



## Alexander Vyacheslavovich Germano

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Alexander Germano's father was Czech and his mother was a Moravian *Romani* woman. [→ "Czech-Roma" ] The son later attached the *Romani* ending -o to his father's family name German which was probably the Russian form of Herman or the Czech Heřman. Thus, under the pseudonym Germano, he became whom one could call, the first Roma author the world has known of so far<sup>1</sup>.

Alexander's parents moved to Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century. Mr. German was a worker installing water mains. Soon after the birth of his son Alexander (Sasha), he died of pneumonia; he had caught a cold during the construction of a water main in Orel. The family now depended on the mother and Sasha's two older sisters to support the family.

Despite financial difficulties, the women managed to assure Sasha's education. After a three-year primary school (*prikhodskoye uchilishche*) he entered a four-year junior secondary school (*gorodskoye uchilishche*) and from there he went to the commercial high school in the city of Svyatoshchino near Kiev. In 1915, he successfully completed his commercial studies.

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, Alexander 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<sup>2</sup>, and directed a local theatre studio.

In 1921, he staged his first play, "In Some Kind of Institution" ("V nekoem uchrezhdyeniy"), in the city theatre of Orel. The play had a run of three hundred performances and appeared in two publications.

In 1926, Alexander Germano moved to Moscow, where began the longest and most important phase of his life – most important not only for him but also for Roma culture and literature, and for Roma in general. Germano writes in his autobiography:

The majority of Roma in Russia travelled at that time and the leaders of the Soviet State – who were basically the heads of the Communist party – wanted to settle the Gypsies. Finally the governments of many other countries had the same aim. Unlike Western countries, in its early days (roughly until the end of the thirties), the Soviet regime used the languages and culture of small ethnic groups as a means toward their politico-social integration. Among more than two hundred Soviet ethnic groups on the territory of the Soviet Union, there were large numbers of small ethnocultural groups which

1 One generation before Alexander Germano, there was a Roma poet of Serbian origin, Gina Rañićić. (She died in 1890; her date of birth is unknown.) Her verses, however, were undoubtedly linguistically adapted and apparently even edited and then published by the Austrian Gypsologist Heinrich von Wlislöcki. Thus, we do not have the authentic versions.

2 Famous Russian writer Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1818-1883) was a native of Orel.



had no written literature or even a system of spelling their language. Among them were the Roma. Alexander 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 the Roma language, and to develop Roma culture and literature.

He do not know all that he learned from his mother about → romipen ("Romhood"). But even if he had been brought up as a Rom, the language and culture of the Moravian Roma was different from the dialects and customs of Roma he met in Russia. Later Germano incorporated his knowledge of the differences in languages and culture of various Roma groups into his prose works. He did it very naturally and unobtrusively. 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 Roma 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. Alexander 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 by the **Centrizda** publishing house in 1930.

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<sup>3</sup> ." "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 Roma magazine "Romany zoria" ("Romani Dawn") in the autumn of 1926. Alexander Germano was the editor of the magazine.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Germano wrote in a language based primarily on the dialect of the so-called "Russian Roma". Like most Roma groups, Russian Roma are called by other appellatives - most frequently *khaladytka Roma* (literally, "military Roma") - and they are divided into a series of subgroups. In Germano's work we meet mostly *feldytka Roma* ("poljovyje ciganë" - "field Gypsies"). They are travelling horse traders, "field campers". Some clans of *feldytka Roma* made an honest living by selling horses; others by stealing them. Elsewhere the author mentions *choristers* whose traditional profession was music, song and dance. Most *choristers* also came from the group of "Russian Roma". The first professional Roma chorus - the Ivan Sokolov ensemble - was founded in 1774 by Count Orlov-Chesmenskij. Gypsies played in city enterprises visited by the nobility. In the nineteenth century it was the fashion in Russian noble circles to own a Gypsy (serf) chorus. According to the Romani ethnologist from Russia, Nadyezhda Demeterova (2000) there were three countries in the world where Gypsy music attained a high professional level and created its original style: Hungary, Spain and Russia. Nadyezhda Demeterova states that "Russian Roma" came from Germany over Poland to Russia at the end of the seventeenth century. Their previous long-term stay in Germany is witnessed by the great number of words borrowed from German. The term *feldytko* ("field") is itself taken from the German word *Feld* ("field"). Some other words borrowed from German which we come across, for example, in Germano's poem "Feldytko bida" are: *krencynes* (you adorn with a wreath: "Kranz" - wreath), *kofo* (successful business: "Kauf" - buy), *špera* (trace: "Spur" - trace), etc. M.B. Sergiyevskiy and A.P. Barannikov wrote a Dictionary of Russian *Romani* (Moscow 1938).



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 Roma 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 lityerature ot Dyerzhavina do Bloka"), "Outline of the Gypsy Language" ("Osnovy tsiganskogo yazika"), "Brief History of Soviet Gypsies" (in collaboration with Rom-Lebedyev, *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 vayre rospchenybena" ("They Called Him a Wolf and other stories", GICHL 1933), "Ganka Čamba i vayre rospchenybena" ("Ganka Tchamba and other stories", Goslitizdat 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, Goslitizdat 1935), "Rospchenybena dre gilja" ("Stories in Verse", Goslitizdat 1937), "Neve Gilja" ("New Songs", Goslitizdat 1938).

In 1939, Alexander Germano translated into *Romani* Pushkin's works "Skupy ritsar", ("The Stingy Knight") and "Mozart i Salieri" ("Mozart and Salieri").

Apart from literary works, Germano also dedicated himself to editing. He collaborated on the editing of all the works published in the Roma language by various publishing houses.

Alexander Germano was highly influential in the founding of the first professional Roma theatre in the world, the theatre "Romen". The theatre had its premiere on December 21, 1931, with the presentation of the play "Džiiben pre roty" ("Life on wheels"). The author was Alexander Germano. We learn from a review printed in the daily newspaper "Pravda" that the play was met with great enthusiasm from the audience. The play had a run of 1200 performances.

Alexander 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 Roma "artyels" ("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.

After a serious illness, Alexander Germano died on April 22, 1955. (Factual information is drawn from the postscript to the book "Povyesti i rasskazy", Moscow 1960. The author of the postscript is B. Turganov.)

There are authors whose names appear in surveys of world literature and who are known worldwide to the cultured public. (This certainly does not mean that every cultured person would be able to relate the story of even one of Shakespeare's dramas – even if he said that Shakespeare was the greatest playwright of all time.) Without our denigrating the creative merit of "world" authors which is rooted



in astonishment over their formal innovations, in their ability to grasp and express humanitarian worth, in their storytelling abilities, in their humour, etc. – it is necessary to admit the fact that they were born in a "great nation" and wrote in some of the major languages of the time contributes to their generally recognised "greatness".

Beside world-famous authors, there are writers whose names and works are limited to a "national" literary circle. Every Czech knows Božena Němcová. Many have read – or had to read in school – excerpts from "Babička" or have seen the film version, but how many of the relatively cultured English, Germans, French or Russians know that such a Czech writer as Němcová existed?

For a number of reasons, representatives of Roma literature have an even harder time to achieve recognition of their works than writers of any other "small" nation.

Roma first proclaimed that they were a "nation" in the year 2000, at the Fifth International Congress of the **IRU (Internacionalno Romani Unia** [→ Emancipatory activities on an international level]) in Prague. The declaration is in itself enormously important. Nevertheless, the path to its fulfillment is not simple even if unprecedented communication possibilities and philosophical-political and socio-cultural principles of the globalised world with its goals of multiculturalism and humanisation can contribute to the realisation of a non-traditional form of "a nation without territory". Roma live the whole world over and boundaries of the internal communities that constitute the entire society of Roma (*Sinti, Kale, Manush*, etc. [→ Roma – Sub Ethnic Groups / → Index of appellations]) overlap the borders of the states and lands of the "majority". Each community – group – speaks its own dialect, which more or less differs from the dialects of the others. If Russian Roma-*Kalderaš* Roman Demeter writes in *Kalderaš*, the *Kalderaš* of Sweden, Argentina or the Balkans will understand him better than German *Sinti* or French *Manush*. But even here there is a barrier: Roman Demeter published his collection of *Kalderaš* folklore in Cyrillic. And this is understandably foreign to Argentine *Kalderaš*. The comprehension of literary works written in one of the "national" *Romani* dialects is thus aggravated by the spelling of the generally dominant orthography of the land in which the writer lives. That means, for example, that Romani-*Lovara* in the USA would be able to understand poems by the *Lovari* poet Choli Dároczi of Hungary if they were read to them – but undoubtedly the form in which they were written, influenced by Hungarian spelling, would be difficult for them to read. The Worldwide Emancipation Movement of Roma bears the need to solve the language problem and a great number of institutions and individuals are working on it. Among others, the Roma press spontaneously contributes to the mutual understanding of various dialects, and the number of works of Roma literature is growing. Anyone who wants to read and understand gets used to linguistic and orthographic differences of "foreign works".

The official position of a society's "majority" toward Roma very strongly influences the creation of Roma literature. For example, the assimilatory policy of various lands has prevented the publication of written *Romani* words. Some potential authors have not expressed themselves at all in writing – or have written in the "foreign" language of the "majority". (One example is the outstanding poet Dezider Banga of Slovakia who published several Slovak collections, but began to write in *Romani* only after 1990.) Publishing in *Romani* was difficult not only in assimilatory states (mostly communist), but also in places where official institutions in no way actually suppressed Roma culture. Here there were other barriers: the market, money. What would the well-known publisher Flammarion have done with the novel "Les Usitory" ("The Fates") by the outstanding Roma (*Kalderaš*) writer from France, Matéo Maximoff, if he had written it in *Romani*?



And so a long list of Roma writers have written in the language of the "majority", not because they would have been unable to publish in their mother tongue, but because it has basically been easier for them to present their work to the public through the official language of the country in which they have lived.

And then there are Roma writers who no longer master their original ethnic tongue or come from traditionally assimilated groups. An example is the novel of the Hungarian Rom, Menyhert Lakatosz, which, in the German translation, for example, bears the title "Bitterer Rauch" ("Bitter Smoke").

National literature generally implies one aspect. It belongs to the "pillars" of national identity, national pride. A "pillar" naturally does not go up by itself – someone must put it up. School constructs the foundations of the pillars. Finally someone builds the pillars, decorates them and presents them before the eyes of state institutions, associations, etc. And so probably all Czechs are consciously or subconsciously proud of Karel Hynek Mácha. Young lovers from Prague and nearby put flowers at his monument on Petřín hill. But which of them, inculcated with "their pride, Mácha", ever read Mácha's poem, "May", in its entirety? For the building of identity, the poem certainly has great symbolic importance even if many do not know its factual contents at all.

The function of Roma literature as "pillars" of national identity has been insufficiently realised. It is mainly because the space for builders of the "pillars" is enormously limited. Whenever has a Rom had the opportunity to learn in school about Alexander Germano of the former Soviet Union, → Matéo Maximoff of France, Katarina Taikon of Sweden [→ Rosa Taikon ], Dezider Banga of Slovakia, Luminița Cioba of Romania, Tera Fabiánová of the Czech Republic, and so many others? The construction by the school of "cultural pillars" as a support for national Roma identity and pride still lies in the future.

How can we evaluate Alexander Germano, when we consider all the aforementioned aspects that occur to us in relation to Roma literature? (And if we operate with the term "Roma literature", we are then forced to use another term, "national literature", whether we like it or not).

Alexander Germano was one of the first and "oldest" Roma authors – if we don't count the legendary poet Giňa Raňičić (died 1890) from Serbia.

Is he really a "Roma writer" if he is a Rom only on his mother's side while his father was of Czech origin? Is he a "Roma" writer if his first language was Russian and he learned *Romani* only as an adult?

When we write about the decade of the flowering of Roma culture in the Soviet Union - from the end of the 1920's to the end of the 1930's – then Alexander Germano is put in first place as a Roma (Gypsy) writer and cultural figure. He says about himself (viz. quotation above by B. Tuganov) that he mastered *Romani* perfectly and that he did not have the slightest difficulty in writing verses and stories in *Romani*.

There have been other authors who have written in their "second" language and never in the "first" they automatically learned at home. We do not have to look far: among them was the famous "Czech" writer Božena Němcová. She wrote in her second language, Czech, rather than her first language, German, for patriotic reasons. On the other hand, other authors have chosen a "second" language



because it had wider reception in the world than their own mother tongue. Among these are a number of Indian authors writing in English, such as Mulk Radj Anand and Balvant Gargi.

How can we evaluate Germano's *Romani* literary expression from the linguistic point of view? So far we have not come across any other evaluations of his works. If we may make our own judgment, we would say that the author expresses himself easily, spontaneously and creatively in *Romani*. Our assessment does have its limitations: The author writes in the language of the so-called "Russian Roma" while our own dialect is that of the so-called → Slovak (Servika) Roma. Nevertheless, thanks to numerous contacts with Roma of various groups and thanks to the reading of accessible Roma literature, we have not found Germano's language especially difficult to understand and assess.

An insufficiency of sources prevents us from making the most thorough assessment of Germano's works. We have obtained only three of his publications. Two of them are written in *Romani*, one in Russian. One of the *Romani* publications is literary, the other political. Germano's stories are translated from *Romani* in the Russian publication. We will treat each of them later. First, we would like to discuss briefly the entire "profile" of Alexander Germano in the context of the historical period in which he worked and wrote. Soviet ethnic politics in the above-mentioned decade (from the end of the 1920's to the end of the 1930's) was first evaluated quite uncritically as an unprecedented example of a human approach to a small, previously suppressed and backward "ethnic group" (Russian: "narodnost"). Lenin's slogan "korenyzatsiya" (to go to the roots) meant supporting the development of "small" languages and culture. Languages which had never been written before became "literary"; systems of spelling were formulated; textbooks were written in them, and literature was published in them. Understandably, all of this activity was administered by the state and it was subject to the political and ideological aims of the totalitarian Soviet regime.

Political ideology even penetrated artistic works. It is difficult to say to what extent writers themselves identified with it. For many, the Soviet system undoubtedly meant "hope for a just new order". It is little wonder that leaders of those small ethnic groups whose culture and language were supported both in words and in practice were quite frankly devoted to the Soviet regime. One of the small ethnic groups was the "Gypsies". Roma (*Kalderaš*) historian and ethnologist Nadyezhda Demeterova writes in her publication "Istoriya tsygan" (2000):

Only Nadyezhda Demeterova evaluates this era very critically – perhaps even too much so – but her "novy vzglyad" ("new look"), the subtitle of the book, is probably a reaction to the "Soviet-type" lack of criticism.

Alexander Germano also wrote a book of political propaganda: "Džana neve Roma" ("New Roma are coming"). It was published in 1933 (Profizdat, Moscow) and deals with the system of Gypsy collective farms and "artyels" ("craft cooperatives"). A brief introduction to the chapter "Dre kralitska berša" ("From the time of Czarism"), "Nacyonal'no pučibe angil Oktjabrsko revoljucyja" ("Question of ethnic groups before the October Revolution") and "Syr dživinde Roma dre phurane berša" ("How Roma lived in old times") indicate that here we come across stereotypical phrases of that time. For example: "(...) *Kralitko Rossija sas bare staribnasa vaš tykne nacional'nostenge* (...)" ("Czarist Russia was a prison for small ethnic groups."). Or "*Vaš amenge – čind'a o Lenino – uchtylla akana adaja kul'turno revoljucyja vaš odova, soby te javas pherdes socyjalističeskone stronasa.*" ("For us – wrote Lenin – a new cultural revolution has now started so that we may become a completely socialistic land.") The informational value of Germano's pamphlets lies in our learning about the socio-economic politics of the Soviet state concerning the Roma. This consists of founding Gypsy collective farms and craft



cooperatives, which understandably presumed the settling of Roma on state-allocated land. Germano makes an exact listing of resolutions in historical order, on the basis of which the collective farms were established. On October 1, 1926, the first law about cooperation with Gypsies who wanted to settle was passed. On February 20, 1928, a second document about "allocation of land to Gypsies who wish to change over to a settled and industrious way of life" ("*Te des romenge phuv, save piridžjana ko butitko ekheštetytko džiben.*") was passed. Apart from land, the Roma received money to begin farming. Naturally, the land the Roma were given was often in completely unknown areas. In a long story called, in the Russian translation, "V putyi" ("On the road", 1933, in the book "Povyesti i rasskazy", 1960) Germano describes a train journey of several days beyond the Urals, where a Roma community from near Moscow was assigned collective farm land. According to Nadyezhda Demeterova, in 1938 there were 52 working Gypsy collective farms. The author says that Gypsy collectives made up 2-5% of the entire Roma population and that that form of farming could not have had an influence on the overall life of the Gypsies.

It is understandable that Germano views collective farms, at the time that experiments with them had begun, differently from N. Demeterova with her distance of seventy-years. The Roma ethnologist, for example, states that the "system of collective farms is in complete contradiction to the Gypsy mentality. The absolute majority of travelers could not connect to farm work; they lacked the necessary work habits. It would be naive to imagine that Gypsies accepted the idea of collective and badly paid work with enthusiasm." On the contrary, Germano highlights the enthusiasm of the Gypsies on the collectives and in craft cooperatives in various parts of his pamphlet.

Demeterova may not be completely right. The fact is that Roma avoid → *but'i* ("hard physical labour") if they are from castes whose professional *dharma* (traditional and "caste" ideology of sanctified professions) is not *but'i* but rather music or trade. They distance themselves from physical labour not because they are "lazy" but because *but'i* belongs to the *dharma* of other castes (cauldron makers, blacksmiths, basket makers, trough makers, masons, day laborers – Romani: *but'akere*.) And since they do not identify with these groups, they do not identify with discharging their professions. On the other hand, *but'akere* Roma – Roma craftsmen – placed great value on physical labour. (This is proved, for example, by posters of the "model worker" or "member of the brigade of the socialist work brigade", which still decorate the walls of many Roma households in the Czech Republic. Many of these Roma would be happy to work if only they could get a job.)

If Germano writes about various zealous Roma workers – mainly women – we needn't doubt him, even if we have had bad experience with the veracity of communistic rhetoric. Germano's propagandist political pamphlet of 1933, "Džana nevve roma" pays tribute to communist ideology and is full of clichés, but it would be worth analysing it at least linguistically. The author must have struggled with the creation of new words which didn't exist in *Romani* until then, and some (not all!) of his neologisms are so successful that they could still be used today. Loyalty can be felt even in the literary works of Alexander Germano – although to a basically lesser degree than in the political pamphlet "Džana nevve roma". (Incidentally, very few of the great non-Roma artists of the time were unloyal!) Germano is enough of an artist; he is honest enough and he knows enough about life that his story and dramatic expression take precedence over his loyalty. Germano's communist convictions are expressed, for example, in his look at "Gypsy kulaks" - rich Roma either from a group of horse traders or cauldron makers.

N. Demeterova – herself from a rich *Kalderaš* family – considers "wealth of Roma" something natural, traditional. She writes:



Travelling Roma – some individuals and some groups – were rich. Since they moved from place to place, they could not invest in real estate. Their property had to be easy to carry and, at the same time, have value. They invested their wealth in gold and silver jewellery and coins. N. Demeterova writes that the Soviet State advanced against "Gypsy kulaks" not so it could prevent them from exploiting other Roma, but so that it could seize their not negligible wealth. Proofs of how a number of "robbed" Roma disappeared without a trace began to be discovered many, many years after the Second World War.

If, at the beginning of the thirties, Alexander Germano looks at "Gypsy kulaks" differently from Nadyezhda Demeterova seventy years later, it is not only for ideological reasons or because of differing measures of awareness of their times. I imagine that Alexander Germano's inclusion (or rather, non-inclusion) in Roma society played a large role. His mother was a *Romni*; his father Czech and a worker, and they moved to Russia. Although Germano was half Rom, he was in no way bound to any Roma community. After the premature death of his father, his family was financially very badly off. Despite that, the son, Sasha, finished high school. From this, the values of the milieu from which he came are apparent. Thus, Germano could not personally empathise with Roma who valued wealth and got rich. And so it was easy for him to be ideologically contemptuous of "Gypsy kulaks".

He personifies in the figure of Maštak his (kindred) non-inclusion in communities of Roma. Maštak appears in several stories. In the outstanding work "Miriklja" ("Beads" 1928)<sup>5</sup>, he is a Rom discharged from the Red Army. He wanders around the country and happens upon a travelling camp of horse thieves.

The camp is ruled like a dictatorship by the boorish Gazun. Gazun receives Maštak - as traditional Roma hospitality dictates – but he is suspicious of him because Maštak is from another Roma community and also because he has been recruited into the *Gadžo* army. Nevertheless the uniform makes Maštak at least a somewhat equal partner to Gazun. Maštak is a Rom, but because he is modern and "different", he will forget traditional etiquette from time to time and so, for example, without any ulterior motive, he jokes with Gazun's daughter Tusa, who is promised to someone else. Thus the relationships among the actors in the story becomes complicated and the reader is in suspense as he reads what is going to happen next. The tension rises when Maštak promises Tusa that he will buy her a string of beads. The word "beads" has a mysterious impact on Gazun. From the time Maštak utters it, Gazun keeps asking what he knows about some beads – and he contemplates making his suspicious guest leave the camp. He even considers killing him. Meanwhile, a battle is approaching. Battles between the Whites and the Reds have still not stopped and somewhere there is always a bloody conflict. Maštak, who has been to war and has had experience with it, urges Gazun to move the camp as soon as possible. Gazun is very aware of the danger, but he postpones his departure. He is even more suspicious of and hostile toward Maštak: Does Maštak perhaps have an ulterior motive by trying to persuade him to move the camp? Heavy gunfire is approaching. Maštak runs and hides. At the last moment he manages to leave the camp, which is hit by a bomb immediately afterwards. When he returns after the battle, he finds everyone dead, torn apart by the explosion. The explosion has dug a giant crater in the earth, and there Maštak catches sight of an overturned vessel with scattered gold jewelry and coins and "miriklja" This is the buried treasure for which Gazun did not leave the camp and so he brought destruction upon himself and all his people.

<sup>5</sup> In the "Russian Roma" dialect, "miriklja" are feminine, as contrasted with Slovak *Romani*. The nominative plural would sound like "mirikle" in Slovak *Romani*. In the introduction to the story, Roma from various linguistic groups meet in an inn and discuss the differences in their dialects. Linguistic discussions among Roma are very frequent and popular and Germano experienced them in his own life. One of the participants in the discussion, Maštak, relates the story of "Miriklja".



Although this story was originally written in *Romani*, we, unfortunately, obtained only the Russian translation. And so we can assess only its contents and the style carried over to another language. The plot is gripping. The writing is very vivid and effective with dialogue and brief but fitting descriptions. The author's insertion of some traditional customs adds atmosphere to the story.

He describes, for example, the old woman of a clan exorcising misfortune: She takes ashes out of the fire into her fist and, blowing them, pronounces: "Misfortune, go to someone else's head." (It is a pity that the translator did not quote the Roma exorcism in *Romani*, as he did for some of the songs he quoted. Ethnographic descriptions of songs don't "stick out", but become an organic component of the story.) Immeasurably interesting in this collection is the story "Surkica" (written in 1946). The author (this time speaking in the first person) brings Roma literature to the Roma family of an old man, Jon Murzej. Murzej is grieving for his son. Before the war, he was a member of a collective farm; then he was inducted into the Red Army. The war ended, but the son had not yet returned. Old Murzej's head is too full of worries for him to be interested in Roma literature. But a thin, old, black woman comes and begins to read *Romani* fluently. Her not-quite-*Romani* accent dismays the narrator. It turns out that old Surkica is a *romani judica* (a "Roma-Jewess"). During a pogrom against the Jews in 1905, her whole family was murdered and only she escaped. She was taken in by Gypsies; Murzej married her. She joined a Roma community; *Romani* became her second mother tongue... The story is based on a real event<sup>6</sup>. It is related soberly, factually, nearly journalistically – and human destiny unadorned with superfluous commentaries appears here in the full strength of its uniqueness.

The title of another of Germano's books, "Rospchenybena dre gilja" ("Stories in song/in verse"), testifies to its character. It is written in *Romani*. The author tells stories in the form of rhythmic prose divided into non-rhyming verses. It is inspired by Russian folk epic poetry. As in the best stories in the collection "Pověsti i rasskazy", here, too, Germano demonstrates his gift for telling an exciting story and unobtrusively introducing an effective visual and acoustic atmosphere which give credibility to the plot and increases its dramatic effect.

We will briefly summarise the plot of the story "Feldytko bida" ("The Pain of Travelling") and then we will conclude with excerpts from his poems in an English translation and a facsimile of the *Romani* original.

Travelling horse trader Galun (interesting analogy with the name Gazun in the story "Miriklja". The bearers of these similar names even have similar characters.) returns with his young wife and two young sons from an annual town fair to his distant camp. Business had been good but he drank up most of the money he earned and did not recover from his drunkenness on the return trip in his old wagon. At night they meet some strangers, Roma fleeing on horses. They are horse thieves who are being pursued by furious villagers. The thieves manage to escape, but Galun's family find themselves in mortal danger: if the villagers find them, they will pour out their fury on them – for *Gadže*, all Gypsies are alike. Galun hurries into the muddy woods with his horse and wagon. They are hidden, but the young son at his mother's breast cries and can't be comforted. He could betray the family. Galun, mad with fear, gags the child – and thereby strangles him.

If we conclude with a brief assessment of the importance of Alexander Germano, we can say that he is one of the first Roma writers ever. At the same time he was a leading cultural, pedagogical and

<sup>6</sup> Relations for mutual protection between Roma and Jews are not unique. For example, the great-grandmother of the Roma author Matéo Maximoff of France was a Jew from Temesvár who was saved during a pogrom by Roma-*Kalderaš*. She became the wife of Matéo's great-grandfather.



educational figure at a time when the Soviet Union promoted the linguistic and cultural development of small ethnic groups. Germano's literary and linguistic talent prevailed over his Soviet loyalty, to which the present times are allergic. The artistic value of some of Germano's stories and poems extends beyond his time and the borders of "Roma national literature" and would most definitely deserve world recognition.

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