limits.

May it serve as a reminder as well as a call to respect, empathy and ability to openly and sincerely express our shared humanity.

Lubomíra Slušná Franz,
director of Association for Culture, Education and Communication
and curator of this exhibition

(Speech at the exhibition venue on 2. August 2026, the day we remember the Roma genocide, Sered' Holocaust Museum)

Fragile Memories

Adolfína (1946)

Rudňany

Her long white hair, falling to her waist, made her impossible to overlook. Mrs. Adolfína greeted us with the elegance of someone stepping out of a black-and-white photograph. She was one of the first we visited and she opened her door to a warm, cozy house. She wore a white blouse with a lace collar and a black skirt. Not because of our visit, but out of respect for the Mass she was about to attend.

There was a slight nervousness in the air. Time was short, but she smiled and calmly offered us a seat. She introduced her granddaughter and we started talking. Mrs. Adolfína answered thoughtfully, weighing every word. She managed everything precisely according to her plan and eventually joined the service online.

Later we passed her house again and saw her dressed in a warm coat pushing a cart with firewood. In that brief moment she revealed another side of her everyday life. She was inconspicuous, ordinary, but strong.





Do you remember your childhood?

“Oh, what a child I was! I got into fights, I chased others, and I turned up everywhere I wasn’t supposed to. My mother used to say, ‘You’re not a girl, you’re a boy.’ I wasn’t afraid of anyone. I didn’t give in to anyone. If someone chased me, I’d start hitting back.”

Do you remember when the Russians came in 1968?

“Oh, I remember, we were all scared here. I was so frightened, I went to hide my family. There was even shooting. A friend of mine, not a Roma, she was white, took me into her cottage. We were like sisters. She gave me a room and I stayed with her for three days.”

Would you want to be young again?

“If it were possible to turn the page, I still have no power to change my life. It’s all a gift from God, as they say. A gift from God. Even if I wanted to, it’s not possible anymore. The years change, the days change.”



We used to spend time
mostly with the white. They
would come visit, not like
now. I'm surprised how very
different things are.

Július (1946)

Stráne pod Tatrami

The settlement in Stráne pod Tatrami, hidden behind the village, seemed poor. Snow-covered fields and shacks scattered around, the road was unpaved and littered. Makeshift electricity wiring and water that needed to be fetched in a bucket at the Cross. This harsh picture of poverty contrasted with the carefully clean interiors, where purple carpets and neatly made beds stood out in the corners.

Mr. Július, father of seven, lives in a small cottage with his youngest daughter. You can feel the dampness and smoke in the one room with a double bed, wardrobe, and sofa. He lies on the bed with two grandchildren, playing on an old phone. "All day I just sleep and play the Snake," he says smiling. Next to his bed is an ashtray full of cigarette butts. "I smoke a pack a day," he admits, and calmly adds, "My daughter brings me food right in here."

After two hours, we say goodbye. We ask what he would change about his life. "I would only have two or three children," he answers. "So you don't have a life like ours and can live well."





Did you have any toys as a child?

“No, old people didn’t have money for that.”

You didn’t have any toys at all?

“If she spent five crowns on something else, he’d say, you could have had bread instead.”

And did you have a ball?

“Oh, there were balls. We played football and such.”

Would you want to live your life again?

“From childhood? To live? No, I don’t think so. Life was wretched back then. I wouldn’t want that. I’d rather live as I do now.”

Wretched? Can you tell us what that means to you?

“Well, it’s not wretched now, now I have everything.”

Mária (1933)

Levoča

We were walked to Mrs. Mariška, as the locals called her, by her eldest granddaughter Adriana. The once spacious family home, built with her husband, gradually became multi-generational. She lived in a room connected to the kitchen on the ground floor, where she spent her last years in the company of her eldest daughter Emília. “Mum was very good, but also strict,” Emília recalls.

When Mariška talked about her childhood memories, she answered with a touch of nostalgia in her voice. The war years were hard, but she never forgot how she and her sister protected their father from soldiers who wanted to shoot him.

She never forgot her husband either. They didn't have a big wedding, but the love lasted for years.

In winter as in summer, there was always unbearable heat from an old wood-burning range cooker in the room. She showed us a few old photographs of her loved ones placed on a shelf.





Do you remember your childhood?

“I went to the forest for wood and we collected spuds for winter. My father was sick, he couldn’t do it, and we were all girls, all six of us. Later, the oldest one just hid. The Russians chased after women, so she hid. My father made a hole in the house and covered it with a table and rugs so they wouldn’t see her. They came into the house. They wanted to shoot my father, so my younger sister and I, we were just two years apart, went to our father and held onto him so they wouldn’t shoot him.”

Do you also remember the Germans?

“Ah, yes, the Germans. They were Germans, but believe me, they were better to people than the Russians. They didn’t chase after women. My sister, she was of age. She was scooping sugar into a five-litre jar and sang. She didn’t know there was a German there. He was on a horse. He stopped the horse and listened and listened to her singing. The door was open, it was warm, and he watched her. She was very beautiful. And when she noticed him, she knew she’d get something. And he smiled at her so sweetly and said in German not to be afraid. That he wouldn’t go rat-tat-tat.”

We had to go to school.
Even barefoot. Sometimes
we would only eat once a
day. No breakfast, nothing.
No lunch, just dinner.





Matilda (1941)

Stráne pod Tatrami

In Stráne pod Tatrami Matilda is known as the herbalist. Today, you'll find dried herbs and teas at her place, which she collects for herself and her loved ones. She remembers her childhood, when she and her siblings would go to the forest foraging for blueberries, raspberries, and mushrooms. There were eight of them at home. She was widowed early and whenever she gets a chance, she visits her husband's grave and reminisces.

From her memories we learn also about the war: "My parents were terrified for us. We were just children. How old was I—four years old?! My mother said we were hiding." The family was hiding from Germans who were looting and her mother brought them food, even though they often had nothing to eat themselves. After the war, the partisans returned, bringing relief.

Matilda grew up in a family of eight children, four of whom survived. When she was 18, she met her future husband. She also remembers moments when they sang and danced at home. At school, she met children of different ethnicities, and although she was of Roma origin, she never had problems finding friends.



Were you born during war?

“There was war.”

Do you remember anything from that time?

“I remember, because my mother used to say it was hard, there was nothing to eat. They hid so they wouldn’t kill us, because the war was brutal. There was war in the village, the Germans were there, the whole family was afraid, everyone hid. And there was nothing to eat, we were destitute. They went around the village so the children would have something to eat, they kept going until the war ended.”

Did your mother tell you what it was like?

“My mother said that after the Germans left, the mothers and fathers went around the village and could take what they wanted. Because no one was living there. No one. The Germans left, and then the partisans came to the village, and there was peace.”

And the partisans, were they good?

“They were good, yes. And the Germans were worse, yes.”



Štefan (1925)

Levoča

The man who greeted us was small and always in good spirits. He had carefully prepared his documents to show us his life's journey. He spent his entire life in Levoča. He grew up as one of five siblings and lost his musician father at the age of eight. Despite the hard start in life, he kept his liveliness and smile.

“Well, sometimes we wouldn’t eat all day,” he recalled his hard childhood. He used to work in construction and in mines and he raised ten children on his own. “And my mother would come home, what can I say, just the truth, she worked for landowners, and whatever they gave her, she would cook, and we would eat,” he added smiling .

Football was his great passion. His eyes lit up when he talked about it. He no longer played, as he admitted, “My legs aren’t up for it.” In old age, he still watched matches on the television. “Yes, true, I’ve got a TV over there, also here,” he added happily.





Well, football is my life.
I cheer for the team
that's winning.

Rozália (1930)

Stráne pod Tatrami

The creaking door, once blue, no longer fit its frame, kept out neither cold nor the sounds from outside. The shack, furnished with old furniture, was tidy. The dirt floor was covered with wavy linoleum, which didn't cover the whole room. The only window was broken, hastily covered with a plastic film that failed to keep the chill out. The kitchen, bedroom, and living room were all in one space. The household was damp, without running water or basic hygiene. A metal pail behind the sofa served as a toilet.

Mrs. Rozália, who never lived in a home with running water, came from Pernek. Her husband died at the age of 35, leaving her with eight children. When asked what she would change, she replies, "Not having children. Children are hard."

She lived with her adult daughter. She spent most of the day in bed. She didn't like coffee, preferring cappuccino. Mrs. Rozália was a living advertisement for horse chestnut ointment, which she considered invaluable. And what did she wish for most of all? A new skirt and an ointment for her aching legs.





If I could grant you one wish, what would it be?

“A skirt! Green, or maybe red.”

Did you attend school?

“I hardly ever went to school. I’d go one day and stay at home the next one. I knew a little, but now I don’t know anything.”

Where were you when not at school?

“I was always sick. Always my stomach, always. You can’t do anything. If you can’t eat well, you can’t do anything. No meat, nothing.”

Do you remember the war?

“The war broke out back home in Pernek. Germans were shooting there. The Russians were shooting. I remember the war. My mother gave me soot and I made myself black with it. The Russians asked my parents about me. My father was afraid; he blackened my whole face so they wouldn’t see me. A Russian had a gun on me. ‘God, I’ll... I’ll take the gun and put it to your head.’ I wasn’t afraid and I was a kid. Fear had nothing on me.”

Rudolf (1946)

Hrabušice

Do you remember your childhood?

“It was such a village, I’ll tell you. No road, no water, nothing. We had to walk kilometres to fetch water. When we went to school, there was no road. Just mud everywhere. By the time we got to school, we were already dirty. If it rained, two kilometres to school. We were soaked.”

How do people call you?

“Domino. Dominik, that’s what they call me. There was a craftsman in our village. He fixed everything, motorcycles, everything. And he took me on as his apprentice, he taught me. I tinkered with motorcycles with him. And my father said, ‘Wait, you’re just like that Dominik.’ And now everyone, since I was young, calls me that around here. If you say Rudolf, no one knows who you mean. But if you say Dominik, everyone knows.”

And what about girls?

“When the boys from the other village came and wanted our girls, we didn’t allow it.”





I used to play music
at parties, at weddings,
so I travelled a lot. We
danced every Sunday,
every Saturday. Now
only once a year.

Sad times...



Helena (?)

Vilčurňa, časť Spišská Nová Ves

Mrs. Helena never went to school; she had not learnt how to read nor write. She was born in Dlhé Stráže as one of eight children. Her memories of childhood were shrouded in poverty and hunger. At sixteen, she married and moved to Smižany, where she gave birth to six children. Her mother helped with raising them. Her husband died young, at only 45. Mrs. Helena remembers him as a good, caring man.

We visited her in an old block of flats, where she lived in a modest dwelling with her daughter. As we walked through the settlement, the snow turned to mud and aggressive dogs barked from wooden kennels. We expected them to break free and tear us to pieces in celebration of sudden freedom. Along the path laid dead rats trampled into the mud. We entered the block of flats surrounded by half-naked, dirty children numbed with cold.

Mrs. Helena was trapped in old duvets, dependent on the help of others. No one knew when she had left the flat last. Her exact age is unclear.



Author of the Photographs:

Barbora Haviarová is a Slovak photographer, videographer, and graphic designer. She graduated with a Master's degree from the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava where she studied photography. She has presented her work in solo and group exhibitions both in Slovakia and abroad. She served as editor-in-chief of Port No. 21 magazine, which won the Slovak National Design Award in the category of Communication Design.

In her work, her longterm focus is on portrait photography and subjective documentary. For over a decade, she has been systematically documenting life in marginalised communities. Concentrating on individual stories and conversations, she creates an extensive visual archive of people in their social and cultural context.

As she says:

“I strive to tell a person's story not through words, but their own face where it is already written. The elderly were photographed in their own homes during personal visits. Every one of them was unique and they have left a deep impression on me.”

Barbora Haviarová
photographer

Exhibition venues/locations:

24 October - 19 December 2024, Synagogue Šaštín-Stráže

4 September - 31 October, Stará škola Kokava, Kokava nad Rimavicou

20 July - 30 September 2026, Sereď Holocaust Museum

8 October - 22 October 2026, Hviezdoslavovo námestie, Bratislava

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