



Amongst us

Stories of Roma Heroes in Slovakia

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**Publication of Ternipe - združenie pre rómsku
mládež na Slovensku a v Maďarsku (Ternipe
Association)**

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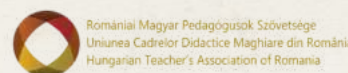
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(Women for the Future Association)
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**Ternipe - združenie pre rómsku mládež na
Slovensku a v Maďarsku, 2024**

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Introduction

‘Roma heroes are ordinary people who are willing and able to act for others and themselves.’

Through the EU-funded project Roma Heroes in Theatre and Everyday Life, seven young Roma from Slovakia became peer trainers having adopted the Roma Heroes Workshop methodology developed by Independent Theatre Hungary. The trainers explored various European Roma dramas highlighting inspiring Roma individuals who, through their actions, brought significant change to their own or other people’s lives. They passed on these stories to other Roma and non-Roma youth in the framework of various workshops.

Drawing inspiration from this experience, they created a publication to introduce readers to their own Roma heroes. Following the methodology developed by Ternipe Association, they conducted interviews with personalities who serve as role models through their life journeys, career achievements, talents, actions, mindset, and willpower – for themselves and others alike. Our publication also introduces two Roma heroes who are no longer with us. Their family members and other relatives helped us to learn about their lives.

Our collected examples show the diverse ways in which we can define the term ‘everyday hero’. People of all ages, men and women, Roma and non-Roma alike can find a story within these pages that will enable them to be a little more open to seeing those around them as everyday heroes. Because heroes live among us.

One small act can trigger an avalanche of change. Here are 12 Roma everyday heroes who dared to act.

We wish you pleasant reading and inspiration!



Brigitta Berky: *‘With Financial Security, Only Self-Confidence, Talent, and Determination Can Limit a Young Person’s Success.’*

A story of a determined woman who overcomes any obstacle to help even a small step forward those around her who are less fortunate



My name is Brigitta Berky, originally from Martinová, but I have lived in Janice for twelve years now. My father came from here, and upon his passing away five years ago, I took over the management of the community organization he had established. In the organization, I mainly work with children, where we hold various activities for them such as dance and poetry recitals. It now looks like, with municipal support, we will have a permanent venue for these activities, which is a major step forward for us.

In the future, I would like to have the children familiarize with the Roma culture, but I also deem important to focus on talent development in our sessions. My primary aim, however, is to encourage them to pursue education and for at least a few of them to obtain qualifications.

Recently, we organized a children’s day, offering various competitions and a foam party for the kids. They were also provided with full catering at the event, which we hold annually. Besides, we also help disadvantaged families at the start of the school year. Many families here in Janice have numerous children – sometimes as many as eight or nine. For these families, school expenses are a significant financial burden, so we donate items such as shoes, backpacks, pencil cases, and other necessities.

My childhood was completely different from that of these children. My parents always did their best to help us succeed the best we could. This path I am on now has never felt foreign, as my father was engaged in similar activities for a long time. I grew up with a sense of duty to help others. To understand why this is important to me, you would need to see the standard of living here. Sometimes, a single nutritious meal for these children is an achievement in this neighbourhood. Thanks to my parents, I never had to experience such hardships.

Besides being an activist, my father also worked in forestry. I have two siblings, and he did everything possible for us. His work has always been an example to me, but now that I am the one running the organization, I wish to follow my own path and shape its future with my own vision.

I currently work at the municipal office, managing government house renovation projects. The biggest issue I see among children is a lack of direction, a reason why we aim to help them set specific goals. It is important to have something to strive for, and talent development plays a huge role in this.

I am proud to have already helped two children start on the path to further education. This is a

significant achievement for me, and I feel we are continually moving forward. Also, it brings me joy being here for these children, being someone they can look up to, someone they can turn to for help. There was a time when I felt like giving up. As a woman and an activist, my work and views were not always respected, which was very difficult for me. But I had people around me who helped me get back on my feet and taught me to persevere through tough times.

One of my fondest memories is organizing the Christmas gift distribution. This takes place annually, and seeing the children's joy when they receive their presents is priceless.

Regarding opportunities for Roma youth, I believe that if financial security is in place, only the young person's confidence, talent, and determination will limit their success. But without financial support, achieving anything can be very challenging.

My ultimate future goal is to establish a centre to provide shelter for abused women and children. I would like to create a place where those with uncertain futures can turn.

Compiled by Géza Váradi



Renátó Botos: *'This Child Will Become a Musician!'*

'Something about the violin caught my eye...' – recalls Renátó, who was already drawing a bow across the strings at the age of four.



I learned the basics from Gyula Ökrös, alias 'Mogyi', a Roma violinist. My parents did everything they could to further my musical education, so I was enrolled in the Filákovo Music Primary School. There I studied music theory and took violin lessons. Later, life presented me with two major opportunities. The first was gaining admission to the state conservatory in Košice. The second opportunity came in the spring when I saw a report on Ferenc Snétberger, who was looking for talented Roma youth. I remember I was the first from my area to make it to the audition.

The following years were very challenging, especially the ones spent in the conservatory in Košice. I could not speak Slovak. Coming from a small rural Roma background, I found myself in a big city, with no acquaintances – completely alone. It was as if I had been thrown in at the deep end to learn how to swim. In Košice, I had to do a great deal to be recognized and respected. My life consisted of travelling and practising. My parents invested heavily in my education, spending their last pennies on me, often with little left for anything else. There were weeks when they could only give me 10 euros. A return train ticket cost 8 euros, leaving me with only 2 euros. My food was not paid for the whole week. I often endured weeks like this, but only one thing mattered: that I could study.

I lived through some difficult moments, with not only poverty but also the stigma of my ethnicity placing me at a disadvantage. Especially as a Hungarian-Roma in a Slovak environment, I had to prove myself constantly. There were days when I practised for 7-8 hours, only to go to the changing room and see someone had left a message for me: 'F***ing gypsy'. Over time, these taunts turned into recognition.

I consider myself a confident, driven person, living for my dreams and working to achieve them. This has been my mindset ever since childhood. My life is blessed, bright, and balanced in every way. Often, I motivate myself by remembering that I did not come from a wealthy family and that my parents sacrificed everything to ensure I could complete my studies. I constantly want to offer more and contribute more. I pray to God to guide my path.

My life is busy, with music playing a vital role. On weekdays, I work with my students, as I am also a music teacher at the primary school in Radzovce. Additionally, I teach music at the Gemerský Jablonec Primary School of Art. I always try to encourage my students not to settle for less and to remember where they come from.

As a young Roma, the utmost advice I would give my peers is to believe in themselves, trust in God, and be patient. Always aim for more in life; do not settle for less. Being Roma is an advantage, a gift from God, and they should never forget this.

Listen and enjoy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF68VYWBMDQ>

Compiled by Friderika Balog



Zoltán Danyi: *'A Person's Trigger Is Having a Goal'*

A warm-hearted, selfless civil servant and poet who sends messages to everyone through his poems and believes that while not everyone encounters miracles in life, he has been blessed with something called love



I was born in Central Bohemia, where we lived until I was three. My parents worked there as agricultural labourers, and I had a very happy childhood. This love is still the driving force of my life. I now live in Hostice as a retired beekeeper and gardener, reminiscing and writing. My village has long been known as Sereg, where Roma have always lived – it is also called 'Láz's Tail' –, and this is where I spent my childhood. Since my youth, people have honoured and trusted me because I always approached others kindly and with a desire to learn about their pasts and futures. My family, my children, and my grandchildren are the greatest treasures of my life – the most beautiful poems I could ever have. If I were to list everything they have given me, it would be a collection of wonders that gives me life and inspiration.

The thought of writing poetry entered my mind from an early age. My goal was to use my poems to offer help, comfort, purposeful thinking, or even strength to people. I always aimed to honour others, and if I saw someone who had lost their dignity, I sought to restore the value that they deserved.

The values within a person reflect in their love and in teaching others to love.

I volunteered in many places, trying to help people with my poetry. For example, I once visited a homeless shelter, where I distributed a few volumes of my poetry to bring some joy to them. The people there were so touched that, as a gesture of thanks, they pooled together a small sum and bought me an umbrella. Such moments remain as lasting positive memories. The source of love is never selfish.

Before choosing my career, my father wanted me to go to grammar school, but I was not particularly interested in studying and preferred writing poetry. Eventually, I decided to go for it. I completed secondary school in Rimavská Sobota, and then attended a year of economics school, though I soon realized it was not for me. I went to university in Banská Bystrica to study pedagogy but only completed the undergraduate course after all. One memorable moment from university stands out. After defending my thesis, a professor from the committee stood up and applauded me because they appreciated the way I presented my work. During the break, he came up to me and said, 'I am not satisfied with you, colleague,' since I had not mentioned what he considered the core essence: 'that Roma love must be taught to the entire world'.

The secret of my life is that my heart can hold everyone. I welcome everyone as a sibling, with sincere thoughts. This is why my first book is called *The Poems of My Life* because it is about my life. I am now writing my fifth book. My poem *Remembrance on the Holocaust* reflects our lives, for the horrors of the past must be eradicated; war is a senseless, evil thing.

There have also been some traumatic moments in my life, just as in everyone else's. Consider, for instance, what could be worse than death itself? Hopeless love. It is terrible when not reciprocated by anyone; it can also cause great suffering for a poet. The essence of my poetry is that every poem presents a challenging question; but the answer is also there. I was always driven by an inner urge to keep going, as God grants me new strength each day – new strength, new possibilities, a new Heaven, and a new Earth, just as He promised.

If a person has no goal, life loses its meaning; without success, one grows weary. Success should be sought in a way that brings enjoyment. I was fortunate in life, as I could do what I wanted and what I loved.

My message to young people is that it is better to give than to receive. Strive to offer something to others, as nothing is nobler than giving. Through giving, you bring joy to others. If we keep this fundamental principle in mind, we can help others out, especially during tough times. Discover this feeling, as without it, human life is aimless.

Compiled by Antónia Szitai



Roland Farkas: “Everything You Have Been Through and Everything You Carry With You Has Value.”

An aspiring Roma talent who over the course of his studies is rediscovering skills he felt as if taken away from him in Slovakia — a visual artist



My name is Roland Farkas; I come from a Roma family from Slovakia, and I identify as Roma/gipsy. I work in the arts, trying to explore both my own and the non-Roma culture. How did my life move in this direction? It became clear to me what I wanted to do with my life when I asked myself what I had and what I wanted to do with it. It felt as though it had always been a part of my life; I was always drawing and thought that might just be my path. Then, after some searching, I found visual arts.

I began my journey in Slovakia, where I had to grow up quickly. My mother, my sibling, and I all had to work to make ends meet. I later tried my luck in England, and after gaining various work experiences, I decided to explore the Netherlands. While working, I also visited different universities and eventually discovered ArtEZ, also located in the Netherlands. I graduated from ArtEZ University of the Arts AKI Academy. Upon graduation, I applied and was accepted into two master's programmes. One of them was the master's programme in Artistic Research at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and the other one the Master of Arts in Fine Art and Design at the Frank Mohr Institute, Minerva Art Academy – Hanze University of Applied Sciences in Groningen. In the end, I chose to pursue my master's degree at the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague.

The primary inspiration for my work is my personal journey and memories. Everything you have been through and everything you carry with you is valuable. My artistic expression is mainly through sculpture, drawing, and painting. In my current artistic practice, first and foremost I explore the origins of materials and stories associated with movement and interaction. I try to create a dialogue with the material, asking if it resonates with my ideas or if it wants me to engage with its essence. This approach leads me and the material to a shared outcome, often in the form of sculptures or installations from drawings. This sort of transformation frequently felt unfinished, in fact, the process itself seemed unstoppable, one that constantly demands new methods and materials to tell fresh narratives that give birth to the artwork.

Fortunately, in my current studies, I can rediscover skills that I felt as if taken away from me in Slovakia. One such skill is basket weaving, which I learned in the past owing to my family background. I learned a lot about our culture from my family, which, while often seen as nomadic, is deeply connected to traditions and crafts that have journeyed alongside Roma culture throughout history. My father had a profound connection to nature and took

advantage of what the environment offered. He learned the willow-basket-weaving technique from my grandfather, and I took it over from him. At the time, it did not yet seem like this was deeply tied to our culture; it simply felt natural. Little did I know that years later it would become such a significant part of my artistic practice.

He always said that for a good basket, you need the right willows. I remember sitting on the ground beside the basket as a child, playing with the remnants. I believe something began at that very moment. From the leftover willows that my father did not use for the basket, I created a new, unique element.

My artistic journey is rooted deeply in exploring identity through materials and techniques. Through my Roma heritage, I have created narratives like the basket-weaving craft passed down from my father. External materials, such as copper or willow branches, transcend being mere elements and become carriers of my childhood stories. Drawing inspiration from my father's nomadic lifestyle and from traditional crafts, such as basket weaving, I explore the origins of materials, seeking a silent conversation with them. This artistic dialogue, often expressed through sculptures and installations, reflects the evolving narratives of my childhood and Roma roots. Performing arts have become a natural extension of my practice. There are other materials – again from my childhood – that I use to create sculptures and artworks. Such a material is copper, since in our area, poorer Roma families collect wires, cables, and extract metals, aluminium, and copper from them. They take these materials then to collection sites in exchange for money. This process was also part of my childhood, and it inspires me because I see art in this transformation of each material. Even to this day, if I find an old cable, I strip the outer plastic, clean it, and then use it in my work. I am fascinated that by removing the outer layers of a cable, I can turn something dirty and discarded into a shiny, bright material. For me, copper is just as valuable as gold.

I have always been captivated by my ethnicity, although this interest has manifested in different ways throughout my life, evolving alongside me over time. Since I belong to two minority groups in Slovakia – Roma and Hungarian –, this creates a multi-layered isolation in my homeland. Therefore, I never feel entirely at home in either. When my father married my mother, a lot of things changed. As a wife, my mother followed my father's way of life – she comes from a so-called average, urban Roma family, whereas my father, also Roma, lived and grew up in a ghetto. So, my mother followed him, and my sibling and I were born and raised there. I believe this is a stigma that marked us. The most common stereotypes one may encounter there are none other than people from our background being seen as troublemakers, jobless, thieves, or alcoholics.

My knowledge of Slovak Roma culture, traditions, and history is limited, as, regrettably, discrimination and isolation often create bubbles wherein knowledge of these matters slowly fades away. An example is the unique Romani languages, which, peculiarly, were passed down exclusively orally for generations and have disappeared in my immediate environment, along with the stories and history they carried.

Now, I am embarking on a new journey, elevating my experiences to new heights, deepening and broadening them. I want to do this with an open mind, and not in a confined mental bubble! By this, I mean that I will keep on stepping out of my comfort zone and use my current artistic process as a gateway (not breaking away from it) to new artistic dialogues and techniques that I can explore from the still unfamiliar world of science.

I know this is the right place and time to extend my roots, grow, and develop through the connections and collaborations I have already begun together with my fellow artists in the Netherlands.

I am extremely confident that the two-year master's programme at the Royal Academy KABK will provide me with every platform I need to connect with the other artist within me.

Find out more: <https://farkasrolandwolf1.nl/>

Compiled by Cynthia Ferkó



Tünde Farkas: ‘I Always Stuck to My Goals.’

An ordinary Roma girl who pursued her path with determination, overcoming all obstacles to become what she set out to be: a paediatrician



I was born in Rimavská Sobota and have lived there to this day. I come from a modest family; my mother worked as a shop assistant, but due to illness, she eventually had to stay at home. My father was a labourer and loved music – he even played himself. I have a brother who is two years older than me, and who started a family following his graduation from high school. I am the only one in my family who went to university and became a doctor.

I always knew I wanted to work with children. I was interested in medicine and in being of assistance to others. Above all, I wanted to help children; so, early on, at the beginning of my career path, I was certain I wanted to be a paediatrician. My aspiration to become a doctor took shape as early as primary school. I had always been an outstanding student, so this is the goal I pursued after completing my secondary education as well, and I got accepted to study in Bratislava.

University brought its share of challenges, both big and small, as it does for everyone. Financially, it was not easy either, with my mother having fallen ill early on and my father taking care of her. Before my final year, my father also fell ill and passed away. After this difficult period, I faced yet another cycle of hardships, but, despite everything, I graduated and started to work.

In 2008, I began working on the children’s ward in Rimavská Sobota, staying there up until 2016. At times, I worked in two places simultaneously: Rimavská Sobota and Rimavská Seč. This was a challenging period, and it carried great responsibility. In the meantime, I got married in 2015, and three years later my son was born. Being a doctor today is difficult. It is hard for people to understand that doctors are also human beings – they, too, have their own families. Many people have no idea that even when I come home, I still think about the child I saw that day.

Looking back, I owe a lot to my family and friends. They supported and helped me in every way they could. I had a classmate whose mother worked among scientists in a laboratory. They knew about my father’s passing away and that my financial situation had become more challenging, but I never asked anyone for help. One day, this classmate came to me and said her mother could help me apply for a scholarship. It would have made them very happy to support my final year this way. It was a miracle for me, as I never expected or asked for it.

My biggest role model is still my mother, who was a strong, intelligent woman. She attended

secondary school in Liptovský Mikuláš. At that time, it was almost unheard of for a Roma family to send a child to college. Even secondary education was a significant achievement.

My upbringing taught me not to differentiate between people based on skin colour. I have always known who I am, but I never felt that my life as a Roma was any different from those who are not Roma. I have always been certain that I would never trade my life with anyone else's.

I am most proud that despite all the hardships I became a doctor and graduated. I achieved the goals I set for myself. Everything I have I obtained relying on my own efforts and the support of my family.

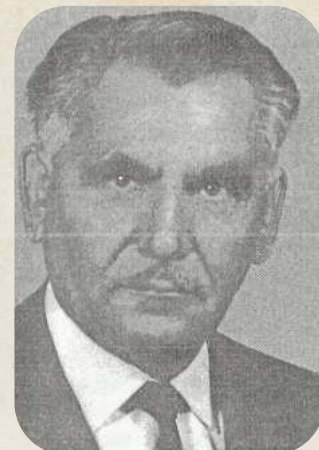
I believe there are many talented children, and poverty is not the primary reason why they do not pursue further education; it is often the parents' attitude. There are many opportunities for social scholarships that can financially assist with children's education. A university degree is not essential, as a good trade can also provide a stable livelihood. My message [to young people] is not to give up, keep studying, and then they can build a different life for themselves!

Compiled by: Szabina Váradi



Dezider Fertő (1921–1996): *‘He Worked as a Cultured Musician and Later as a Woodcarver Throughout His Life’*

An exceptional Roma artist, who preserved the beauty of Roma culture in his carved works, despite early negative criticism.



In the past, woodcarving was an exceptional artistic talent, especially among Roma people. Dezider Fertő was blessed with this rare talent. His discovery is credited to the visual artist Árpád Horváth of Tornaľa, who first met the woodcarver in 1986. At that time, Dezider was creating several reliefs and statues in his native village. When they first met, Dezider was in a depressed mood, as two cultural workers had just left him, describing his work as ‘proportionally deformed’. Despite this, the experienced artist did everything possible to prove the quality and significance of his work. Drawing on Roma culture, he imbued his creations with valuable characteristics and personalities.

Dezider Fertő was born on 22 February 1921 in Gemerská Ves, near the town of Tornaľa. By then, Hungarian-speaking Roma, known as Rumungros, had long settled in his native village, people who were also dedicated to music, among other things. Dezider grew up in such an environment and learned the technique of woodcarving.

In his youth, he was captivated by music and the cimbalom, which he loved so much that he also played in a Roma band, primarily at the nearby baths in Leváre. Later, he obtained the qualifications necessary to work as a teacher and took a position at the vocational secondary school for agriculture in Lučenec. He lived for some time in Feledince and Košice but eventually settled in his native village, Gemerská Ves.

According to his family, he worked throughout his life as a cultured musician and woodcarver. His works often depict scenes from the daily lives of Roma people: musicians, whom he immortalized in the form of Roma musicians playing in pubs, at festivals, weddings, and funerals; women depicted in various life situations: as musicians, innkeepers, companions, mothers with children, women kneading dough, women with bread baskets, etc. In his later years, he created many religious-themed reliefs and statues, such as Bethlehem or Adam and Eve in Paradise. According to the artist Árpád Horváth, Dezider Fertő carved various modified nativity scenes, which are housed in the Roma Cultural Museum in Brno and the Museum in Rimavská Sobota.

Dezider worked with simple techniques, creating reliefs from linden or walnut on wooden bases. Early in his career, he attempted to modify the surfaces of his sculptures with colourless varnish or oil paint. Later, under the influence of Árpád Horváth, he abandoned this technique and

left the wood surface untreated, preserving its natural texture and colour, making his final figures appear more natural.

Fertő Dezider's works have been exhibited in numerous places such as the Gömör-Kishont Museum in Rimavská Sobota, the Roma Cultural Museum in Brno, and the Slovak Agricultural Museum in Nitra.

Compiled by: Adam Csonka



Roma nativity scene



Roma musicians

***Zita Gazsó: 'I Am Aware of the Life of the Roma;
I Know What They Are up Against on a Daily
Basis, and Therefore I Want to Make Their
Tedious Lives a Little Better and Brighter.'***

EA woman who, against all odds, achieved her goals and strives to help people in their everyday lives.



My name is Zita Gazsó. I am married, have two adult children and five grandchildren. I currently work full-time at the Office of the Government Commissioner for Roma as a regional coordinator on a national project related to the development team. Since 2004, I have also been the leader of the Roma organization the Information and Advisory Centre, in Rimavská Sobota.

Coming from a Roma family, I was born and live in Rimavská Sobota. I was raised by my grandparents, completed primary school in Rimavská Sobota, and attended secondary school in Bratislava. After finishing secondary school, I continued my studies at the Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, majoring in social studies.

I am aware of the life of the Roma; I know what they are up against on a daily basis, and therefore I want to make their tedious lives a little better and brighter. My motivation began with children, as I love working with them, though adults are no exception in this respect. In Rimavská Sobota, there are limited opportunities for them to participate in various activities, which is why we have started developing projects to involve them. Since 2004, we have implemented numerous projects for children, adults, and the unemployed. We organize camps for children, weekend courses for adults, festivals, international youth exchanges, and many similar projects that benefit the Roma community. It fills me with pride to be employed at the Office of the Government Commissioner for Roma, which has allowed me to grow in my career.

There is a person in my life who set me on this path: her name is Alena Horváthová. One day, she took my children to a camp and showed an interest in how we lived and what qualifications I had. She awakened my desire to continue my studies. College was challenging for me because I had a family and a new job. I had to care for my family and to work, besides which I also had to study and prepare for exams. Many times, I could only get about studying at night. Fortunately, I pursued my goals and succeeded. My children, too, are very proud of me, and we celebrate my achievements together.

I have never been ashamed of being Roma.

I proudly embrace my Roma identity, and I always strive to change the negative views about Roma through my behaviour and to highlight the diversity within our community.

My message to today's Roma youth is that I believe there are numerous opportunities available; they simply need to take advantage of them. Completing their studies is very important, as only this can lay the foundation for their future.

Compiled by Szabina Váradi



Csaba Horváth: *'We Are Not Here to Change People but to Give Them a Chance to Change Their Own Lives.'*

A knowledgeable and experienced figure in Roma activism will know briefly share his journey from a simple housing estate to national success.



I am Csaba Horváth, 39 years old, born and residing in Rimavská Sobota. I have worked as a public servant for over 18 years, handling administrative duties at local governments, but I also work as a Roma activist. I am married with three children – two sons and a daughter –, who are the most important in my life.

My activism began in 2006, though I had never before considered dealing with Roma issues or having a Roma wife – yet both of my wives were Roma. At that time, we founded a civil society, where we worked with both children and adults, primarily organizing educational programmes for them. In 2007, I received a position at the county office, and my activism took a back seat for a time, but eventually I managed to find a balance between these two roles. Throughout my activist work, I helped many people with drafting petitions, appeals, and handling various official matters. Besides, I organized various programmes for young people and participated in charity projects. As I began working at the county office, my activism also advanced to the county and then the national level, moving beyond leading dance groups or distributing food, to drawing up documentations, reviewing and assessing various projects. Therefore, many may not consider me a traditional activist, as I spend less time directly with people and work more behind the scenes.

A turning point came when I became vice-president of the Roma section of a youth organization in the Rimavská Sobota region. This was the first time I set up a direct relationship with local Roma settlements, and witnessing the extreme poverty changed my perspective. I did not grow up in a Roma settlement but on a housing estate, and seeing these children made me realize I could have easily been in their position

My initial goal was to change the world. When I was young, I felt full of energy and believed I could transform the Roma community. Today, I understand that we are not here to change people but to create opportunities for them to make changes in their own lives. While for Roma children it is education that represents a chance to break out, for adults, it is work. If we can provide them with employment close to their homes, they will have the chance to thrive.

One of my greatest achievements was participating in the Rimavská Seč school programme, where a

child once said they wanted to be like us. Additionally, I helped a young person achieve his goals and acquire a trade, and today I regard him as my foster son. On a national level, I am proud to have established Opre Roma, which initiated three large-scale nationwide projects, including a twelve-point memorandum we drafted and signed with political parties prior to the 2020 elections.

If I could go back 20 years, I would perhaps have started engaging with issues of Roma identity sooner, as I have come to see this as one of the most important aspects for our community. Today, I focus mainly on research into Roma culture, history, and the Holocaust, and I aim to establish a centre dedicated to studying these topics.

Compiled by Géza Váradi



Mihály Ladics: *'You Were Born a Teacher.'*



As a child, Mihály did not fully understand the meaning of the word 'gypsy'. Today, he teaches Roma children and is living his dreams.

I was born in Eastern Slovakia, in Kráľovský Chlmec. I grew up in a small village, Drahňov, where I currently live with my family. My childhood was difficult, as I lost my mother to illness at a young age, only nine years old. I have six siblings and one half-sibling. Left alone, our father raised us. I consider myself fortunate, as we are a very close-knit family who can rely on one another for anything. My father is a great role model for me because, as a single father, he raised seven children. I think it is a very rare thing in today's world to succeed as a single parent – on one's own if need be. My sister is another one of my role models, as she made sacrifices for the family: she left school and did not complete her studies – only to care for us.

I began primary school in Drahňov, my hometown, at a Roma school, and later continued at a Slovak school in Kaposvár. I was the only Hungarian-Roma child in my class. People were more interested in my Hungarian heritage than in my Roma background. My secondary school years were also spent in Kaposvár, where I trained as an electrician. Through an Erasmus programme, I had the opportunity to work for a company in Budapest. Although I received a job offer in Budapest, I declined, knowing I wanted to continue my education. I then attended Selye János University in Komárno, where I applied and successfully completed my teacher training.

Throughout my studies, I faced quite a few challenges. Language was the first barrier, as I had attended Slovak primary and secondary schools but applied to a Hungarian university. There were times I faced humiliation, with remarks like, 'Why are you at a Hungarian university if you attended a Slovak school?' I saw this as a failure. Being a blue-eyed, fair-haired student, I did not experience discrimination based on my ethnicity. However, I witnessed the humiliation and prejudice faced by my classmates with darker skin. As a child, I did not fully understand what the word 'gypsy' meant. This remained unclear for a long time.

I have a profession that I love. There is never a morning when I go to work feeling reluctant. I remember playing with my friends as a child – pretending to be the teacher, seating them as my pupils. Today, this is not a game anymore but my reality. I work at a Slovak school attended by Roma children. I was given a class right from the start, and it was a challenging beginning. I worked at the school for a year. When I left, my boss bid me farewell with the words: 'You were born a teacher.'

Besides teaching, I am also active as a representative. Growing up in my village, I have seen all sorts of things. There are limited opportunities here. My goal is to develop the village and create job opportunities.

If I could give advice to young people today, it would be: *Do not be afraid to try something new. Pursue your dreams with determination. Anything is achievable. Move forward bravely. Study, study, study!*

Compiled by Friderika Balog



Richard Radics and Richard Radics Jr: “*My son almost took the instrument out of my hands, plucking each string one by one, and I knew that was a unique talent residing within him.*”

A little boy whose talent can stand on the big stage.



I, Ricsike's father, was born on 3 April 1995 in Rimavská Sobota. I come from a family of musicians; my father was an excellent pianist, and my grandfather, László Mihály, was a drummer, though he is no longer with us unfortunately. I began playing the violin at the age of six, with instruction from Eugén Berki, to whom I owe a great deal. After attending the Rimavská Sobota Music School, I was admitted to the Rajkó Talentum Music School at the age of ten, where I studied under László Nyári. After a year and a half, I returned to Slovakia, and music remained like a hobby in my life. I later trained as a chef and became a teacher of Wing Chun Kung Fu.

Ricsike's musical journey began in March 2023, when he started learning the violin (born on 24 June 2015 in Rimavská Sobota). We had not anticipated his interest in the violin.

It all started when the Gömör Roma Orchestra was formed. I was also invited to join, and so I spent several hours practising each day. It was then that my son almost took the violin from my hands. He plucked each string one by one, and I already sensed that he possessed a rare talent.

I immediately began working with him, and within five months, he performed with the Gömör Roma Orchestra, playing Brahms's Hungarian Dance No 5. In November 2023, I approached László Nyári, his former teacher at Rajkó. After hearing Ricsike, he said that in his 30 years of teaching, he had never encountered such talent. Ricsike began his studies and, at the Christmas concert, performed Monti's Csárdás and Brahms's Hungarian Dance No 5.

Ricsike is very proud to be the youngest primás [lead violinist] at Rajkó. László Berki Jr and his wife invited him to perform at the upcoming grand concert of the Pannon Roma Orchestra, dedicated to the memory of Berki Sr. The concert took place on 18 April at the Urania Cinema, where Ricsike performed a block of songs: Piros rózsák beszélgetnek [Red Roses Talking], Nem tudjuk azt csak mi ketten... [No One Knows It but Us...], and also played A-moll csárdás [A Minor Csárdás] and Villámcsárdás [Lightning Csárdás].

On 20 April, Zoltán Mága, the violinist, invited my son to perform Csillagok, csillagok, szépen ragyogjatok [Stars, Stars, Shine Brightly] in C minor, for which we had seven days to prepare. It was that time that my son, Ricsike, received a 3/4 master violin (Benjamin Patocka, 1924) from my parents. This was the concert held in MVM Dome under the title 50 Years – 50 Concerts, where Ricsike performed solo in front of an audience of sixteen thousand. It was not only the audience that captivated Ricsike but



also stars coming on the stage such as Piroska Molnár, Gyula Bodrogi, Margit Bangó, Angyalok, and so on. Incidentally, in this performance, Ricsike played the role of a young Zoltán Mága. Mága himself was impressed and praised him.

We still have a long road of serious study ahead of us. Ricsike is a perfectionist, loves practising, and does not like making mistakes, paying attention to every detail. With the help of Farkas Nándor Beke, we were introduced to Éva Ácsné Szili, who also teaches Ricsike the violin. He attends the Music School in Feled as well, where he takes part in piano rehearsals and theoretical (solfege) lessons with Brigitta Berky Bohó. The Director of the Music School in Feled, Roland Horváth, has much to thank for, as he respects Ricsike's wide-ranging musical studies and has his best interests at heart, which is very helpful for his development. The competitions he has participated in and won have been in the colours of the Music School, with the help of the piano teacher there.

On 10 May 2024 in Körmöcbánya (Trebisov), Ricsike won first place in a national competition. On 7 June 2024, he earned a gold medal at an international competition in Komárom. On 28 July 2024, Pannon Roma Orchestra and Sabbathsong Klezmer Band performed a concert in the courtyard of Vajdahunyad Castle in Budapest. Here, he played a medley of folk tunes: Villámcsárdás [Lightning Csárdás], Tele van a csipkebokor virággal [The Thorn-Bush Is Full of Blossoms], Házasodom nemsokára [I Am Getting Married Soon], A-moll csárdás [A Minor Csárdás].

On 2 August 2024, Ricsike played together with Rajkó Orchestra at the 75th birthday celebration of Bertalan Farkas, the first Hungarian astronaut, where he performed Csillagok, csillagok [Stars, Stars] and Villámcsárdás [Lightning Csárdás].

To date, he has performed at eighteen events. Here, I have highlighted but a few. He also plays and enjoys traditional Roma music, but his primary interest and focus remain on classical music. Currently, he is practising Schubert's The Bee and is playing scales across three octaves from sheet music. His greatest inspirations are Kálmán Bányák and Jascha Heifetz.

I am delighted that my daughter, Marika Radics (born 16 August 2017 in Rimavská Sobota), has also begun learning to sing. They have already performed together at Rajkó and in our village, with more joint performances scheduled for September this year. My daughter will also begin training at Rajkó this September, with Éva Novák, an excellent singing instructor. Listen and enjoy: <https://www.youtube.com/@RiciRadic>.

Compiled by Cynthia Ferkó



Éva Sajkó: *'I Always Knew That I Had Some Other Purpose, Too, in This World'*

A devoted mother who did not give up on her dreams and continued her education



My name is Éva Sajkó; I am 46 years old, come from a Hungarian Roma family, and identify as both gypsy and Roma. I live in a small village called Abovce with my husband and three children. I currently work as a teacher at the Kazinczy Ferenc Hungarian-Language Primary School in Tornaľa. As a teacher, I try to convey and instil values in my young students that will help them discover and appreciate the beauty and richness of Roma culture and that they should be proud of. They should not be ashamed of their identity. School constitutes a highly essential environment for Roma students in terms of socialization. I am absolutely certain that, as a teacher, I have a significant responsibility to guide these children and awaken a sense of self-awareness in them, helping them believe they are indeed capable of achieving more and that they, too, can become anything in life.

As a child, I grew up in a quiet little village called Šimonovce with my younger sister and parents. As long as I can remember, my parents always worked hard to ensure that we had everything we needed. I consider myself lucky to have been born into a family where our parents raised us with great love and understanding. We did not feel a lack of anything. I remember, as a young schoolgirl, coming home from school to find that my parents were never home because they were already working in the barns. They would only come home at bedtime, so my sister and I managed our studies on our own. I loved learning; I was open to everything and interested in everything. We learned to take care of ourselves very early on. Despite all of that, I had a beautiful childhood that I look back on fondly.

How did my life turn towards a career in teaching, and what motivated me? It was a long journey, full of obstacles, but all the effort and sacrifices were worth it. I have always loved children and spent a lot of time playing with younger kids. There was never any question – I knew, I felt that I needed to work with children. After finishing primary school, I initially applied to train as a nurse because I wanted to work on a children's ward. Unfortunately, that did not work out, so I deviated from my original goal and, thanks to my excellent grades, I was admitted to a retail management programme without an entrance exam. During my first year, I met my future husband – we fell in love, and I married young, which prevented me from finishing high school. Back in my time, Roma girls married quite early. We started a family and had three sons. As a mother, I stayed at home to raise my children, as all Roma women do.

I became fully aware of what I wanted to do with my life when I started working as a parent helper in the nursery school in Abovce, assisting with the children. I felt I needed to make a change because my life did not feel complete. Essentially, I felt I had a lot more potential. It was all very important and nice that my husband and I raised our children together, but I felt a strong inner drive to contribute something more of myself to the world. However, as a Roma wife, this was not an easy task! Eventually, this drive led my husband and me to make a crucial decision, as a result of which I first completed high school in retail management in Rimavská Sobota, finally graduating two years later. By then, all three of my children had already been attending school. I studied at night, worked during the day, and fulfilled my role as a mother at home, as a Roma woman is expected to – cooking, washing, cleaning, ironing, and, of course, making sure that fresh food was on the table every day. Then, as fate would have it, I applied to Selye János University, beginning my studies all over again, which bore fruit six years later. I successfully obtained my bachelor's and then my master's degree.

As a Roma woman, rising on my own was particularly difficult, but I do not regret it today. I must admit that, initially, my husband did not favour this change, saying, 'You do not need to work, why are you going to school? Stay at home and raise the children; I work and provide everything we need.' Slowly, however, his opinion and attitude changed. Today, he is immensely proud of me and celebrates my achievements with me.

Achieving my goals was greatly supported by a kind former headmistress of the Abovce primary school and the former deputy headmistress of the Tornaľa primary school. I look up to these people with pride. They told me: 'Évike, you must keep studying; do not worry about anything else, just study. I can see that you are capable, that you love working with children – this is your path, but it is only possible if you continue studying. You must finish what you have started!'

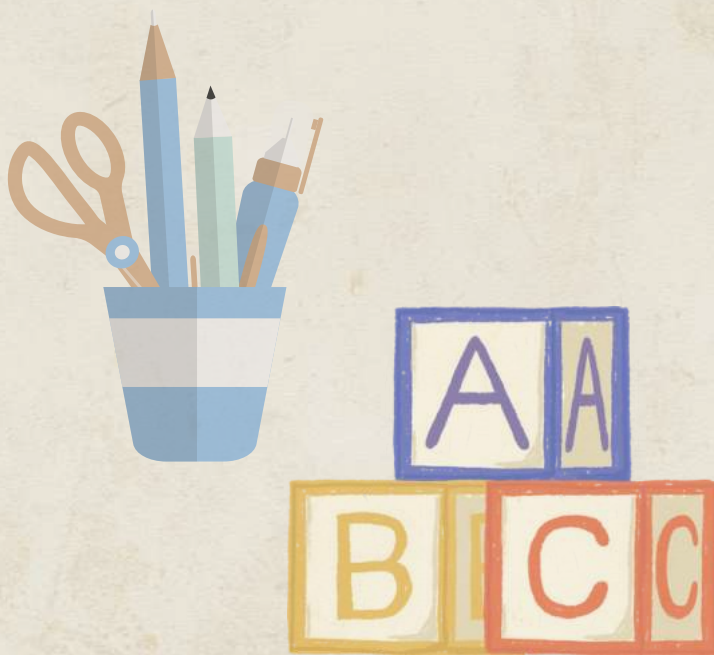
I was able to work for 15 years at the former small school in Abovce, where I gained a wealth of experience. This is where my career began, on the lowest rung of the ladder, and it fills me with pride. My colleagues accepted my Roma background and never made me feel inferior. On the contrary, they loved and respected me, sharing in my successes. They were people of unique value and pure heart. The skills I gained there I still use to this day and continue to expand them to the best of my ability. I try to carry all of this forward, but my most important teaching method remains: love, acceptance, and praise for the children.

Yes, there are beautiful moments in both my private life and career, but I am always most proud of my accomplishments with my little students – the way I teach them to write, read, count, or even just how to properly hold and use a pencil. Seeing how their behaviour changes, becoming gentler, and how they express themselves in an increasingly meaningful way, paying attention and answering my questions. They open up to me, speaking honestly about their feelings. When I prepare them for a drawing competition, seeing the joy in their eyes as they create with a pure heart and achieve great placements – they are my pride!

I have always followed Roma culture with interest, and this curiosity has been a defining element of every stage of my life, unfolding with me over the years. Roma culture is intertwined with singing and dancing, and I try to incorporate these traditions into my daily practice, preserving and passing them on to my students, strengthening their sense of belonging, encouraging them to proudly embrace their identity.

My message to today's Roma youth: 'Do not just know what is right – do it! The knowledge you gain is yours and enriches your work, making it more meaningful and of high quality. Keep learning as long as you can!'

Compiled by: Adam Csonka



Július Váradi (1946–2015): ‘Never Settle for Just Good; Strive for the Best, Even if It Is Only a Refrigerator.’

A Roma man who demonstrated how one could start from humble beginnings and make a mark in the world with a violin, strong will, and a love for music



Július Váradi was born in Rimavská Sobota and raised in Rimavská Seč as the first child and first son in a family of seven siblings. His father was the sole breadwinner, while his mother worked on the fields and in the gardens of more affluent families or cleaned for them. Born into a family of musicians, both his maternal and paternal grandparents were musicians, and the tradition was that newly born sons were given a bow to hold. He held onto it with such determination they were sure he would become a musician.

And so he did. Music became his vocation, as he went on to be a violinist excelling in classical music. His parents provided everything they could, but they lived in poverty. Determined to support his family, he sought to earn a living through music. As per various accounts, he was very fond of cleanliness and a man of precision. Also, he was extremely kind and helpful, assisting Roma people in various situations and standing up for them, living his life devoted to his family.

At the age of eight, his parents enrolled him in the music school in Feledince [today: Jesenské], which he attended by train. He would practise on the train, delighting fellow passengers with his playing, who would often tip him. Seeing potential in this, he started playing even better, and he eventually bought a bouquet of flowers for his mother on Mother’s Day. By the time he was 14 or 15, he was already playing in a band, performing at weddings and receiving invitations to nearby villages such as Janice and Harmac. He completed his studies at the Conservatory in Rimavská Sobota.

His first job was with the Jozef Gregor Tajovský Theatre in Banská Bystrica, where he worked for four to five years. Afterwards, he taught at the music school in Feledince. His next position was with the Thália Hungarian Theatre in Košice, where he met his wife, Sonia Karssayová. Later, he performed with a symphony orchestra in Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq, followed by an invitation to South Korea to perform at the Olympic opening ceremony. He concluded his successful career with many years at the Gran Teatre del Liceu in Barcelona, where he and his wife settled. They had a son together.



His business card

His motivation was always his love and devotion to music. He often practised from morning till night. When he could not master something, he would keep practising until it was perfect. For some reason, he was not attracted to Roma music as much as to classical theatre, symphonic orchestra. Even as a young child, he knew that he wanted to pursue this path and was confident he would one day be successful. He had some detractors who envied him, wanted to bring him down, and did not believe in his success. Despite everything, he aimed to achieve international recognition, which he did eventually. However, the most beautiful moment in his life was the birth of his son, and his family remained his greatest treasure.

When he fell ill, he expressed a wish to be buried in his homeland rather than in Spain. His wife fulfilled this wish, and in 2015, he was flown back from Barcelona and laid to rest in Rimavská Seč, next to his parents and siblings.

His message to young people, according to his sibling, would be: never give up on your dreams and be persistent.

Compiled by Antónia Szitai



In the army



Július's wife, Soňa Kassayová with her husband's mother and father.

Concluding Remarks

The stories of everyday heroes serve as a unique mirror for us all. The Roma heroes featured in this publication have not only made a difference in their own lives but have also shown the way for others. They are the ones who believed in themselves and dared to act, thereby setting an example for all of us. Ternipe Civil Society aims to give a voice to the Hungarian-speaking Roma youth in Slovakia and to build a community around those who can inspire others with their stories.

This publication is not merely a documentary but also a doorway providing an opportunity to get to know each other better and work together for a more inclusive and accepting society. Our everyday heroes have proven that every little action counts and that the smallest action can make a difference – not only in their own lives but also in their communities. As we read through their stories, we can understand that a hero is not some unattainable concept but a potential lying within each one of us.

Thank you for joining us on this journey, and we hope that the stories presented will inspire everyone to dare to believe in the power of change. The heroes are indeed among us – perhaps in you, dear reader, or in someone you know.

István Vavrek, Head of Ternipe Association, on behalf of the team

Do you have a Roma hero whose story you would like to share? If so, send it to us via the following e-mail address: ternipe1@gmail.com. If you do not wish to share it with others but would like to express your thoughts, you may write them on this page.



