

Gypsy Musicians

by Ernő Kállai

Widely considered as an aristocracy within the gypsy population, gypsy musicians have played an important part in Hungarian cultural life. Gábor Mátray, the renowned musical historian of the 19th century writes about them in the following terms of appreciation (although, it must be admitted, he could not always detach himself from contemporary public opinion on the gypsies):

“The distinguished musician achieves respect and earns himself a reputation which will live for centuries, but similarly, the outstanding folk musician of loudly applauded popular performances who, rising from what may be the humblest of origins, also refines his artistic talent to superb perfection in his kind of artistic skill and deserves not only the appreciation of his contemporaries (especially in his own country to which he has devoted his long years of noble service) but may equally expect to be kept in remembrance long after the last breath has left his lips.” (Mátray, 1984a: 288)

The world of gypsy musicians has recently undergone profound changes in terms of lifestyle and musical genre: while playing Hungarian popular songs (‘magyar nóta’) in restaurants as a way of making a living is almost extinct, an increasing number of musicians of gypsy origins are active in classical music and jazz, and bands which play authentic gypsy music have been gaining in popularity.

In the first part of my study I offer a brief and sketchy survey of the past of gypsy musicians, of their role until the mid-1900s.

In the second part I rely on an analysis of nine interviews conducted for the purposes of the migration research project with a view to giving a picture of the present situation of musicians (their social stratification, their interest in employment abroad and the role of factors which are linked with the latter such as access to information, media consumption, circumstances and organisation of travelling etc).

The account here given will finally be complemented by the abridged and edited version of an interview made with one of the musicians, which is reproduced in the *Appendix*.

“ALL THIS IS JUST EXSTASY OR A DREAM, AT MOST”¹

Attentive research has shown that the idea that gypsies are born for music and that they brought this activity from India as their ancient trade is just another myth.² The gypsies settled in Hungary in the 14–15th century and the first sources to mention a few gypsy musicians date back to the 16th and the 17th. Contemporary records in Western Europe show no trace of music being the primary or dominant source of living among the gypsies; on the contrary, they clearly indicate that gypsies were making their living as smiths and practitioners of other handicrafts. It seems all the more surprising, therefore, that records relating to the late 18th century should all of a sudden start speaking of gypsy musicians winning their bread by playing in bands as professional entertainers. Usually considered the first lead violinist in a gypsy band, Panna Czinka (1711–1772) is recorded to have often helped her husband in the smithery beside her musical activity, and he, in turn, sometimes appeared in her band, and later, with the demand for musical entertainment growing, he could even pursue music as his only profession.

“The regular resident gypsy is not only a son of Vulcanus [i.e. a smith] but also of Apollo, and is the musician of the locality, and many of them are virtuosi beyond all doubt. (Quoted from the personal records of Gedeon Ács by Mezey, 1986: 64)

But the real turning point in the life of gypsy musicians – one that gave them better opportunities not only to make a living but also to rise on the social ladder – came with the advent of the musical genre called ‘verbunkos’, or recruiting song, which appeared as part of the process of national awakening and became the dominant musical genre for a long time. Originally, *verbunkos* – meaning persuasion or recruitment – was a dance to be performed by men, which was danced in the Habsburg Empire in public places to persuade young men to join the army by representing a soldier’s life as adventurous and enjoyable. It was a common scene in the Habsburg empire in the period from the organisation of the standing mass army to the introduction of universal conscription. As dancing without music is of little appeal, there emerged a growing need for people who could play the music well enough to enliven the occasion, and rich people began to demand this new kind of musical performance as an accompaniment to their occasions of entertainment. Records from this period testify that some of the gypsies were having a hard time trying to combine the provision of their newly demanded services with the continuation of their old trades.

„What is even more pressing, I had to serve the recruiting soldiers by playing the violin. And that means, as if to make my poor condition worse still, that I cannot do my own job. It took until Advent till I could stop, and now I am wanted to present for that service again... In addition, the noblemen want me to serve them when the time comes.” (Közi Vádász, a gypsy from the town of Miskolc in 1781, quoted by Tóth, 1994:52)

¹ The motto taken from the diary of the young Count Széchenyi is quoted – after Szabolcsi – by Sárosi (1998: 370).

² There are several studies which address the issue, e.g. Havas, 2000.

All these developments were partly a result of the strong demand for a specifically Hungarian style in music which was a defining feature of the process developing national consciousness and culture. In the world west of our country the period of musical history called Viennese Classicism was at its most thriving, with giants such as Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven at the peak of their creativity. Somewhat rudimentary at the time, Hungarian musical culture was waiting for a revolutionary transformation, and gypsy musicians were to become the main carriers of this movement.

Another explanation for the change that occurred in the status of gypsies was, according to the oft-cited statement of Bálint Sárosi:

“...the rise of gypsies to dominance in music for entertainment was greatly facilitated by society’s condescending and depreciating attitude to the entertainers themselves. What was self-humiliation and a come-down in the eyes of those attached with close ties to society was the best way of getting into society and a suitable form of self-assertion to someone in their circumstances of life. By the end of the 18th century, with the first successful performances of their bands, the gypsies had attained to the stage at which playing music (as opposed to working the iron in a smith’s workshop) now counted as the most prestigious and attractive trade for them.” (Sárosi, 1971:55³)

The social recognition that resulted from this development was to cost gypsy musicians a great deal of adaptation and self-discipline since the peculiar idea of ‘having a good time’ entertained by the Hungarian gentry often exposed gypsy musicians to a variety of humiliating situations and experiences, which they had to tolerate if they were to continue earning their living. For a long time (19th century) restaurant musicians collected their pay by going around the place holding out a plate before them, but paper money drawn through the hair of the violin bow, thrown into the instrument or fastened to the musician’s forehead with saliva, were also practices with a long tradition, and some of these have been eternalised in semi-proverbial stock phrases. There were also other common ‘jokes’, one of which is described by Sárosi:

“Not infrequently, men in a fit of whim would have the gypsy musicians accompany them to the latrines ... had them stand around the wooden construction, provide musical accompaniment to the goings-on inside and play a flourish of all instruments at the appropriate moment.” (Sárosi, 1996: 40)

Gypsy musicians became an increasingly indispensable part of everyday entertainment. The recognition of their musical skills even began to transcend country frontiers:

„I have heard the Miskolc gypsies playing a few times, and I must admit their music deserves to be highly esteemed. Although not all of them play from scores, they play so well that one completely forgets that he is listening to untutored musicians. Their special strengths show especially in Hungarian dances, but they are also a master of the lament. The gypsies of Miskolc play at every ball and at every festive occasion held in

³ Sárosi’s work can be recommended as the most comprehensive study on gypsy music and gypsies to date.

town, and play rather well; indeed, people throng to hear them. Hence comes the pride we have observed in them, which becomes apparent also in their the way they dress, eat and drink, their manner of speaking, walking and their entire demeanour toward others... Many of them are so educated that we are at a loss: are they real gypsies? Even their black colour has undergone perceptible change.” (Jakob Glatz’s writing from 1799 quoted by Tóth, 1994:52)

The musicians gradually became the „aristocracy of the gypsies”, increasingly moving away from those in other trades and passing their new trade on to their descendants. It is not that they have an innate musical talent; it is that their descendants grow up in an atmosphere of respect for the trade and of hope of a certain living, receiving systematic musical education from an early age. Gábor Mátray, an important musical historian of the period writes:

“Of all our nationalities, the gypsies show the greatest interest in music [...] A gypsy child of only 7 years will start plucking on some instrument, and rises to incredible artistic skill through frequent practice. Except for the clavier, they learn to play practically all the major musical instruments.” (Mátray, 1984b: 183)

At the end of the 18th century the number of gypsy musicians appearing in censuses hardly reached 1600, but a hundred years later as many as 17.000 gypsy musicians were recorded in Hungary. Scattered across a social scale from village musicians to the members of well-known bands, these gypsy individuals were the most recognised and most successful members of the entire history of this ethnic group in Hungary, eternalised in the memory of the nation and its written history. Recognising the opportunity offered by Hungarian society and finding the way for them to advance in that society, part of the gypsy population thus became a formative element in Hungarian musical culture. Having won social recognition by the early 19th century, gypsy musicians became carriers of national music and members of the national movement toward a transformation of society toward a bourgeois pattern. The first in a series of great lead violinists and undoubtedly the greatest and most famous one in the Reform Era, János Bihari (1769–1828) was the musician whose work elevated *verbunkos* into to the status of a defining part of the Hungarian musical heritage and gave its name to a period in Hungarian musical history. He was the first gypsy musician whose activity became the centre of a true cult, and also the first of his kind to get rich (although he died poor). According to contemporary records, he was standardly invited to play at balls organised around major political events and his performance was admired at social events as much as in the imperial court, but he was greatly esteemed by figures as outstanding as Franz Liszt, Sándor Kisfaludy and Dániel Berzsenyi, as well. A contemporary, Lajos Evva wrote in 1875:

“...princes and noblemen were as unable to resist the magic of his violin as the poor craftsman’s assistant who would throw in his very last wages into the famous gypsy’s hat.” (Quoted by Sárosi, 1971: 75)

The massive spread of gypsy bands and the appearance of the most famous lead violinists can be dated to the mid-19th century. They accompanied the troops of the Hungarian army in the 1848/49 war of independence and they helped keep the spirit of national resistance alive until as late as the political compromise which was finally struck between Hungary and Austria in 1867. I will mention only a few of them. Ferenc Sárközy (1820–1890) lieutenant to Lajos Kossuth and the chief conductor of gypsy musicians taking part in the war; Károly Boka (1808–1860) lead violinist from the town of Debrecen, who was held in such respect that his funeral was attended by over ten thousand people, or Ferenc Patikárus (1827–1870) who measured musical skills with Pál Rácz Sr. at a competition which was judged by a jury consisting of notables such as Ferenc Erkel, Mihály Mosonyi, Kornél Ábrány, Gábor Mátray and similar great personalities of the era. Although Pál Rácz was awarded only second place, his impact on the audience must have been tremendous if one comes to think of the fact that novelist Mór Jókai modelled the protagonist of his novel *Fekete vér* (Black Blood) after him, and that the popular Hungarian song beginning *The aspen has shed its leaves...* is still widely known today, the song which was played by 120 gypsies at his funeral.

Receiving special attention and support after the defeat of the war of independence, gypsy musicians undertook tours around the country, thus keeping up the spirit of national resistance. By this time, there were entire dynasties of musicians among the gypsy population, and the memory of smithery and other crafts was receding into a distant past. This was also the time of the beginning of the myth according to which such virtuosi cannot but have been musicians from the beginning of time. The gypsy aristocracy was already distinguishing itself from the rest of the gypsy population: it had become inconceivable for an ordinary ‘peasant gypsy’ to marry into a distinguished family of musicians. The successive generations of musicians were attaining to ever higher levels of dexterity in practising their art, by now the exclusive one. Yet, in spite of all these changes, more and more of them were complaining of a „decline in gypsy music”. This is explained by the fact that gypsy musicians, at the new level of previously unthinkable technique, were beginning to incorporate „extraneous elements” into their skill, playing classical music, opera excerpts and medleys, all of which meant a dramatic re-interpretation of the Hungarian *verbunkos* tradition. This is true despite the fact that the genre and the musicians had become such a defining characteristic of musical culture by the late 19th century that many began to think of the Hungarian *verbunkos* and gypsy music as the „original” and „ancestral” Hungarian folk music. Franz Liszt’s notorious book *On the Gypsies and Gypsy Music in Hungary*, which proved that *verbunkos* was composed as opposed to unwritten folk music and highlighted its characteristics, set off a debate that occupied the attention of Hungarian society for several years.⁴

The mid-century saw the appearance of a new musical genre, the Hungarian song, also called popular composed song, which drew partly from the *verbunkos* tradition. The social demand which led to its formation was similar to that which once gave rise to *verbunkos* itself. Members of the upper reaches of society who considered themselves as carriers of a progressive mentality, felt a need for a new, specifically Hungarian musical genre (it must be remarked that Zoltán Kodály’s characterisation of the Hungarian song was different:

⁴ For more details of the debate see Sárosi, 1998: 352.

“the music of the transitional type of man who has risen above the world of the folk song but has not risen to high culture”, quoted by Sárosi, 1971: 137). They needed something that would suit various attitudes, something that would complement and underscore their mood, whether of merriment or sorrow, something they could sing, become a part of, music which they would be able to experience as their very own. It is by no means accidental that Béni Egressy, the composer of the music to *Szózat* (a kind of second national anthem) is considered as the father of the written Hungarian song, the composer who clearly recognised the need for the new genre. These new kinds of songs were typically written by provincial gentry and clerks who could be successful at this musically simple form despite their imperfect musical education. That is how Kálmán Simonffy, chief notary in the town of Cegléd, later a member of Parliament – immodestly referred to as ‘the Hungarian Schubert’ –, became the first truly successful writer of songs of this kind. He was followed by Elemér Szentirmay, József Dóczy, Loránd Fráter and Árpád Balázs, to mention just the most well-known names. There were also a number of ‘one-song composers’, since ‘a Hungarian gentleman’ would feel almost obliged to enrich Hungarian musical culture by putting forth whatever talent lay in him.

According to some estimates, thirty thousand songs of this kind had been composed by the mid-20th century, and gypsy musicians played an indispensable role in introducing them to the public as the impact of these songs had little appeal to the audience without music. It was through the skill and manner of performance characteristic of gypsy musicians that the composed Hungarian song came to conserve, transform and carry on the tradition of *verbunkos*. In the period between the two world wars the genre – and its performers, gypsy musicians – were so popular that musicians became a genuinely indispensable part of everyday life. They were so highly esteemed that some songwriters – who were gentry, clerks, doctors and solicitors rather than gypsies, of course – would take their violin, stand in with gypsy bands and popularise their own compositions with the help of their modest skills as violinists.

Special mention must be made of Pista Dankó (1858–1903) a songwriter of gypsy origins from the town of Szeged, who rose above his contemporaries as the first gypsy musician who achieved historic fame for himself as a songwriter rather than with his skills as a musician. Some of the over four hundred songs he wrote are still popular today, including *My violin has broken...*, *The sun is setting...*, *One pussy, two pussies...* A clear indication of the cult surrounding gypsy musicians is the fact that Dankó’s funeral was accompanied by mourning and pomp all around the country and that a statue was erected in his commemoration in the town of Szeged in 1912.

It is also worth recalling a few details about the appearances of gypsy musicians in other countries. Gypsy musicians are recorded to have turned up in the imperial court in Vienna as early as the 1780s and in 1840 their performance in Paris was reported by *Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris* in the following words:

“The two Hungarian musicians and one dancer who call themselves gypsies and arrived in our capital a few days ago gave a magnificent performance on the stage of Vaudeville last Thursday. The musicians got a great applause. One will think of them even more highly if one learns that these strange artists are completely ignorant of the simplest elements of the art of music, and the perfection with which they played their lovely-sounding tunes is a result of their amazing instinct.” (Quoted by Csemer, 1994: 16)

From the late 19th century on, famous lead violinists and their bands travelled to almost all countries in the world which were then important, and these musical trips were regularly reported by Hungarian newspapers. Their skills were admired by notable personalities of the age such as the members of the British royal family or the famous composer Claude Debussy. A few gypsy musicians settled down abroad, but most of them looked upon these foreign tours abroad as a way of making more money from which to boost their career at home. In this way they got acquainted with more and more of the musical styles current in other countries at the time, which was instrumental in preparing the ground for the next generation's movement into the area of jazz and classical music, delivering another proof of their traditional readiness to improve, meet new challenges and respond to the changing demands of society. At that time audiences found it strange to hear outlandish tunes in Hungarian concert halls, including Zoltán Kodály himself, who expressed his surprise in the following words in 1925: "I heard an Englishman the other day expressing his surprise at the fact that all he hears from gypsy bands in Budapest is jazz and the song »Why did I kiss that girl?«" (Quoted by Sárosi, 1996: 53).

Gypsy musicians were more or less able to keep up their social status and living standards until the late 20th century. Bálint Sárosi estimates that there were still 7-8000 gypsies playing music professionally in 1968.

GYPSY MUSICIANS TODAY⁵

There are three groups in the present-day society of gypsy musicians, whether professional or amateur. The following sketch of the present-day situation of gypsy musicians will be based on interviews which were conducted with members of the three groups and will be presented partly in terms of migration research. Short biographies of the nine interviewees will be inserted in the presentation.

The musicians who have been interviewed know few people outside their circles. There is even less communication between the groups which play classical music, gypsy music and authentic folk music than between any of them and persons of other ethnic origins, which is probably a result of the completely different lifestyles and interests.

Stratification: groups which play classical music, gypsy music, and authentic folk music

Young people who play classical music. The first great group of musicians consists of young people whose ancestors were performers of the classic gypsy music which grew out of *verbunkos* for several generations but these young people themselves have predominantly received education in classical music. This shift of orientation is a result partly of their own personal inclinations and partly of the influence of their parents. These parents had witnessed the decline of „café music” since the 1980s and almost prohibited their

⁵ This part of the present study is based on the author's "Gypsy Musicians and their Opportunities Abroad" which was published in *Mozgó Világ* 2000/10 (Kállai, 2000).

children from any association with gypsy music if their inclination was lead them toward music. This lead to the emergence of a musically highly educated and skilled stratum of young gypsies whose social status is completely different from that of their parents. However, classical musical education in Hungary has been overproductive for several decades now and opportunities to find jobs as members of symphonic orchestras or in teaching are constantly on the decrease. As a result, those who cannot find such employment tend to make arrangements and efforts for a career abroad. These young musicians learn German and English and most of them are of the opinion that a musician of some quality can only hope to achieve true professional recognition and material reward only in Western Europe, mainly Germany or Austria, or in the United States.

Biographical Sketch of the Interviewees in the First Group

- 24-year-old man resident in Budapest, married, with one child. Fourth-year student at the Musical College, studying to be a violinist. He comes from a musicians' family with a great past, both his parents and grandparents made their living by playing gypsy music. His father, a clarinetist, did not allow him to turn toward traditional gypsy music, for which he had an inclination as a child, and also prohibited his brother from doing the same, and sent him to piano lessons, instead. He has been learning to play classical music since he was a child, it is his only field of interest. He sometimes goes to international competitions and plays in several well-known symphonic orchestras, as a result of which he often travels abroad. He knows very many gypsy musicians, especially from the same area of classical music. He is learning English hard.
- 23-year-old woman, a resident in Budapest, unmarried, lives with her parents. She is in her third year at the Musical College studying to be a violinist. She comes from a musicians' family of several generations, his father is a lead violinist in a gypsy band. Although her ethnic origins are not apparent from her looks, she does not conceal her identity, but she does not boast about it, either. She usually tells others about her ethnic origins by telling them what his father does. She is learning German and English. She often travels abroad as a member of symphonic orchestras.

Incidentally, this view is not unique to gypsies: symphonic orchestras all around the world, large and small, are full of Hungarian musicians.⁶ This is partly due to the fact, as is revealed by stories heard from more and more graduates from the Music Academy, that certain orchestras are reluctant to employ musicians of gypsy descent, which they openly admit to the applicants concerned. They justify their reluctance with reference to the unreliability of gypsies, and if they still take on someone of gypsy origins, they expect complete professional and personal assimilation from him or her.

In the West, musicians are kept in esteem regardless of their ethnic backgrounds. They are given permission to settle down and they can live comfortably with their families even in very small towns. They keep in contact with many foreign musicians, including some Hungarian gypsies who have been working abroad for some time. Touring with the orchestras

⁶ Conversations with Italian musicians reveal that there are also many of them working in different countries, for similar reasons.

gives them opportunities to meet, sometimes several times a year. The conversations they have on these occasions, they say, are their best and most reliable source of information about opportunities and circumstances abroad, and this is why they can afford to ignore information given by the mass media, which they think is false.

Elderly musicians playing gypsy music. The second large group is made up of musicians who are well advanced in years, the generation of musicians who were the beneficiaries of the last great flowering of gypsy music in the 1960s and 70s. They used to play 'classic' gypsy music in a traditional folk band, and dance music. They were the 'catering trade musicians' who made a lot of money and were able to save a lot of money. Their salaries were purposefully kept low, but they did not mind because they could make much more from the tips they received from the customers in one night.

Biographic sketch of the interviewees in the second group

- See Appendix (p. 88)
- 58-year-old man living in Pest county. His family has always had something to do with music but they did not do it as a profession. He was the first professional in the family. He used to play as a drummer in dance-bands. He has only daughters so no one in the family followed him in the profession. After the social transformation of 1989 he could no longer find employment as a musician. He worked as an unskilled labourer for a few years, which wrecked him both mentally and physically. Now he lives on disability pension.
- 57-year-old man living in a town in Pest county. He comes from an old musicians' family, plays the contrabass. Starting as a classical musician he travelled to several countries as a member of orchestras in the 1960s. (He has been to almost every country in Europe and several times to the Soviet Union.) Later he chose classic gypsy music, mainly under the influence of his wife who lived in the country, so he decided to leave Budapest and his job there. His financial situation began to get worse as early as the 1980s since there was no longer a need for large gypsy bands, especially in the country. He was able to continue as a bass guitarist in dance-bands for a few years or at Lake Balaton on a few-month contracts in the summers. After 1989, however, he could never again find employment in his profession. After a few years as an unskilled workman in a factory he was pensioned off owing to his bad nervous state. At the moment, both he and his wife are supported by his children, none of whom is working in the music line. He is no longer interested in music.
- 60-year old man living in Szolnok county, member of a gypsy musicians' family known all over the country, himself a lead violinist. He started his career in his father's band, then played as an accompanist in various folk bands, travelling abroad a lot. He has been to Austria, Finland, Germany and Italy. After 1989 he could never find employment in his original profession. His financial situation got so bad that his house had to be sold at an auction a year ago to pay his debts. His son, also a trained gypsy lead violinist, works in a flower shop in Budapest as an unskilled assistant.

They had no difficulty finding employment: the National Centre for Entertainment Music sent those who happened to be under no contract to vacancies at restaurants, which could not turn them down. In fact, they had a vested interest in taking them on, since the musicians were working almost free, the music increased the turnover and there was a compulsory size for the band they employed if they wanted to stay in a certain category in the system of catering trade regulations.

The existing system of labour exchange often made it possible for musical bands to work abroad on a contract. They did not want to stay abroad for good partly because this was sure to lead to severe legal consequences (it was illegal and punished with sanctions under Communism even to overstay on one's visa), partly because in Hungary they could live like kings on the "hard currency" they had earned abroad. So everybody was trying to get a job abroad but only for a few months, perhaps, at most, for a year. Their hopes rarely extended beyond Germany or Austria, but some of the really good (and lucky) ones got to Canada, the United States or even to Australia. In these distant places they usually played in Hungarian restaurants to members of the Hungarian communities there.

Difficulties in finding jobs started in the mid-1980s with the spread of cheap mechanical music, which had begun to undermine their opportunities. The process of privatisation that followed in the wake of the social transformation in 1989, made these musicians jobless virtually overnight. The National Centre of Entertainment Music was no longer able to protect their interests. Their tragedy lies in the fact that they are not good at anything else than playing music. Some of them, reluctantly, started out in business and others tried their hand at other jobs, but most of the businesses went bankrupt and many of the persons involved collapsed mentally as a result of the loss of social prestige and financial security. By now they have used up their reserves and they are facing a bland future.

Some of them still try to catch the last straw of a job abroad. They usually target areas with a Hungarian community of people from the older generation of emigrants, the kind of Hungarians who still like to hear one of those sweet melancholy Hungarian songs of which I spoke in the historical sketch. But opportunities are dwindling. The older ones among the musicians have little contact with musicians abroad. When they were travelling, they met only each other or the Hungarians who lived there. They did not learn to speak foreign languages and did not make friends abroad.

Musicians playing authentic folk music. The third major group of musicians consists mostly of Vlach gypsies. These people are self-taught and play authentic gypsy folk music. They have appeared gradually over the past 10-15 years and the demand for their music is growing. This gives them satisfaction especially because those trained musicians who once played traditional classic gypsy music never used to consider them as musicians, not even talked to them.

Previously, they made their living from businesses or commercial activities but the growing interest in their music turned them toward this activity. They are very successful abroad, especially in English-speaking countries where they are paid well on account of their 'exotic' qualities.

They are not marked by a strong inclination to migrate but they make contact with gypsies abroad through their vernacular and they are ready to move to another country if the prospect of a better life emerges. This tendency has been reinforced recently by what

they perceive as a strong anti-gypsy atmosphere in Hungary. Many of them have told me that wherever they go in the world (England, Germany, occasionally Canada), they are certain to come across Vlachi gypsies. They can talk to them, they seek each other's company and are able to help each other. They say these relationships are their main source of information about the situation and opportunities abroad.

Biographical sketches of interviewees in the third group

- 36-year-old woman of Vlachi gypsy origins. She is a housewife, looking after two children. She has been an occasional performer in bands playing authentic gypsy folk music for ten years now. With the interest for this kind of music constantly growing, it is a lucrative occupation. She has been abroad several times.
- 26-year-old gypsy woman living in Budapest, member of a well-known band which plays authentic gypsy folk music. She claims not to be a Vlach gypsy, but she speaks the gypsy language (Romany) as a native does. She spends most of the year abroad.
- 45-year-old Vlachi gypsy man. He runs several businesses but appears regularly in bands which play authentic gypsy folk music. He says it is an easy way of making money, but does not find this sort of activity satisfying enough in itself. He has been abroad, mainly in German-speaking countries, only as a tourist several times over the past few years.

Gypsy Musicians and Migration

We conducted the interviews with members of the three groups of gypsy musicians with a purpose in mind: our aim was to find out as much as possible about those details of the interviewees' lives which have a link with the problem of migration (paying attention not only to the experiences of those interviewed but also of their friends, acquaintances etc.). We tried to acquire detailed information about trips to other countries, temporary jobs in other countries including details about the previous events and the preparations that preceded them, the conditions under which they stayed abroad, the „success” of these trips and their possible consequences. We also asked them to tell us where they had acquired the information on which they made their decisions and how they shared their information and experiences with other members of the gypsy community. The conversations revealed the way in which these sources of information and patterns of exchange influence their inclination to migrate.

Most of the stories about employment abroad relate to the 1960s and 70s, when musicians used to travel to Austria, West-Germany and the USA on one-year contracts. They did not used to take their families: the whole band would stay in one apartment, they would save all the money and bring it back home. Their families would come to visit for a week a few times during the year.

They were often offered the opportunity to settle down but they did not want to stay there because they considered themselves Hungarians and loved their country. Today they regret missing the opportunity. “If we go abroad on a contract for a few months, we are applauded as great Hungarian artists. Back here, we are called filthy gypsies and spat on” – a gypsy man playing traditional gypsy music commented.

A classical musician told us the following story. A friend of his, who is 15 years older than he is, took on a job as a violin tutor at a music school near Vienna in the 1990s. He had been informed of the opportunity by some of his colleagues who had been working there for some time. He enjoyed staying and working there, but he was so homesick that he would not think of settling down (even despite the fact that he took out an insurance⁷, which he is still paying and is receiving money from it). He came back after five years to take on the post of director at a country secondary school with a special musical curriculum. His knowledge of music and of foreign languages are greatly appreciated at the school, just as his foreign contacts and his role as an organiser. He has organised several tours for orchestras and choirs of the school's students in Austria and Germany.

My interviewees get their information about job opportunities and conditions and attitudes to gypsies abroad only through personal contacts. They think the media are lying because what they constantly hear from acquaintances and former employers is that they are welcome in foreign countries. They think there is no 'gypsy issue' in Europe yet, although there have been signs of some resentment recently as a result of the massive exodus of Vlach gypsies. They say they (our interviewees) are not identified as Vlach gypsies when abroad, but it must be remarked that this information is more or less second-hand, as they mostly meet only other gypsy musicians. The contacts they make with gypsies and non-gypsies tend to be made during their work. These contacts mostly do not come to more than occasional meetings, the opportunities for which arise mainly when they tour with a Hungarian orchestra abroad.

Classical musicians learn foreign languages at home before they go abroad and improve it during their stay there. In fact, there is nothing much else they could do because they could not do their job properly in a theatre or symphonic orchestra if they could only communicate in Hungarian. They organise their trips on the basis of carefully negotiated contracts so as not to take any risks. They say they are sought out by foreign managers who know exactly the persons „who count”. Having no opportunities left at home, many of them would like to stay abroad for good. Their primary target is to acquire a residence permit, which they usually get easily because their friends abroad make careful preparations. Applying for refugee status has become a serious option only in the most recent past (they do not think it is an efficient way).

Young gypsy musicians usually join some orchestra on probation and if their position becomes firm enough, they take their families with them. The first step toward a job abroad is an audition. Auditions are held by orchestras abroad at least once a year, giving these young musicians an opportunity to display their skills, and even if they are not needed on the spot, the names of the good ones make their way into the notebooks of agents. After this they are often visited by impresarios with contract and work permit ready. Before leaving, they usually wind up everything at home, selling whatever property they own, even their flats if need be, to cover their travel expenses.

As far as information about the living conditions of gypsies who are resident abroad is concerned, we were able to get some only from the Vlach gypsies. They have a vivid interest in the circumstances and events of the lives of those living abroad and they can make contact with them whenever they travel. In their opinion gypsies abroad are in a much more

⁷ He could not tell us exactly what it was. It may have been some kind of private pension fund.

favourable situation than here in Hungary. This question simply does not arise for the Romungros⁸: they think there is no gypsy issue abroad and they are not considered Roma.

I have also tried to find an answer to the question: how do the Hungarian media influence the migration of musicians, and the preparations they make for taking jobs abroad? I found that the musicians' reliance on the media is negligible. Only the young ones read newspapers, and they tend to read tabloids. They tend to get information from television newsreels, but they have little trust in their truthfulness. They mostly watch trendy programmes on commercial channels (such as *Facts and Files*) – they have seen television reports on the massive migration waves recently – but they think the information they get through personal channels is in stark contradiction with these reports. They read virtually no minority papers, indeed, hardly know them, except exceptionally their titles. Generally speaking, one can safely state that they do not trust the media and are not interested in the migration news they might offer. They know about the restrictions on the employment of foreigners recently introduced in European countries, but they trust that the situation will be provisional and that they can try some time later.

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⁸ A term used by Vlach gypsies to refer to the gypsies who speak Hungarian as their mother tongue and usually have a different position in Hungarian society from theirs.

APPENDIX

“Waters once run never come back...”

My interviewee is a 62-year-old man who lives with his family in a small town in Pest county. He is a descendant of a famous family of musicians which has a history of several centuries. All his ancestors were performers in the classical gypsy music tradition. The first instrument he learnt to play was the 'cimbalom'⁹, but he retrained himself to be a pianist in the early 1960s. He worked as a professional musician in restaurants, and hotels, mostly as a soloist but also as a member of dance-bands. After the political transformation in 1989 he could no longer find a job as a musician. To make a living, he started several businesses from the money he had saved up as a performer, but these attempts failed through a lack of entrepreneurial skill and used up his financial reserves. At present his financial situation is poor and he lives on pension. His two children have also been trained as pianists (one of them has a professional musician's certificate), but neither of them work in the music line. It was their father who advised them to pursue other studies. They went to university and presently work in jobs they were able to get with the help of their degrees. He knows a great number of musicians, both gypsies and non-gypsies, all over the country, but he has also been in contact with musicians who work abroad.

– I was a professional musician for 35 years. At first I learnt to play the cimbalom, but I soon switched to the piano. My father was also a musician, a conductor. He could play all the instruments, from the piano to the violin, from the cimbalom to the clarinet and used to teach musicians in Pest county and Szolnok county how to play all these instruments. This may have been part of my inspiration, but somehow I personally felt I had to spend my whole life doing this, I had been born to do this, and so this was what I came to like. I could play the cimbalom when I was only four or five years old, because there were two cimbaloms in the family. When my father died, his instrument was not immediately sold off, and my uncle Gyula also played that instrument.

– *But why is it natural for someone born into a musicians' family to start playing an instrument?*

– I could not have expressed this at the time, but now perhaps I can: it is generally true to say that you are born for this, it is in your genes, your emotions, your nervous system, your thoughts, your brain, and you just cannot eradicate it. It happens of itself.

– *But you also need training, don't you? Who was the first to tell you to sit down and just start doing it?*

– My father – strangely enough I do not really remember this because he died early – made me sit before the cimbalom when I was a very little child and told me – I know this from my the story my mother told me later – that when he was no longer alive, I would surely be a professional artist, teacher or some sort of musician. But I was just playing the

⁹ A traditional Hungarian instrument similar to the dulcimer. (Translator's note)

cimbalom all the time, whether he made me sit down to it and talked to me and put the hammers in my hand or not.

Later they started teaching me at home. My uncle Gyula did, in fact, when I was six. And when I was about ten or twelve years old they sent me to places such as Szolnok where there was an outstanding cimbalom player. I dare say the best musicians of the country were there in Szolnok, but there were one or two in Cegléd, Debrecen and Miskolc, as well. These were extremely good. So these were the people I learnt from for several years.

– Do you think your father would have wanted you to become a musician at all costs if he had lived longer? I mean, he thought it was worth the effort to become a musician, didn't he? In those years after the war, anyway.

– Yes, I think he would have thought so. I was later told that my father had been widely considered a very educated man, in fact he used to be widely mentioned as one. My mother told me he was a man with an open mind, the sort of man who would be able to see thirty-forty years ahead. For instance, he foresaw the kind of modern world we would live in, in which our music would be recorded and stored and there would not be such a great demand for live performances. Which is a pity, in a way, because there were such incredibly good musicians, and there had been so much painstaking effort going into this, down all those centuries during which all that musical culture and experience was accumulated and embodied in them. And it did, indeed, happen: there is no longer a need for so many musicians, let alone gypsy musicians. It's all a result of technology.

Still, in my understanding, it's just in the family tree – it can't have happened otherwise. Those gypsies who played music professionally, at the level of artistic perfection, used to be referred to as 'gentlemen gypsies'. But to come back to the roots: there were musicians of national renown among my mother's brothers and parents, I can mention names that were familiar nation-wide, such as the Lukács family in Szolnok. They have been the cream of musical life in Szolnok for a hundred years now, the standard-setters. Meanwhile before and immediately after the war there was an occasional physician or some other educated man among them. There were a few people who did not choose the musical career, but music was a formative influence even with them.

We weren't better off financially than others, but perhaps we were ahead of them in our mentality. There were many poor families in those times, before the war. My generation was in a very favourable position after the war, we were given opportunities, and our family was very much a community with a lot of willpower, ambition and, apparently, talent, and we were able to catch up with the level of the society of the time. We were able to build beautiful houses and travelled abroad. We learnt the profession from the best musicians in the country, the great names like István Lukács, who was the best cimbalom player in the world. I mean that, literally. He used to teach in the Studio. I was trained by him for over five years. All this was a matter of talent and willpower – it was a result of those things that it all worked out this way.

– Before and after the war, there were many Roma living here and only few of them were able to rise above the life of some kind of worker, or agricultural labourer on big estates. Only one or two of them made it as musicians. By contrast, everyone here calls himself a musician. Could this be an expression of the desire for a better life that was at work in everyone, and could we say that music was the road to it?

– Yes. And what is very interesting is that only one to two percent of the musician gypsies were able to become artists. The rest of the gypsies had only the desire, although each of them had some instrument, a violin or a cimbalom, standing in the corner at home. That's what we musicians, and the other people call peasant gypsies. I think they are so called because, unfortunately, just like the agricultural labourers among the Hungarians they could not break out. Well, one or two of them up to a certain level, perhaps, but not to that level, just like the Vlach gypsies. So we have nothing to do with them at all, the Vlach gypsies: they are neither professionals, nor musicians. They are a different world. The musician gypsies have as little to do with them as the Hungarians or the Chinese – nothing at all.

– So the true musician gypsies distinguished themselves not only from the Vlach gypsies but even from the Hungarian gypsies who are not musicians. So the musicians were a real caste?

– That's right, exactly. But I would also add that the musician gypsies have thought, and will think as long as the world exists, that they are such a narrow circle that no one has ever made his way into it. Musician gypsies have never as much as recognised an ordinary gypsy as someone they know, let alone make friends with him or let them enter their flats. Ordinary gypsies have never married into a musician family, they have not even got close to the musician gypsies. Even today, in this world of general poverty, when society can do without musician gypsies, a real musician gypsy will never condescend to talk to one of those people, or to take them seriously.

– And what about those who were born into a musician family but did not themselves become musicians because they lacked talent or started pursuing other interests? Were they a problem for their families?

– Well, they were still treated as members of the family, but at the same time they found themselves on the periphery, and had this feeling of not being inside all the time. In fact, it was such that they would instinctively keep away from the family, the musicians, relatives, even brothers and sisters. They had a minority feeling of not having got that high. But they did keep in contact with their parents. They lived in the family, but on its periphery.

– How did a good musician spend a typical day in his life? Did he practice? Did he always play the same thing once he had been allowed to join a band?

– There is no artist in the world that learns or practices more than the musician gypsy. A young man in a good musician family would get up in the morning and practice continuously until lunch was served at noon. And he would do this until he was sixty years old. There were times when superb technique was in great demand, and there were other times when people would want to hear *verbunkos* or Hungarian popular songs, then the musician gypsies would devote the greater effort to that. But they would practice their scales, and could play anything in the world from classic pieces to operas. You had to be able to play at least five hundred Hungarian songs by heart, and wherever they stopped practising it on one day, they would have to continue practising it on the next. And they kept refining them technically, as well as the style, and the one that was the best would not interrupt to say anything, but he was constantly watching them practise. They would not leave a mistake of a minim uncorrected. The best musician would break in saying "What are you doing?". A musician would practice like that for his whole life. Demanding practice sessions with the orchestra for two hours a day, and then they would play in the evening

for six to eight hours. It was also expected of you, in a good musician family, to learn everything you could learn at home, and when you got to the level that the best musician in the family accepted you, you had to go on to a better musician and learn from him. For six months, or a year, according to need, until you got to the level required. In the end you had to get to the kingdom of lead violinists and learn from the king. But they also completed the courses at the music academies. In short, they learnt much more than anyone in former times who got university degrees.

– *Suppose, a young musician learnt a lot and got better than the rest. Could he then take over the leading role as the senior musician in the family?*

– Of course. Every musician family wanted their son to be the best musician. Having the best musician in one's family was the most precious thing they could think of: it meant everything to them. They would sacrifice their lives, their house, anything they had, for that. Every family felt like that about it.

– *And what about those who did not really like to practice and to learn?*

– They would not force them. They just did not become musicians. Their families would say "He wouldn't be a true musician, anyway". Because a musician gypsy has an obsession... I had an uncle, Oszkár Lukács was his name, he was such a superb musician that he was mentioned as second only to Lajos Boros – anyway, this man used to sleep with his violin at night for several decades. And if he woke up at night and had some musical idea, he wouldn't go back to sleep without practising it until he had got it. He would carry his violin under his arm in the street, and he would play it any time he had something. They were such great lovers of music. In fact, they still are. They can no longer make a living from the music, but they have continued playing it up to the present.

– *If musician gypsies were recognised so much in those times, well, did they get rich?*

– They did not get rich, but the gentlemen gypsies could earn a decent living because Hungarians, especially the upper classes, the educated and the barons and the counts, they loved to live it up. In short, the gypsy musicians, the gentlemen gypsies made a living but never got rich. They made enough money to afford them a comfortable and pleasurable life: they would go to espressos with their families, they lived it up, they wore fine clothes and ate delicious food. They could not earn enough to make them millionaires, but they had nice and honourable lives.

– *And what exactly changed after the war? We know that the world of gentlemen living it up in casinos came to an end and was replaced by a different system. What happened to the gypsy musicians?*

– After the war there came the political trend that said the working class is coming, we have eliminated the barons, counts and the rich, long live the proletariat, and this applied to the gypsies as well. The gentlemen gypsies were deprived of opportunities. They allowed a few bands to continue in existence, those whom they needed, or those who grew up under that system, learnt to play music a little bit, and this sort of folk bands were formed where they were allowed to play. They allowed one or two music bands of this kind to exist, but not the others.

– *But what did they do once they could no longer continue playing?*

– Well, it was just like it is today: they were put out of operation, they scraped along, living from hand to mouth. They did not take workmen's jobs, they found that to be below themselves... If you come to think of it, someone who had been learning all his life and

had achieved such high artistic standards in playing, who had been a gentleman should now go and sweep the streets? They just scraped along but never stooped as much as to take an unskilled job in a factory or something.

– *Did they educate their children to be musicians nevertheless?*

– That's right, they educated them to become musicians. Then the Kádár era came, during which a new generation grew up who learnt to play music very well again: the Lakatos', Lajos Boros, the Járóka family, the Fátyol family, the Burkas ... I could go on.

– *During the Kádár era gypsy music still had traditions to cling to. There was gypsy music in all restaurants, and many people were paying attention. At the same time, it was then that a few gypsy musicians started steering their children's education toward classical music and jazz rather than traditional gypsy music. What could have lead to this? Foresight, or the bad experiences? After all, gypsy musicians had a good life in the 1960s and 70s, didn't they?*

– Yes, very good. But some of them foresaw the coming of certain political trends which would reduce the number of gypsy musicians needed. Those among them who were more educated or simply clever got the point and started training their children in dance-music or classical music, or training them to be teachers or artists. That's where Szakcsi Lakatos or Aladár Pege came from. The children of this group of people duly became music teachers and artists, graduated from the Academy and so on. They hit the top level in jazz. They are names known all over the world.

– *The Kádár era saw the foundation of the National Centre for Entertainment Music, on the one hand, and the organisation of the Gypsy Children's Orchestra, on the other. Was musical education completely cut off from the family as a result of these?*

– Not completely. The NCEM represented Hungarian gypsy musicians and dance-musicians as a national organisation. The gypsy music department was headed by widely recognised good musicians and educated men of national renown. They forced the young musicians (not physically, I mean) to meet the requirements of the day. The gypsies were happy to have had their education nationalised. The pianists, for example, used to go up to Szófia street, to the Studio where they were taught by well-trained great artists, the best pianists of the country, to play dance-music, but there was also an independent jazz course. So the State was sponsoring great training opportunities for the students who had to pay almost nothing. The only thing the students from the country had to pay for was travel expenses, but even those were partly covered by the State. So young musicians were not forced, their training was facilitated.

As far as the Gypsy Children's Orchestra is concerned, it supported talented youngsters in Hungary by offering them auditions and entrance examinations with Gyula Farkas, who could sense the absolute pitch. They taught the kids and took the orchestra everywhere. They were given housing and full board.

– *What about those who had previously been trained in a family environment and did not want to take part in such training? I mean, if you did not have a certificate, you could not get employment. Did these organisations exclude people who did not want to join them?*

– No, it wasn't the organisation that excluded them: they excluded themselves, because there was a rule that said that only someone who had passed the appropriate examination was allowed to work as a performer in public places, especially in a fine espresso or restaurant. Which meant that only the Gypsy Children's Band or the NCEM could bring them

up to the level that was necessary for them to pass the exam. This was necessary because expectations had been continuously rising.

– *Was there any personal bias involved in the system? In other words, was anyone ever excluded from the opportunity to play professionally because someone had a grudge against him or just did not like him personally?*

– No. There was just one question: is he up to the level, or is he not. If he wasn't up to the level, he was given further opportunities to learn more, for several years if it was necessary – there were people who trained for ten years –, and he used to be given a register with which he was allowed to work at minor places in the country, but even there he had to meet certain standards. And when matured, he was given the category and could play anywhere in the world.

– *Did it ever happen at the NCEM that a few functionaries were imposed from above? Were the musicians always able to retain control over the organisation?*

– No, there were no grossly inadequate appointments. Besides, the mentality of the musician gypsy is such that we do not make distinctions like that. They simply love each other. There are good musicians and poor musicians. If someone isn't good, we do not make friends with him, and that's it. That's the main thing.

– *Before the war, the leader of the band used to make a contract with the manager of the establishment. How were contracts made during the NCEM years?*

– The NCEM would name a hundred places and ask the first class musicians, the big names “Where in Budapest do you want to go? Which hotel? Which bar?” And wherever he wanted to go, the organisation would send him there for a year, or half a year, so the greatest musicians had the choice. But there was another possibility, too: the restaurants were also allowed to ask for particular musicians. There was the Mátyás Cellar, for example, a lot of foreign millionaires among the customers, a really exquisite place. That place was sort of reserved for Sándor Lakatos, the number one lead violinist in the country. He was the standard there, the man they wanted. No other musician would ever want to get there before him. And the catering places trusted the NCEM. They knew it would send people who could cope. There were good musicians even at third category places.

– *And what was the usual procedure if the musician was employed directly by manager of the establishment?*

– The manager telephoned the NCEM saying that he would like to take on a particular so and so lead violinist. There were no advantages to this, but no disadvantages, either. The contract was made by the Centre and the musicians had to take it. It was a government regulation that they were to play for six hours and have a ten-minute break every hour. Everyone was provided with a free dinner, and a fixed fee. There were briefings for the musicians, and good manners, the observance of norms was part of their examination. Later on they would require everyone to have secondary school levels, and even later foreign language skills were a requirement on the lead violinists and the pianists.

– *In other words, a musician with an examination certificate in Hungary always had a job. What happened if someone did not have a contract and contacted the Centre: did they help him to get a job?*

– Yes, immediately. They did that until the last moment, that is 1988. Until that time a good lead violinist or a pianist could choose from a hundred opportunities. The Centre did a good job in representing their interests.

– *How did it happen after 1989? Did the musicians find themselves unemployed overnight?*

– They threw them out even if they were under a contract. For instance, there came a man from Biharkeresztes who bought the establishment for the price of five hundred pigs, and the next day he was free to hire whatever band he wanted, and they are not worth talking about.

– *Wasn't there anyone to defend the interests of the musicians?*

– No, there wasn't. The Centre couldn't do that, they weren't a political organisation that could have influenced matters in the country in any way.

– *How many gypsy musicians were there before 1989, do you think?*

– There might have been six to seven thousand gypsy musicians in the 1970s.

– *And how many gypsies were there in, say, a thousand musicians playing in restaurants?*

– 850 out of a thousand, I'm sure.

– *What were the areas of music in which the performers tended to be non-gypsies?*

– Bands that used to play at weddings, balls, accordion bands.

– *While we're on the topic of musicians who play at places like restaurants and hotels, what about the piano? Was it an instrument of the gypsies, or of others?*

– The gypsies used to play the piano as well as the folk instruments – the violin, the contrabass, the viola. There were somewhat fewer drummers among them, and wind instruments used to be played mostly by Hungarians. There may have been one or two gypsies playing the saxophone and the clarinet but no others.

– *So in the Kádár era everyone had a job, everybody could work and the musicians lived well.*

– Good gypsy musicians could get rich under that regime. Everyone could buy a nice house, had a car and a job and appreciation. The income situation was such that everyone had a reasonable salary on which one could live comfortably, and three or five times that much in tips. You could make good money. You could get together, well not six thousand perhaps, but at least one thousand Forints every night even in the smallest, most far-out and worst third category place you could imagine.

It was a good life, a good middle-class life, there were no beggars and millionaires. There was a good, solid middle class, and everyone could get a job. Those who would not work were called work-evaders and a threat to the public and they were taken by the police and locked up. Everyone earned as much as to... well, a glass of beer cost one fifty, later two Forints, a small Wiener schnitzel cost ten sixty, the big one sixteen, so everyone made enough money to support the family and have one or two glasses of beer once in a while, and everyone paid a glass or two for the musicians. That's how they lived and everyone was happy. It was as normal as that. There were rich people, to be sure, and they would honour the musicians even more than the others. They said: live and let live, and that was actually what everyone lived by.

– *Those one or two thousand Forints a night that you mentioned – how many tipping customers did you need to get that much? How much did one customer give?*

– Well, sometimes one man gave as much as twenty at other times. But there were also outstanding events. In one particular town, for instance, a certain musician made forty thousand Forints in two days. That's roughly a million today.

– *If the musicians earned so much for several decades and lived so well and were the gypsy aristocracy, then what has happened during the past ten years, since the transformation that made them so poor? Where has all the money gone?*

– It's a combination of two things. First, most of those musicians are old men now. Nobody wants them any more. Nobody wants anyone above forty. The other side of the question is: where is the money? Well, the truth is, gypsies, the musicians have always considered a life spent in saving something that is below their style. They have always spent what they have earned. And now it's no jobs, no music, no sources of living.

– *And what about the young people who are still training to be gypsy musicians? Are they going to have a chance to make a living?*

– Not at all. You mustn't train to be an instrumentalist any longer, let alone a violinist, or any other folk music instrument like the contrabass or the viola. Never again. Waters once run never come back, nor will that lifestyle, those people, that mentality or the demand. They will find out, if they do, that it is ridiculous and hopelessly stupid to learn anything like that today. All artists say that, not just me.

– *On the other hand, a number of self-taught musicians of Vlach gypsy origins have been making increasing sums of money by playing their own music, with a tin can, and a guitar. What do you think of that?*

– That's just ridiculous musical illiteracy. They are not good at anything in the world deserving the name music. They have nothing to do with music, and have no present, will have no future. You have to train at a conservatory or a college to be up to music. If you want to play music, you first have to learn it. It's not like you just start banging the gate or a can, that's just charlatanism. Mere eye-wash, anything but art.

– *In the Kádár era a lot of musicians had the chance to go abroad. Did you know any one of them?*

– I was on friendly terms with almost everyone that used to go abroad. Or if the relationship wasn't that close, I certainly knew them well.

– *What did they tell you about the living conditions out there?*

– Hungary used to be known for two things: gypsy music and the goulash soup. When a gypsy musician went abroad in those times, everyone would hug him and applaud him, the Hungarian emigrants would kiss them with tears in their eyes. And when they played them "I was born by the side of the meandering river Tisza..." the Hungarians who had left long before would give them all their money, they would fill their violins with gold.

– *So they could make a lot of money abroad. Who or what did you have to be to get out?*

– For instance, you could get out if you had a great name and asked for permission. But the Centre wanted to send out people who would cope and enhance the country's reputation. Secondly, the Gypsy Children's Orchestra took the young ones all around the world. And thirdly, there was this army orchestra, the folk ensemble, and two or three others, and these would always tour foreign countries, they were asked for and their manager just kept signing contracts, and would tell them now we're going there, now there, and so on. They were on the road all the time.

– *Were there any among them who said they wanted to stay there?*

– Yes, and in fact there are a lot of them living abroad at this moment. Somehow they felt that it wasn't a good idea to come back, that an economic crash might be coming which would undermine the lives of musicians.

– *There has been a great wave of emigration in the gypsy community for the past few years. Many of them go to Canada, some have also asked for political asylum. Why do you think they left?*

– Most of the people who left that way were not musicians. Because the people who were excommunicated were the ones who did not like to work, or had the kind of job in which you are no longer needed. Now, if a musician gypsy left, he left with his band, and has remained an artist gypsy to the present day. Those who are enduring this life of poverty here are only the old ones, who are so advanced in years that they no longer feel able to start a new life.

– *Would you have stayed abroad in the 1960s or 70s if you had had the chance to do so?*

– That's a difficult question. I would have left if I had not had a family. Now it's too late, and I am having great difficulty making money. Perhaps I would have left, if... but my family did not let me go. I had to bring them up properly.