



Tera Fabiánová

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Tera Fabiánová (born Kurinová) belongs among our oldest Roma writers. This year she will be 70 years old. Her life and work are so interesting and rich that she deserves to be commemorated throughout the year in our publication.

Tera was born on October 15, 1930, in Žiharec (today the district [county] of Šaľa) in southern Slovakia. The community of her paternal relatives, uncles and aunts, resided there. Among them was her uncle Robert, who reared his younger brother, Tera's father, from the age of three. Both of their parents had died in the same month of the Spanish flu and left ten children, the smallest still in the cradle. The older sibling divided up the younger ones and took care of them¹.

When Tera was four years old, the family moved to Vlčany, not far from Žiharec, the community of Tera's maternal relatives. There in the Roma community her father built, out of raw, unbaked bricks, a small family house. Four-year-old Tera and the rest of the family members helped to trample on the bricks. [→ Adobe bricks]

When Tera was eight years old, the so-called Vienna Arbitrage (Sept. 2, 1938) accorded 10,400 square kilometers of southern Slovakia to Hungary. Šaľa, with its whole widespread environs, fell into this territory. For the Kurin family, this meant that the father, who was the family's breadwinner, was drafted into the Hungarian army and later sent to the eastern front to fight against the Soviet Union. Then, at the end of the war, sixteen-year-old Lajoš, the oldest of the five siblings, was sent off to do forced labour in Germany. One consequence of the war, was that Tera completed only three years of elementary school. She writes about this in her beautiful autobiographical story " *Sar me phiravas andre škola* " ("How I attended school.")

After the end of the war, the land taken by Horthy's Hungary was returned to the Czechoslovak republic.

In 1946, the Kurin family, along with many more Roma and poor *Gadže* were talked into working in Moravia.

In her sixteenth year, Tera worked with others on various farms, then in Prague doing construction, and later got a good chance to know the meaning of being a servant for Milady and Milord in their inn, which was private until 1948. In one place in her autobiographical story, Tera says, " *Man savorestar iła avri mro humoris.* " ("My humour has always saved me.")

As an eighteen year old, she met her husband Vojta Fabián from Kurima u Stropkova and in May 1949 their first son, Vojta, was born.

Tera does not like speaking about her marriage, which ended in divorce after forty years. For traditional Roma "boy" Vojta, who was also a professional non-commissioned soldier, it was not easy to come to terms with his creative Tera, an individual who absolutely refused to play the part of the subjugated, obedient Roma wife. (Here it might be appropriate to compare their relationship with that of Božena Němcová to her staid, bureaucratic husband, except for the fact that Tera never disobeyed the

¹ Tera and her youngest sister Ili tell about this time in detail in their contribution "Románo čládo"(printed in Romano džaniben [1-2/96; p. 6-10])



commandment " *te avel žuži avre muršestar* " ("to remain undefiled by another man"). [→ Position of the husband and wife in the family])

Living with a community of southern → Slovak Roma , to whom Vojta belonged, had a decided influence on Tera's spoken and written expression. Basically she acquired Vojta's dialect, but his dialect is deeply influenced by elements of her native "Hungarian Romani". [→ Ungrika Roma] On the lexical level, it is highly enriched, because horizontal varieties (that is, dialectic expressions) move to the vertical, stylistic scale and become synonyms. It is more difficult to get used to parallel uses of grammatical forms. Tera's *Romani*, for example, uses the characteristic imperfect ending *-ahi* instead of the *-as* which is used in the majority of other dialects. Phonetic and morphological differences are easier to understand in both dialects - even when, after a short time, spoken experience of speakers of both dialects speak together well.

When Tera speaks with *Slovak Roma*, her expression contains fewer "Hungarian" elements. When she speaks with her relatives, she returns to her own dialect, but her relatives tease her by saying that she has become a "Slovak" because she doesn't manage to rid herself of elements of her acquired language.

In her literary expression, Tera holds rather to the usage of "Slovak" *Romani*. At first, of course, she used Hungarian spelling, which she mastered during the three years she attended elementary school. In the area of Šal'a there always lived a Hungarian minority and in Tera's childhood the only schools were Hungarian. In the course of time, under the influence of Czech books, Czech spelling began to creep into their *Romani* literary works. Czech spelling, however, made way for *Romani* spelling which was elaborated by the language committee **Cikánů-Romů** (1969-1973).

Tera stigmatised marriage not only in her linguistic expression but also in her choice of themes. A series of her tales and verses is concerned with the harsh fate of Roma women.

Tera worked her whole life, starting at the age of five: with farmers on their fields, for Jewish families, on farms on the borderlands, in construction, as a servant in an inn. When "Milord's" inn was nationalised, Tera began working at **ČKD** in Vysočany as a cleaner, an unskilled worker. There she noticed a " *gádžo, so prindžarlas but thema - šaj ul'a Čhindo na džanav* " ("a *Gadžo* who knew many lands, who was perhaps a Jew, I don't know"). He noticed that Tera could do something more than drag heavy pieces of iron. He convinced her to take a course in crane operating. When Tera finished the course with excellent results, she began to work on a crane at **ČKD**. She performed that work for 35 years. Sometimes she earned medals.

She had to abandon crane operating because of bad health. Half deaf, she began to lose her sense of balance, the chemical vapors of acid, in which boilers produced for Iran and Iraq removed rust, affected Tera's body so badly that she had to be operated on. During the operation, she was clinically dead. She returned to life because her four children held her. That experience of how she "re-lived" is in one of her first tales " *Le Romeskeru suno* " ("Dream of a Gypsy"): A Roma **ČKD** crane operator experiences clinical death after an accident. He gets to heaven. He expects Roma and Whites to be treated as equals. How surprised he is when he sees one entrance for *Gadže* and a special entrance for Gypsies. And everything else is the same as on earth - not even in heaven do the Roma have the same rights. The tale – perhaps Tera's first prose – is written with inventive humour, which expresses the harsh experience of being a *Romni* more revealingly than any political propaganda. The tale "A Gypsy



Dream", in Czech translation, was broadcast on Czechoslovak radio in the mid 1960's. In the story, the crane operator finally returns to life because his wife and children call him.

Although Tera has been retired for quite some time, she still works. In a conversation printed in this volume, she tells how she went to work for the Hungarian embassy. Later she worked "for Arabs", then for the family of the Venezuelan consul. There she met an Indian cook and the two women understood each other perfectly, not only on the human level but also through their languages: Tera spoke *Romani*, the Indian spoke "Indian" and after a few days the affinity of the two languages was close enough for them to converse. Today Tera washes five storeys of an office every single day. Does she have to? She says she does because if she hadn't bought her state-owned flat for a large sum of money, she would be on the streets. Her youngest son Miška, who lives with her, naturally makes financial contributions. Miška is a salesman for an exclusive firm. She is also helped by her oldest son Vojta. Her daughter Marika lives in Germany and doesn't have it easy. Jarošek, her second son and formerly a singer in a "Kučerov group", died a few years ago. This was one of the tragedies of Tera's life, of which there were more than a few.

When thinking back on how Tera's first *Romani* poem came into existence, I always go back to the beauty of that moment. Some time in the 60's (I have known Tera since 1954), we were on a trip to visit a relative in Pilsen. Suddenly Tera began "to call into the universe" words which fascinated me. When she finished, I stopped the car, grabbed a pencil and paper and begged her to repeat "it" again. Who composed it? Who wrote it down? Where did she get it? "*Kada me phenav! Kada me dikhav anglo jakha.*" ("I am saying it. I see it before my eyes.") She was, of course, unable to repeat that "it" that she had seen for a while before her eyes so beautifully as at the moment of her first inspiration. And so I wrote it down as I remembered it. Then I read her "vision" to Tera – and Tera improved it and completed it. That first poem, "*Av manca, čhajori*" ("Come with me, my love") was published in the first collection of Roma poetry *Romane gil'a* (1979).

I had the good fortune of being a witness to the inception of another of her poems "*Ra'ate av'om*" ("I came in the night"). Tera was inspired when she was washing dishes in the sink and I was sitting near her on my accustomed seat in the kitchen. And that time I wrote down Tera's "*šukar lava*" ("beautiful words"). But at the same time I begged her to write down her poem herself. Actually she did, and we are printing it as a facsimile next to the edited, authorised version.

When, as a consequence of the so-called Prague spring in August 1969, the **Gypsy-Romani Union** was founded and began to publish a newsletter "*Romano lil*", Tera's column became the first contribution in *Romani*. We are publishing it here as a historical document. Further columns under the title "Reserved for Tera" were published and were a living inspiration for more than one Roma girl or young woman. I remember how I came to Nachod to record songs and met Olina Balážová, at that time about 49 years old and today the leader of the "Obláček ensemble". Although she didn't know Tera personally, she sent her a message that she would like one day to be like her. Olga, whose married name is Vnadová, then really did collaborate with her father, the late Elemír Baláž, to write his life stories. She is a traditional woman and, at the same time, emancipated. With her family she is struggling to save Roma culture.

Apart from the position of Roma women, Tera's literary work reveals two further themes: the stigma of being a Gypsy, which causes so many Roma to deny their origins, and the friendship with animals, which, like people, are part of nature and therefore in so many Roma families they become "relatives",



companions, friends. (In Tera's short story *Čavargoš* [Tramp], which was filmed for television by the director Jana Ševčíková.)