



3.4

# Travellers in Norway and Sweden

Jakob Wiedner

Hei, romano tjava  
kamma romano tjei!  
Hei, romano tjava  
besja stadia pre snei!  
Hei, romano tjava  
kamma romano tjei!  
Honkar diro taving  
så ava diro kei!

Hey, Romani boy,  
have a Romani girl!  
Hey, Romani boy,  
put the hat slantwise!  
Hey, Romani boy,  
have a Romani girl!  
If you are a Traveller,  
come here!

III. 1

*The chorus of a very popular song among the Travellers. The vast majority of words in the chorus are of Romani origin.*

(Source: Latjo drom / glomdalsmuseet.no)

The ‘travellers’ of Norway (‘reisende’ in Norwegian) and Sweden (‘resande’ in Swedish) are an ethnic minority in Scandinavia that is historically related to Romani migration to Northern Europe in the early 16th century. Following a semi-itinerant lifestyle, the traditional occupations of the Romanifolk/Tatere or Resande are – among others – the production of metalwork and clothes, dealing with horses, and trading with goods. Through frequent intermarriage with locals, this minority community has developed specific characteristics that combine the Romani cultural heritage with Scandinavian culture.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1505, the arrival of ‘Tater’ people is first mentioned in a letter to the royal court in Copenhagen. In this letter, the Scottish king asks his brother the Danish-Norwegian king to let a group of pilgrims from ‘Little Egypt’ into the country. In 1512, the Stockholm city chronicle mentions the arrival of ‘Tater’ people. The existence of travelling Romani groups was already known in Scandinavia from northern Germany but it was the first time that these people were seen on Scandinavian soil. The name ‘Tater’ is taken from the word ‘Tartar’ that originally referred to Mongolian invaders and that had become a generic term for strangers who were believed to come from outside Europe. Already at the end of the 16th century the attitude towards the ‘Taters’ became hostile and the Danish-Norwegian king ordered to expel them from the country when found. The leaders of ‘Taters’ were sentenced to death.

In the course of the 18th century, the perception of the Romanifolk/Tater as an ethnically distinct group has diminished in the Norwegian discourse and, at the same time, the semi-itinerant lifestyle of ‘travellers’ was more and more seen as a social phenomenon, irrespective of their ethnic background. In Sweden, writers keep using the term ‘zigenare’ (Gypsies, cf. German ‘Zigeuner’) to refer to the Resande throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. This means that the Resande in Sweden were seen as an ethnic minority, while in Norway the Romanifolk/Tater were perceived as Norwegians who went off the ‘right’ path.

It was the Norwegian theologian Eilert Sundt who re-discovered the connection between the Romanifolk/Tater/Resande and the European Roma by comparing the languages spoken by these groups. Like it is the case today, the Romanifolk/Tater/Resande did not speak Romani as their first language but Norwegian or Swedish. What is left from the Romani heritage is a so-called ‘Para-Romani variety’ which means that only the Romani lexicon has been maintained. The Romani lexicon is used within spoken Norwegian or Swedish and the old Romani grammar is – except for a few remnants – entirely lost. Accordingly, the status of this Para-Romani variety as a separate language is discussed controversially both within and outside the community. Only a small fraction of the community members positions themselves as part of the European Romani minority. In regard to ethnicity, Norway and Sweden chose different approaches when the Romanifolk/Tater/Resande were recognised as ‘national minorities’ in the frame of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities: While in Norway the ‘Romanifolk/Tatere’ are officially recognised as a separate ethnic minority beside the Norwegian ‘Romfolk’ (the Lovara Romani sub-group), the official policy of Sweden reflects the Romani ethnicity of the ‘Resande’ by recognising them as a sub-group of the Roma living in the country.

During the 20th century, both the Norwegian Romanifolk/Tatere and the Swedish Resande experienced harsh assimilation measures aiming at destroying their particular culture and traditional occupations in order to forcedly integrate them into

## III. 2

The tail of the aircraft on the photo portrays Ludvig Walentin Karlsen (1935-2004), a Pentecostal preacher of Romanifolk/Tatere descent. He is among the several tens of Norwegian personalities who adorn the tails of the Norwegian airlines' aircrafts. (Norwegian Air Shuttle)



## III. 3

Production of a traditional knife by a Norwegian traveller. (from the collection of Glomdalsmuseet, Norway)



the Scandinavian society. This endeavour severely threatened the survival of these people as a separate ethnic group, since the traditional occupations were forbidden, women were sterilised, children were taken from their parents away and families were forced to abandon their common dwelling places and to settle among the majority population.

It took until the end of the 20th century that the policy towards the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande changed from strict assimilation to acceptance and protection. The assimilation policy was abandoned and the minority received the status as national minority in both countries. Nevertheless, it will take time until this minority gains trust in the authorities and in a majority society which tried to exterminate their specific culture and lifestyle for around 500 years.

## LIFESTYLE AND OCCUPATIONS

Like many Romani communities in the various regions of Europe, the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande traditionally followed a semi-itinerant lifestyle. While in winter families lived in their own small houses or on farms, they were travelling in summer in order to offer their services in the villages of Norway and Sweden. Their traditional professions as craftsmen, workers and horse traders were well coordinated with the needs of the farmers and so they formed – despite all mistrust from the side of the majority population – a substantial part of the rural economy in Norway and Sweden. The Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande were always economically dependent from the majority population but at the same time they were always marginalised, irrespective of the question if someone perceived them as strangers or as Scandinavians following a lifestyle seen as incompatible with the way of life of the farmers on the countryside.

The traditional means of transport were horse-drawn buggies and therefore the horse became a central part of the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande culture. At the coasts in the west of Norway some families preferred to travel by boat. Inland families do, however, not consider the 'båtsreise' (boat travel-

lers) as part of the Romanifolk/Tatere but as a distinct community of Norwegian and German descent.

The Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande have become particularly known for their elaborate metal works such as knives or kitchen tools, a craft tradition having a great prestige among the community members. Not only the men but also the women were selling the goods which they bought wholesale or they produced themselves. While metal work was traditionally typical man work among the community, women were engaged in the production of textiles such as embroidery, crochet work or weaving. Besides that the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande women were known for fortune telling.

Due to the fact that the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande lived in a hostile environment on the one hand but also incorporated group outsiders that were not of Romani descent on the other, the Romani words used in Norwegian and Swedish gained special importance. While seen from outsiders as a 'secret language' used to cheat the farmers, the community members themselves perceive it as an important means of flagging their distinct identity and to flag solidarity within the group. The ability to speak in a way that is not understood by others became a way of protecting oneself from the infringements from the side of the majority population. As a member of the Norwegian Romanifolk/Tatere community once stated during an interview, the knowledge of protecting oneself from attacks from the outside world became so important for this minority that the word 'romano' – originally the old self-appellation – changed its meaning to 'clever, foresighted, looking beyond the surface'.

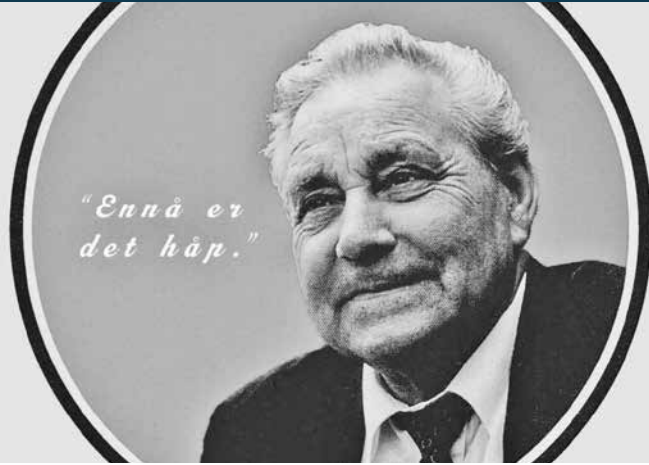
RECENT CHANGES IN THE ROMANIFOLK/  
TATERE/RESANDE CULTURE

The technical and societal changes in the 20th century changed the way of life of the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande substantially. The modern welfare state, the marked economy and big companies make most traditional professions obsolete. This is especially true for communities following an itinerant lifestyle

## III. 4

Election campaign for Ludvig Walentin Karlsen (1935-2004) to become one of the Norwegian personalities featured on the tails of the Norwegian airlines' aircrafts.

(from Oslo byarkiv, Norway)



as the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande did and partly still do. The supermarket replaces the trader travelling from village to village and modern farming technologies replace the traditional agriculture in which horses played a significant role. It follows that the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande lost their traditional markets and areas of work in the time of modernisation and technology – next to the fierce assimilation policy in the 20th century. So it is also the general economic developments which make it more and more difficult to get along with the old traditional occupations. Accordingly, many community members are forced to give up their lifestyle and to search for an employment elsewhere. Despite of this, some Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande try to keep travelling in summer and live from trading with goods or selling their own products.

Not only the lifestyle and the traditional occupations of the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande are in transition, but also the religion is challenged. Many community members distance themselves from the Church of Norway and the Church of Sweden and convert to Pentecostalism, as a result of an active missionary work among this minority by Pentecostals – a development which is also known among other Romani groups in Europe. Via Pentecostalism, the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande get in contact with Roma from other parts of Europe and so a new feeling of belonging to the Roma is awakening among some members of this minority. On the other hand, however, many community members refuse to perceive themselves as Roma. This reaction must also be seen in connection with recent Romani migration to Scandinavia from former communist states in Eastern Europe. Many Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande community members are afraid to be lumped together with the new migrants fearing that they lose their achieved status in Norwegian and Swedish society. The Swedish approach to see the Resande as Roma underlines the common origin which does not mean that all Resande in Sweden would accept this categorisation. The situation in Norway is, accordingly, even more characterised by a more or less strict differentiation between Romanifolk/Tatere and 'Romfolk' (Norwegian Lovara Roma).

## III. 5

Scandinavian travellers, undated

(from the collection of Glomdalsmuseet, Norway)



It is rather unlikely that the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande minority as a whole will in the future understand itself as a part of the Romani people. Similar is the case with the Sinti in Germany who prefer to keep a certain distance from Romani groups referring to themselves as Roma. However, the great mobility and the openness of modern societies makes it possible that ethnic groups of Romani descent can intensify contact between each other and so slowly change the self-understanding of the own group.

## CONCLUSION

The culture of the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande minority has a special position in the context of Romani culture. Having lost Romani as the first language, the linguistic heritage of this group has become an inherent marker of the own identity while the first language of this minority is Norwegian or Swedish. As a result, the Romani words that have been maintained are of utmost importance for these people, their 'crown jewels' as a community member once said. This leads to the situation that everything which is seen as typical for the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande identity is given great importance even though many community members live an 'ordinary' Scandinavian, i.e. settled, lifestyle and use their so-called Para-Romani language only in few everyday situations. The cultural elements that are considered emblematic are strictly maintained by the community. The community is willing to fight to receive the right to be different. Traditional crafts and travelling in the summer are seen as the real and only legitimate way of life that can be called 'hårta romani', meaning real Romani. The focus on the past entails, however, also internal conflicts about the question of the legitimacy of interpretation of the own history and culture. The Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande are therefore a community that is internally split between several camps who have different, often opposite, imaginations about how to live a typical life as a 'traveller' on the one hand, and how to find one's place in modern society on the other. While some representatives of the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande

## III. 6

Norway recognised *Romani* and *Romanes* as distinct, non-territorial, languages. *Romani* is the language spoken by the Travellers, the so-called Romanifolk/Tater. Their number is estimated to be up to few thousand. *Romanes* is the language of the Gypsy/Roma. The speakers of this group amount up to few hundred and they usually live in the Oslo area.

Both names for the language, *Romani* and *Romanes*, are borrowed from Romani. *Romani* is an adjective, while *Romanes* is an adverb, such as in the following examples:

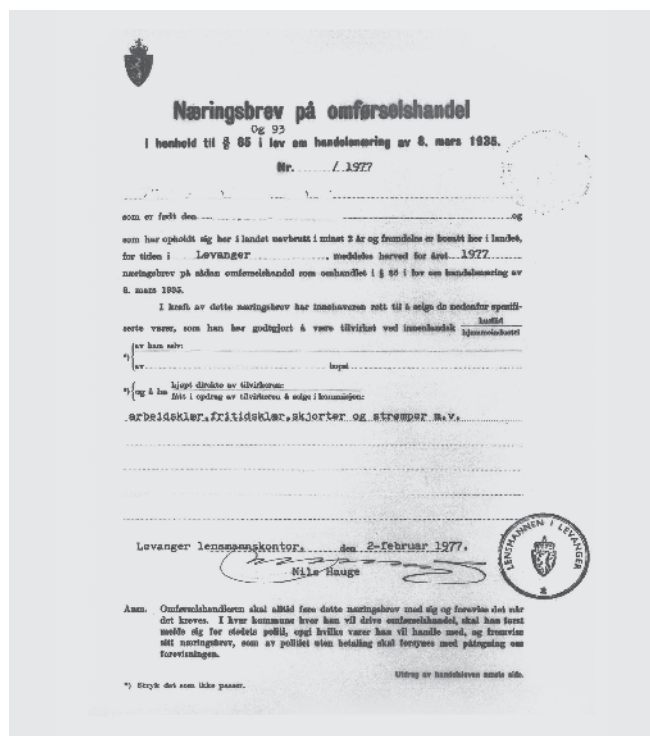
*I romani šib šukar-i.* 'The Romani language is beautiful.'  
*Žanes romanese?* 'Do you speak Romani?'

vehemently plea for a 'reunification' with the Roma, others want to keep distance and understand their culture as a particular Scandinavian traveller culture.

In 1998, the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande received official recognition both in Norway and Sweden after a long history as pariah group that had been perceived as threat for the society in general while the positive contribution of this minority to Scandinavian culture had only rarely been acknowledged in earlier times. Projects such as the permanent exhibition on Romanifolk/Tatere culture and history in Glomdalsmuseet in Elverum in Norway but also the voluntary work of Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande activists slowly bring a new neutral view on this minority to the general public. Even if it will still take time to overcome disapproval from the side of the majority population, first steps have been made in order to create a climate in which the Romanifolk/Tatere/Resande culture can be maintained openly and brought into the 21st century.

## III. 7

Norwegian license for trading without fixed business office.  
The license on the photo was issued for a Norwegian traveller.  
(from the collection of Glomdalsmuseet, Norway)



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