



Romani literature

2.0

Romani-Project Graz / Michael Wogg

Romani literature is written by authors living in many countries, writing in many different languages and dialects, using many different writing systems. Yet the range of its themes is fairly homogeneous. Given the special conditions Romani literature has faced from the beginning, its output has been substantial. However, after only eight decades of development, on a historical scale Romani literature is still at an early state of emergence.

ODE TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

*Twentieth Century,
What did you hold in store for the sad Roma people?
Did you bring the sun into our dark lives?
Did you dry the tears from our women's eyes?
Did you lighten our songs and dances with joy?*

*Twentieth Century: listen to our songs.
Can you hear from the notes
how our hearts have been drowned in tears?*

*Look at our dances:
Our women's steps may seem as light as bird's,
but in reality they are trying
to cast off a bitter burden
from their aching shoulders.*

*That burden is you,
Twentieth Century,
and the sorrow you brought into each of our lives.*

III. 1 *Ode to the Twentieth Century - Leksa Manuš* (translated by Gillian Taylor, from Hancock, Dowd, Đurić [eds.] 1998 "The Roads of the Roma", p. 54)

INTRODUCTION

Romani literature is literature written by Roma. In lack of a definition in terms of language, the ethnic criterion still gives the most reliable definition of the subject, even if it may lead to unsatisfying results. One would probably not count Joseph Conrad to the masters of Polish literature, since he wrote in English exclusively. Yet he is labelled "a Polish novelist, writing in English", and this would also be the appropriate designation for most Romani writers – Romani poets and novelists, writing in the language of the country they live in.

After centuries of oral tradition, in the 20th century Roma have started to write literature. The writers are spread all over the world and write in many different languages. Only a minority of them writes in Romani and those who do, in absence of a standard language, use their dialect of Romani which most often is not easily understood by readers who speak other dialects of the language. Moreover, texts written in one and the same dialect may be written in different notations, most notably in Latin vs. Cyrillic. And even texts of one dialect, written in one and the same notation, may differ in spelling.

Given only these most general conditions of its production, it does not come as a surprise that Romani literature has not established a firm canon yet. To the day the only comprehensive survey of Romani literature is the one by Rajko Đurić. In scientific terms, some of the information given in his book "Die Literatur der Roma und Sinti" (2002) seems disputable, and therefore we must not draw upon it extensively here. Yet Đurić undertakes a knowledgeable and useful overview of authors and their works in many countries, especially of Eastern Europe, and one has to bear in mind that his book is the first and so far only attempt to cover the whole range of our subject.

ALEXANDER GERMANO (1893-1955)

Under the pseudonym Germano, Alexander Vyacheslavovich Germano became the first Romani author the world has known of so far. In 1915, he successfully completed his commercial studies in Kiev. In school, Sasha had already begun to write down various observations and thoughts. He wrote in Russian because at home he heard his mother's mother tongue, Moravian Romani, only rarely. His mother was accustomed to speaking Czech with his Czech father and later, after their arrival in Russia, the whole family gradually came to speak Russian. Thus, Russian was Sasha's first language.

In 1915, Germano's first essay, „Cherv' gryzyot“ („The Worm gnaws“), appeared in the anthology „Orlovtsy – zhertvam voyny“ („Citizens of Orel – To the victims of war“). From 1919 to 1921, Alexander Germano served in the Red Army. There he worked as a cultural educator. In 1921, he was demobilised and, from then on, devoted his life to culture and literature. In the city of Orel where he lived, he worked as an editor of a local newspaper; wrote feuilletons, sketches and essays; organised literary evenings; collected materials for the newly established Turgenev museum, and directed a local theatre studio. In 1921, he staged his first play, „In Some Kind of Institution“ („V nekoem uchredhnyeni“), in the city theatre of Orel.

In 1926, Germano moved to Moscow, where the longest and most important phase of his life began – most important not

only for him but also for Romani culture and literature. Germano was not brought up as a Rom, but he was a Rom on his mother's side and his romanipe was resurrected by the prestige of the official task that stood before him: to create spelling for transcribing Romani, to write out the grammar of Romani, and to develop Romani culture and literature. Germano incorporated his knowledge of the differences in languages and culture of various Romani groups into his prose works. When Roma from different sub-ethnic groups met, they were accustomed to speaking at length about the differences in their dialects. It was actually such a conversation that Germano introduces into his story „Miriklja“ („Beads“, 1960). A natural conversation about the Romani language takes place in a pub between Russian „Romychoristers“ (great city musicians): Maštak, the hero of the story, and Feduk, a member of a Bessarabian clan of „travelers and horse-thieves.“ Germano developed a deep knowledge of Romipen both by living among Roma and from literature. Much had been written about Gypsies, but articles, scholarly papers, and language studies were scattered among various periodicals and collections, and many of them had fallen into oblivion long ago. Germano devoted three years to searching through libraries and archives for what had been published about Gypsies in Russia and where to find it. The outcome of his work was the „Bibliography of Gypsies; Inventory of Books and Papers from 1780 to 1930“ („Bibliografija o tsiganakh, ukazatel knig i statei s 1780 po 1930“). The bibliography with a foreword by Prof. M. Sergiyevskiy was published in 1930.

Due to these factors – time, geographic and social diversity, language and dialect diversity, notation and spelling diversity, and the absence of leading figures – Romani literature did not yet have the possibility of developing proper criticism. Adding to that, for the

non-Romani public the fact of an author being a Rom still seems to trigger the use of ethno-social criteria in reception. Even the books of Matéo Maximoff, which have been translated into 14 languages, have mainly been judged by ethno-social, and less by aesthetic crite-

ria in the literary public. Maybe he got many readers just because of his being a Rom (and his books deal with what it means to be a Rom), yet clearly this doesn't do justice to his work, which, after all, deserves to be judged as literary art.

AUTHORS AND GENRES

Although still young, Romani literature has brought forth many remarkable authors. Matéo Maximoff (1917-2003), Alija „Ali“ Krasnići (*1952), Alexander Germano (1893-1955), Menyhért Lakatos (1926-2007), Ronald Lee (*1934) and others are best known for their novels (although they are by no means limited to them). Bronisława Wajs (called Papusza, 1909-1987), Mariella Mehr (*1947), Jovan Nikolić (*1955), among many

others, have written poetry; Ivan Rom-Lebedev (1903-1989), the authors writing for theatre Pralipe, Ilona Lacková (1921-2003) and others developed drama. Romani historiography has been initiated by Ian Hancock (*1942), and Rajko Đurić (*1947) focuses on literary history, to name just the two most influential scholars. Matéo Maximoff and Valdemar Kalinin (*1941) translated the Bible into Romani, Muharem Serbezovski (*1950) the Koran. Works by Pushkin have been translated into Romani by Nikolai Pankov (1895-1959), Victor Shapoval (*1958)

translated Shakespeare's sonnets, and Leksa Manuš Valmiki's ancient „Ramayana“ (1990).

Many Roma participate in the ongoing process of literalising oral Romani culture by writing down tales, songs, stories, and be it for their own use exclusively. Closely related to that, the genre of autobiography has boomed for the last 20 years and yielded results of high literary quality like the books by Philomena Franz (*1922) or Ceija Stojka (*1933).

It is virtually impossible to do the works of even the more important

At that time, Germano divided his life between residing in libraries and archives and living in travelling camps of Roma, where he wrote down their folklore and learned their dialect. „I spent a whole week in camps. I learned the Gypsy language and so I began freely and naturally to write verses and prose in the Gypsy language ... I got to know every aspect of the life and feelings of travelling Gypsies,“ writes Germano in his autobiography.

*The first Germano literary work written in Romani, the story „Ruvoro“ („Wolf Cub“), appeared in the first issue of the Romani magazine „Romany zoria“ („Romani Dawn“) in the autumn of 1926. Germano was the editor of the magazine. At that time, Germano was accepted as a member of the Union of Proletarian Writers, „Kuznitsa“ („Smithy“), and, at the same time, he founded the Romani literary group „Romengiro lav“ („Word of Roma“). The author wrote verses and stories in Romani, but he continued to write in Russian. The theme of his Russian language works became almost exclusively Roma. His essay „Gypsies“ („Tsiganye“), published in the collection „Nasha Zhizenye“ (1931), was highly praised by Maxim Gorky. Notable literary works in Russian dedicated to Roma are: „Gypsies in Fiction from Dyerzhavin to Blok“ („Tsiganye v khudozhestvennoy literatury ot Dyerzhavina do Bloka“), „Outline of the Gypsy Language“ („Osnovy tsiganskogo yazika“), „Brief History of Soviet Gypsies“ (in collaboration with Rom-Lebedev, *Kratkaya istoriya sovietskikh tsigan*) and others. At the end of the 1920's and beginning of the 1930's, Germano's books in Romani*

*were published one after another. „Nevo dživiben“ („New Life“, *Centrizdat* 1929), „Les kharde ruvesa i vavre rospchenybena“ („They Called Him a Wolf and other stories“, *GICHL* 1933), „Ganka Čamba i vavre rospchenybena“ („Ganka Tchamba and other stories“, *Goslitzdat* 1935).*

*Germano's poetry written in Romani also appeared in several independent collections: „Lole jaga“ („Red Fire“, *GICHL* 1934), „Jav pre strega“ („Be on Guard“, *Molodaya Gvardya* 1934), „Gilja“ (Songs, *Goslitzdat* 1935), „Rospchenybena dre gilja“ („Stories in Verse“, *Goslitzdat* 1937), „Neve Gilja“ („New Songs“, *Goslitzdat* 1938). In 1939, Germano translated into Romani Pushkin's works „Skupy ritsar“, („The Stingy Knight“) and „Mozart i Salieri“ („Mozart and Salieri“).*

Germano had incredible energy. Apart from his literary and editorial work, he organised reading and writing courses for illiterate Roma and collaborated in the founding of Romani „artels“ („craft cooperatives“). During the Second World War he fought actively as a member of the anti-aircraft defense in battles for Moscow; later he joined groups of artists who organised cultural events for the army and for soldiers in hospitals.

The artistic value of some of Germano's stories and poems extends beyond his time and the borders of Romani national literature and would most definitely deserve world recognition.

After a serious illness, Alexander Germano died on April 22, 1955.

III. 2

Romani writers all over the world justice here. They simply are too many, they have published in too many different languages, many publications

are out of print, or the works may be unaccessible for other reasons. Thus, we will give only a rough overview and feature three outstanding authors

(Alexander Germano, Alija “Ali” Krasnići, Matéo Maximoff), whose life and work has been discussed by scholars in greater detail.

THE BEGINNINGS: RUSSIA

Although there may have been singular earlier attempts, many scholars hold the opinion that Romani literature started in the 1920s in Russia, and it is safe to say that it did so impressively. In Russia, as early as in the 18th century a cultural elite of Roma had come into existence. After the Revolution, representatives of this former musical and artistic elite, who in the past had been closely associated with high society in the former Russian Empire, were the first to gather under the banners of the new “proletarian” ideology. Ivan Rom-Lebedev (1903-

1989), Nikolai Pankov (1895-1959), Nina Dudarova (1903-1977), Maxim Besljudsko (1901-1989), Alexander Germano (1893-1955), and others wrote fiction, compiled dictionaries and textbooks, translated Russian literature into Romani, and wrote plays that were published in the years between 1925 and 1938, with active support of the Soviet state.

In 1931 the “Indo-Romen Theatre” (later called “Romen Theatre”) was opened in Moscow, and for several years the plays were in Romani exclusively. The theatre had its premiere on December 21, 1931, with the presentation of the play “Džiiben pre rotj” (“Life on wheels”). We learn from a review prin-

ted in the daily newspaper “Pravda” that the play was met with great enthusiasm from the audience. The play had a run of 1200 performances. The author was Alexander Germano.

In the late 1930s, however, Russian state policy towards the Roma changed, and the wave of publications ran dry almost instantly. The later works of the pioneering authors – with only few exceptions – remained unpublished, and the works of following authors like Leksa Manuš (1942-1997) are scattered in a multitude of journals. The pre-war, “pre-Stalinist” period of immense literary productivity in Russia is still unchallenged in the history of Romani literature.

MATÉO MAXIMOFF

The French writer, cauldron maker, and Evangelical pastor Matéo Maximoff (1917-1999) is probably the best known Romani novelist. He published ten novels, written in French.

As a child, Matéo learned the Romanian and Russian history of his family at storytelling sessions of relatives. Maximoff's ancestors made their livelihoods in Russia (until they left in 1914) in two ways: as musicians and through the traditional profession of the Kalderaš – they produced and mended cauldrons. Grandpa Maximoff ended his travels with his sons and daughters in Spain. There, in Barcelona, Matéo came into the world as the first-born son, the oldest of six siblings. The date of his birth is given as January 17, 1917.

Matéo's mother came from a Manouche family. She was a cousin of the great Romani musician Django Reinhardt. She died young during the birth of her sixth child in Belgium. The Maximoffs left Spain for France when Matéo was three years old (1920). At that time, his first language was Kalderaš Romani; his second, Spanish. Later, apart from Romani, his main means of expression was French, the language of the land where he lived the rest of his life.

The Maximoff family – Matéo's father, his father's brothers and their families – travelled around France, where they worked mainly as cauldron makers. Matéo practiced this trade like his brother and other cousins. He worked from his early youth because, at the age of fourteen, he was orphaned and had to feed his four younger siblings. „My father taught me to count to ten and the letters. The rest I taught myself. At that time I was around seven

or eight years old. My father also taught himself to read and write as a soldier in Russia. The world would be flooded with Romani writers if Roma could write!”

Dramas from the life of his family, mythicised over time and distant places and mainly by the fantasy of storytellers, had already been tempting Matéo in his youth to apply his knowledge of writing and to record them. Only writing Romani, that language in which the stories were told, was something completely unimaginable, „non-existent“, unprecedented. In reality, there was a precedent for writing, but no Rom elsewhere in the world had heard of Germano or Lebedev.

The coincidence of two factors helped Maximoff to realise his embryonic literary impulses: a bloody fight between two Romani families resulting in Matéo's being put in prison with other Roma and the insistence of his court-appointed attorney, Monsieur Jacques Isorni, that he write down a description of the fight and Romani customs in general. And so Matéo Maximoff wrote his first novel, “Les Ursitory” (1939, published in 1946) on order, as „notes“ - the basis for a defense plea.

The novel takes place in Romania, in the eighteenth century. Many of the themes he deals with also in his later books are already present in Ursitory. For example, the motif of bi-cultural education is often repeated in Maximoff's works. The situation of inter-family hatred he resolves through the kris, the Romani court. Ultimately, the excessive number of fights, their causes and solutions, which overload „Les Ursitory“, bear witness to the author's willingness to fulfill the request of his lawyer Isorni and give him information about this particular field concerning the traditional life of the

YUGOSLAVIA AND CZECHOSLOVAKIA

Similar to the Soviet state of earlier decades, the Republic of Yugoslavia in some ways provided favourable social and cultural terms for Roma, and from the 1960s on more and more Roma took their opportunity of access to higher education. Although there had been a journal “Romano lil” in Belgrade for three issues in 1935, it took until the early 1970s that in Belgrade, Skopje, Priština, and Sarajevo vivid scenes of Romani intellectuals emerged. Slobodan Berberski (1919-1989), who had been publishing since the 1950s (in Serbian), now devoted his writing to issues related to Roma, Alija “Ali” Krasnići (*1952) started his writing career, Rajko Đurić (*1947) published his first collection of poems in

1969, and Jovan Nikolić (*1955) began to publish poetry (in Serbian language) in 1981.

With the brake-up of Yugoslavia and due to growing nationalism and economic difficulties Đurić and Nikolić emigrated to Germany, and so did Rahim Burhan (*1949) and his Romani theatre “Pralipe”. In 1991 “Pralipe” formed a cooperation with the “Theater an der Ruhr” in Mülheim. Founded in Skopje in 1971, the theatre performed in Romani mainly, its repertoire covering a range from first performances to the classical plays of Shakespeare. “Pralipe” dissolved in 2005.

Almost at the same time as in Yugoslavia, but under different conditions the literature of Roma in Czechoslovakia emerged. Rather than of politically favourable – or at least less unfavourable – terms the rapid emergence of Romani literature in the Czech

part of the nation was the merit of Milena Hübschmannová (1933-2005) who served as an initiator and promoter for what soon was to become a circle of authors, writing in Romani. Tera Fabiánová (1930-2007), Andrej Giňa (*1936), and others wrote for the journal “Romano lil” (Romani Letter), which existed between 1969 and 1973 as the magazine of the “Sváz Cikánů-Romů” (Union of Gypsy-Roma) in Prague.

Compared to the Yugoslav authors, the output of the Czech writers remained limited almost completely to short stories and poems. This may be an outcome of the different conditions the authors faced in the two states. Whereas in Yugoslavia in 1969 Slobodan Berberski announced publicly the creation of the “Rom” association, which soon brought up organisations all over the country for the following two decades,

Roma. „Les Ursitory“ can be read in one breath. It is a typical mythologising Romani tale in which supernatural beings and forces are components of a complex, multidirectional reality, the dimensions of which rational leaders of „western civilisation“ are deprived.

In 1939, the Maximoffs fled to Spain. They were arrested and interned in the Gurs camp in the Pyrenees on the French-Spanish border. Then the police transferred the „Gypsies“ to a „Gypsy camp“ in Tarbes. After Tarbes (from August 1940 to May 1941) followed an internment camp for „nomads“ (that is, for Roma) in Lannemazan. Matéo Maximoff did not give up thoughts of publication of „Les Ursitory“ even in the internment camp. He got only a five-day pass from the camp – and that was again on the basis of the intervention of his lawyer, Isorni. Matéo Maximoff went to see him in Paris: „In 1942 I got a contract... but the book was published only after the war in 1946.“

Relatives of Matéo Maximoff – roughly four hundred people – were interned for 31 months during the Second World War. Matéo Maximoff wrote the book „Routes sans roulettes“ („Roads Without Wagons“) about this sorrowful time. French internment camps for „nomads“ were not so grimly horrible as the German „extermination camps“, but even here living conditions were desperate.

The success of this first novel „Les Ursitory“ proved the author’s ability to write and confirmed his long-time, dormant wish to communicate stories, ideas and messages in a form that was, until then, quite unusual – in writing. In all of the other novels, stories and tales of Matéo Maximoff, like in „Les Ursitory“ and „Ce Monde qui n’est pas le mien“, the presentation of a complex „Romani re-

ality“ is characteristic. What non-Roma would consider as „unreal“ or „surreal-supernatural“, is an essential part of the lives of Roma. Destiny, dreams, spectres or dead souls (mulo, sing.), beings from „another world“ are an inseparable part of every-day life. But above all stands a supreme force – the embodiment of good, pativ (honour), order – God.

Matéo Maximoff very unobtrusively inserts into the plot of his novels information about the ancient cultural customs of the Roma. Despite his description of what one could call „ethnographic“ Romani (Kalderaš) customs, they are always inconspicuously wedged into the plot and do not disturb the action.

Although Matéo had four wives, for many years he lived alone very modestly in a little flat in Romainville, a suburb of Paris. He had been an Evangelical pastor since 1961. The literary work that expresses his turn to the Christian faith is his translation of the entire New Testament into Kalderaš Romani. Maximoff also began to translate the Old Testament, but his illness and death prevented him from completing the work.

Although he admitted that the language closest to him was Romani, Maximoff wrote all of his works, apart from a few of his mostly unpublished stories, in French. At the time he wrote his first novel – for the purpose of his defense conducted by his French lawyer – the publication of Romani books was unimaginable. It is high time that the noteworthy, great works of art of the Romani writer Matéo Maximoff be translated from French, not only into other European languages, but also into Romani.

Ill. 3 Milena Hübschmannová, Rombase

in Czechoslovakia the flare up of the comparable freedom of opinion in the late 1960s was instantly scotched by the invasion of Russian troops in 1968. But the concentration on short genres is also a consequence of the Czech author’s writing in Romani, which, in absence of codification or lexical standards, required constant pioneer work in every

respect. An anthology has been issued by the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno called „Čalo vod’i“ (2008), in which texts of many of the Czech and Slovak authors are collected.

An outstanding Romani author in Slovakia is Dezider Banga (*1939). Banga published his first collection of poems „Piešeň nad vetrom“ (A Song

above the Wind) in 1964 after he had finished his studies of Slovak and History in Bratislava. Banga writes in Slovak mainly, which helped him to get his books published in Czechoslovakia. Later he also published fairy-tales, poems and children’s books in Romani, and has continued to be active both in writing and education.

OTHER EASTERN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

Bronisława Wajs (1910-1987), whose Romani name is Papusza (Doll), is one of the world’s first Romani authors. Papusza owes her „discovery“ and publication of her books of verse primarily to Jerzy Ficowski. Ficowski met Papusza in 1949 and edited her first bilingual collection

of poetry, which he published under the title „Pieśni Papuszi“, (Songs of Papusza, 1956). The Polish public could get to know the first Romani woman in Poland who wrote down her poetic improvisations on paper. According to Ficowski’s information, Papusza began to write down her „songs“ in 1950, after her relatives settled.

As is evident from the author’s autobiographical recording, the position

of the community in which Papusza lived was that she should not write. And so, despite all the encouragement of Jerzy Ficowski, there were times when the poet didn’t take her pen in hand. Even though Ficowski collected only thirty of Papusza’s poems (some short, some epic and long), they are unique and enormously strong works of art in their authenticity and originality drawn from „nomadic life under the protection of nature“.

ALI KRASNIČI

The writer Ali (Alija) Krasniči was born in 1952 in Crkvena Vodica, a town near Obilić (Kosovo). He is a member of the Gurbet group, a group of the Vlach-Roma. Ali Krasniči is one of the very few Romani writers who write prose in Romani. Other Romani writers like Menyhért Lakatos or Matéo Maximoff also wrote novels, but wrote exclusively in Hungarian and French respectively.

Already at an early age, Ali Krasniči knew about the dark sides of life, which can be overwhelming if no possibility is found to 'know' them, to describe them and compare them to the positive sides. From the beginning, literature was this possibility for Ali Krasniči, first as listener and later as author.

Thus, however, it was necessary to chose a carrer which was unusual for a Rom. He never questioned his identity as Rom and his mother tongue (Gurbet-Romani); they were a natural and central part of his life. In this sense, Krasniči is a tradition-conscious Rom. However, he does not consider the traditional values of his forefathers nor Romani as something static which cannot be subject to change.

He started studying at the Faculty of Law in Obilić as extraordinary student. In traditional Romani societies, the education

nal establishments of the Gadže (Non-Roma) are not valued highly. Apart from a fundamental suspicion of Non-Roma, this low opinion is caused by the fact that many institutions, like universities, show no consideration for the culture of Roma. This disdain is gradually decreasing now, but in the 1960ies and 70ies Krasniči's studies equaled a breach of a taboo.

Due to intensive insights into the life and thoughts of Non-Roma, and among them mainly the educational elite, he became aware of the fact that very little and, at the same time, a lot of false ideas were known about the life of the Roma. He also saw that the status of Romani culture and literature was considered very low in the eyes of the Non-Roma. Krasniči's later concern to publish his book whenever possible in two or three languages (Romani, Serbian, Albanian or English) probably is a result of this experience.

At that time, his decision to turn towards literature became more and more concrete; at first following his personal interests, later, however, with the need to bring it before the public. In the years and decades that followed, Ali Krasniči became one of the best known Romani authors in former Yugoslavia. Until now, he has written and published more than 40 books, is represented in numerous anthologies, has written articles for the radio and radio plays. He was awarded several of the most important prizes for his literary work.

In Hungary, Menyhért Lakatos (1926-2007) and József Holdosi (*1951) both have written novels in which they portray the life of Hungarian Roma. Holdosi's "Kányák" (1978) uses methods of then popular Latin American magical realism to weave a layer of Romani thinking and beliefs into the depiction of the life of the people living in the "StraÙe der Zigeuner" (Road of the Gypsies), as the title in the German translation reads. Lakatos, in his autobiographical novel "Füstös Képek" (Bitter Smoke, 1975), spreads out a view spanning over three generations of a Romani family. Both novels are widely viewed as outstanding works of Romani literature in form and content.

Bari Károly (*1952) and Attila Balogh (*1956) are certainly the most advanced Romani poets in Hungary. Károly, a poet, translator, painter, and folklorist, has thoroughly studied the oral tradition of the Roma and edited a vast compilation of "Gypsy Folklore" music (1994/1999). His poetry, in which he skilfully transforms Romani tradition to contemporary form, has been incorporated to the canon of Hungarian poetry. Balogh, long-time editor of the magazines "Amaro Drom" and "Phralipe", has published poems and prose. Recently a collection of his poems was translated into English ("Gypsy Drill", 2005) and has recieved

attention for its outstanding, forceful language and original conception both in Hungary and the USA.

Leksa ManuÙ (Alexander Bjelugin, 1942-1997), a Latvian poet and linguist, among other works translated the Vedic epos "Ramayana" by Valmiki to Romani (1990); Belorussian Valdemar Kalinin (*1941), a poet and teacher, has translated the Bible to Baltic Romani (2001) and published the collection of poems "Romani Dreams" (2005) in London, where he has lived since 1995; Luminița Mihai Cioabă (Maria Mihai, *1957), the best known Romani writer of Rumania, in her verse keeps close contact with traditional Romani songs.

THE WESTERN COUNTRIES

Whereas in the East there had at least punctually been given support to Romani publications, in the West for a long time there was not even recognition. Early emancipatory moves of Roma remained

singular incidents, and it took until the 1970s that more effective efforts were undertaken. Writing in Romani was virtually inexistent until the 1980s. Thus, even more than in the Eastern and Central European countries in Western Europe Romani literature remained a domain of single individual achievements. In the

year 2002, finally, mainly on the initiative of the Swiss writer Mariella Mehr, the "International Romani Writer's Association" (IRWA) was founded in Helsinki. In 2008, however, the IRWA effectively was dissolved due to obvious lack of interest by Romani writers and Roma in general.

Because of the comparatively small lexicon and the lack of many abstract terms, most Romani authors limit themselves to lyric poetry and drama. Ali Krasnići, however, did not let himself be put off by that fact, and made a virtue out of necessity. Ever since his beginnings as a writer he has been creating new words, and has written them down in his own dictionary, which in the year 2000 included 25.000 entries and is now almost completed. To cite only two examples: Romani does not have a word for the noun „drop“, only for „it is dripping“ (pićal). So he derived the noun pić (drop) from the verb. For the abstract notion „home“ Krasnići used the two words than (place) and bijanipe (birth), and combined them to thanbijanibe (home). Generally, it is not necessary to understand Ali Krasnići's second and third language – Serbian and Albanian – in order to understand his word formation process and the new constructions. It is further noticeable that Ali Krasnići writes in many different literary genres. Apart from prose and lyric poetry he also writes children's books and dramas, and additionally works as translator from Serbo-Croatian into Romani.

His main concern, which he deals with in a literary form, is depicting the life of the Roma in all its facets. He deals with suffering, privation, poverty and need, but also with the longings, the happiness and the every-day pleasures of the Roma in his region. Stylistically,

Krasnići's works remind the reader of Emir Kusturica's film language. Both use alienation effects and ironical exaggeration in order to approach the character traits and particularities of a certain culture. Krasnići's literature is shaped by the use of pictures and humor, and he stands out through his extraordinary talent for focusing on seemingly unimportant details without losing sight of the context.

Additionally, the authenticity of his descriptions is guaranteed because he has experienced the dark and the good sides of the life of Roma himself. In 1999, he and his family – like a hundred thousand other Roma – were robbed off their home and possessions in the course of the war in Kosovo. The Albanian nationalists accused the Roma of collaboration with the Serbs. Latent prejudices and stereotypes appeared again and cause an ethnic cleansing of undreamt-of dimensions.

Ali Krasnići had to hide in a cellar for three months before he and his family could eventually flee to the refugee camp Kragujevac (Serbia-Montenegro). They lost all of their possessions, only Ali Krasnići's manuscripts could be saved. What remains for Ali Krasnići is his family and his literature. From both, he draws the strength and the hope that one day the Roma will be done justice, and the culprits called to account.

III. 4 Mozes F. Heinschink, Michael Teichmann, Rombase

Matéo Maximoff (1917-1999) is widely regarded the most important of all Romani writers. Ever from his first book, “Les Ursitory” (written in 1939, published in 1946), he has in his writing developed a characteristic voice. His 11 books have been translated to 14 languages. He embedded old Romani customs and rites into his romantic stories, which often are inspired by tales of his forefathers. Originally a tinker, he later became an Evangelical pastor in the place near Paris, where he lived until his death.

After Maximoff, one of the first books of a Rom which received great attention throughout the world is “God-damm Gypsy” (1971) by the Canadian scholar and activist Ronald Lee (*1934). It has been translated, among other languages, to Spanish, German, Italian, Serbian, Czech, and Russian.

Swiss Mariella Mehr (*1947) has achieved high standing as a novelist, poet and dramatist. Although she belongs to the group of Yeniche which are not related to the Roma, she has always regarded herself a Romani writer. Her debut novel,

“Steinzeit” (Stoneage, 1981), already shows a highly individual, “hard-cut” style, which she since has developed in 14 books.

Santino Spinelli (*1964), a Sinto from Italy, has published poetry and initiated the annual festival for Romani culture in Lanciano. As a linguist and musical ethnologist, he currently holds a seat for language and culture at the University of Trieste, Italy. Apart from that, under the name Alexian he has gained wide reputation as an accordionist and singer. Like Mariella Mehr, he was involved in the founding of the IRWA, and so was José Heredia Maya.

Heredia Maya (*1947) is a professor for the study of Flamenco in Granada and has published dramatic works and poetry collections. He has become famous for his drama “Camelamos naquerar” (1976). Joaquín Albaicín (*1966) has published novels and tales, a history of the Roma, texts for flamenco songs, and as an essayist he contributed to TV-programs, newspapers and international magazines.

Veijo Baltzar (*1942) is the outstanding figure of Finnish Romani literature and, as far as one can judge by accounts of Finnish reading reviewers and his long list of publications, a remarkable author. With the novel “Polttava tie” (The Burning Road, 1968) he started a career of immense output, which, besides books and articles, includes TV scripts, plays and opera librettos. He also worked as leading teacher in the Theatre Academy of Finland. Baltzar's novel “Phuro” (2000) was received enthusiastically; his recent novel, “Sodassa ja rakkaudessa” (In Love and War, 2008), is a story of Roma in World War II. Neither of them has been translated from Finnish so far. Apart from Mariella Mehr, Baltzar was the leading force in the short life of the IRWA.

Other remarkable Romani writers in the Western hemisphere are the US-American scholar Ian Hancock (*1942) and the Swedish author Katarina Taikon (1932-1995), who published an autobiography and the “Katitzi”-series of popular children books.

**BIOGRAPHY
AND REMEMBRANCE**

It does not come as a surprise that many publications by Roma belong to the genre of autobiography, as Romani culture to the day is strongly shaped by oral tradition. Typically, these life stories are told by Roma and written down and edited by non-Roma. It would not be appropriate to unthinkingly exclude these works from the body of Romani literature only because they were told by their authors rather than written. Their concepts and themes, their style of language, everything of them except writing itself and more or less of editing belongs to the narrators. The genre is still popular and therefore many publications in many Western European countries, especially in Germany and Austria. In Great Britain, Swedish Alyosha Taikon, the son of Johan Dimitri Taikon (“From Coppersmith to Nurse: Alyosha, the Son of a Gypsy Chief”, with Gunilla Lundgren, edited by Thomas Kenrick, 2003) and Bill Lee (“Dark Blood”, 2005) published their biographies.

In Central Europe, for obvious reason most biographical books by Roma deal with the personal experience of the Holocaust. The German writer and

activist Philomena Franz (*1922) published her autobiography “Zwischen Liebe und Hass” (Between Love and Hate) in 1985, the Austrian writer, painter and activist Ceija Stojka (*1933) her first book “Wir leben im Verborgenen” (We live in secrecy, with Karin Berger) in 1988, and since then more have followed. Iлона Lacková (1921-2003) developed her book “A False Dawn” (2000, the Czech edition 1997) in close collaboration with Milena Hübschmannová. Although it is not entirely devoted to them, the years of persecution and murder, which the author describes at the beginning of her book, strongly motivated her writing career which she started with the play “Horiaci cigánsky tábor” (The Burning Gypsy Camp) as early as in the late 1940s.

CONCLUSION

Romani literature is extremely diverse, as it is written by authors living in many countries and has been shaped by the diverse political, social and cultural conditions they are living in. It is written in many different languages and dialects and in different writing systems. Yet the range of themes is fairly homogenous: the place of the single individual between the Romani and non-Romani so-

ciety as well as the place of the Roma in today’s societies in general is often questioned; even in the more advanced texts, and even when they do not attempt to, the question of “Romanipe”, or what it means to be a Rom, is always present; the change from pre-modern (oral) to modern (written) tradition is at least inherently present in many of the texts; many texts after 1945 deal with the personal experience of the Holocaust and with the collective trauma it meant and still means for Romani societies.

Given the special conditions Romani literature has faced from the beginning, its output has been substantial so far. However, after only eight decades of development, on a historical scale Romani literature is still at an early state of emergence. However, it mirrors the state of Romani societies both in their diversity and their common issues. It is the “national literature” of a nation whose national identity is still in statu nascendi and to whom most probably the term “national identity” itself will always mean something completely different compared to what it means to national and ethnic national states. The future will show, whether Romani children will ever read Maximoff or Germano in school, like Russian pupils read Pushkin or British Dickens.

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