



## Basket Weavers

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### Etymology

There are several terms for a "woven basket" in *Romani*. → Vlax-Roma use the terms *košari*, *korpa*, *seŭa* and *kožnica*, other groups use e.g. *sevli*. The *Romani*- term for "weaving" is, in almost all dialects, *khuvel* or *khuvela*. Both *sevli* and *khuvel* are of Indian origin. *Sevli* derives from *śūrpa* (badket), *khuvel* derives from *guphati* (to join together).

### Historic Development

The basket weaving trade features among the oldest, widest-spread and most respected Roma professions. It fits the Roma in so far as Nature offers the raw material (willows) free of cost and – more importantly – everywhere. Usually, Roma could not do jobs which bound them to a certain place. When they had to move on, a change of place should not lead to a change of profession.

Basket makers were and still are present in most groups of Roma. However, this profession was of particular significance in the Greek – Turkish area. The *Sepečides* (basket makers)<sup>1</sup> are the group whose social structure is most strongly connected to this profession.

Up to the middle of the last century, whole settlements could earn their living as basket makers. One of the best-known settlements of basket makers was near Çırpıköy, a village near Izmir. At first, the Roma were living in huts made of reed (*kalives*) on the outskirts of Çırpıköy, but they had to leave their *phurane thana* (the old places) because of the great danger of fire, and settled in the town. Some Roma also moved to Izmir.

The women exchanged the baskets, which were made by the men, against goods which could then be traded on the market. This intermediate trade assured a small extra income. The *Sepečides* in Izmir did not have competition by Non-Roma or other minorities, which was a great advantage. Their skill was respected, and all social levels had to rely on the services of the Roma. There was no alternative to woven baskets, which were mainly used for storage and transportation of food. Because of their low weight and their high stability these baskets – equipped with leather straps – were very well suited for carrying heavy things, such as wood, metal or stones.

Like for all traditional Roma professions, the significance of basket making has decreased continually over the last century. [→ Professions: Historical Development] With the appearance of plastic and industrially made baskets, basket weaving has become increasingly unprofitable. Most basket makers could not maintain their position in view of cheap competition. They had to find ways to get an extra income, and, in the end, had to give up their profession and turn to another trade. Nowadays, only few Roma work as basket weavers. Some *Sepečides* make baskets as a second occupation; but their main occupation are jobs in the services sector or seasonal jobs in agriculture.

<sup>1</sup> Their ancestors lived as nomads in the area of Saloniki up to the war between Greece and Turkey (1920 – 1921). After the Treaty of Lausanne (1923), in which a population exchange was agreed on, they had the choice to either change their religion or to leave Greece. So, the *Sepečides* split up into a "Turkish" and a "Greek" group. The *Turkish* group traveled to Mersin and the Izmir area, those who stayed in Greece converted to Greek-Orthodox faith, left Saloniki and moved to Volos.



## Raw material, Production, and Products

All over Europe, it is the branches of the weeping willow that are used as raw material for basket weaving. They are cut in spring or in autumn, sorted and put into bundles according to size and quality. Depending on the climatic conditions, time of harvest and nature of the raw material, there are two kinds of branches: the bark of the high quality rods has to be removed immediately, and the rods dried. Those branches which are not full of sap have to be boiled before the bast can be removed. After that, they are dried. Before the branches are used, they are put into a water basin (*Sepečides-Romani: i laka*) to soak.

The first step in making a basket is weaving the basket's bottom. At the bottom's edge, vertical side "pillars" are fastened in regular intervals, which are bound together at the top end. Similar to weaving carpets, the willow rods are woven upwards until the desired height is reached. The cut edges are woven into a wreath.

Those → Burgenland-Roma who specialize in basket weaving use the un-boiled, white rods for making beautiful laundry- and shopping baskets. They use the boiled, reddish-brown rods for bigger, more functional baskets.

The *Sepečides* also distinguish between white and dark rods (*parno / kalo dali*). The first are used for smaller or medium-sized receptacles (*sevli*) for coffee, spices or bread. Bread baskets are called *sela mandrenge*, baskets with lids *sela kapaklis*. Dark rods are called *kalam (o kalami)*.

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