Ágnes Daróczi

Making Gypsiness Bearable

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ágnes Daróczi (b. 1954, Berettyóújfalu, Hungary) was raised in Bedő (at that time, a Romanian minority village close to the Romanian border), the oldest child in an extended Romani family with four siblings. Bedő, her village, was mainly inhabited by Romanians and a few Romani families, including the extended Daróczi family. She went to the prestigious high school linked to the Lajos Kossuth University in Debrecen (1969–1973), where she discovered the poems of Károly Bari (b. 1952, Bükkaranyos, Hungary). He was one of the youngest and most talented Romani poets and writers in the 1970s. Daróczi recited several poems by Károly Bari at various educational and cultural fora. In 1971, she met Bari at the Sárospatak Students' Days, where she was also the winner of the recitation contest. At around the same time, she was exposed to Romani poetry and translations of József Choli-Daróczi (1939, Bedő–2018, Budapest) who was part of her extended family. In 1972, as a secondary school pupil, she received massive public recognition via a talent show (*Ki mit tud*? / "Who's Good at What?") for reciting a poem in both the Hungarian and Romani languages by Károly Bari. Her public recitation of poems by Bari and Choli-Daróczi were the most subversive acts of political aesthetics to emancipate the Roma. She furthered the discourse on Romani identity and political consciousness in an era when official discourse conceptualized Roma merely as a "social problem." In 1972, at a talent show, Daróczi met her future husband János Bársony (b. 1951, Budapest), who led the musical ensemble Monszun (1967–1986). Later, she became a member of this group as well. Bársony had an important intellectual influence on her and provided constant support for her political activism. In 1973, Daróczi was admitted to the Faculty of Humanities at the Eötvös Lóránd University in Budapest to study literature, cultural management, and then journalism. In 1978, she was the first Romani female public figure to have a university degree. During her university studies (1973–78), she visited, as part of the Monszun ensemble, workers' hostels that were primarily for Roma and non-Roma menial workers from the most disadvantaged regions of Hungary. They presented and collected Gypsy folk music, poems, and stories. Daróczi and Bársony established a Romani folk music

band, Romano Glaso, in 1976, and another, Kalyi Jag, in 1978. Both involved Romani workers from the hostels. As Daróczi explained, a breakthrough was made when the Hungarian elite saw oppressed Romani culture on the stage.

In 1978 she graduated from university and started to work at the Hungarian Institute for Ethnographic Culture (Népművelési Intézet) as a research fellow at the invitation of the sociologist Iván Vitányi (1925–2021), director of the institute. In 1979, this institutional framework provided her with the opportunity to organize the First National Exhibition of Self-Taught Artists, which Daróczi then reorganized and reconceptualized in 1989 and 2000.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Daróczi belonged to a tiny group of Romani intellectuals, including Károly Bari and Jenő Zsigó (b. 1952), who were considered "radicals" by the state. In 1989, Daróczi was one of the founders of Phralipe Independent Gypsy Organization, which aimed to end the party-state's Gypsy policy and create democratic representation for Roma communities in Hungary. In the same year she joined the Anti-Ghetto Committee led by Aladár Horváth (b. 1964) alongside other Roma and non-Roma intellectuals to challenge the plan for a segregated housing project, which aimed to remove Roma families from inner-city Miskolc.

After 1989, Daróczi played an important role at the national and transnational level. From 1992 until 2000 she was the founding editor of the Roma program *Patrin*[1] on Hungarian State Television. She also founded the Romedia Foundation, the Romano Instituto, and occupied important organizations transnationally, for example as founder and vice-president of the European Roma Travelers Forum, 2004–2016. She started pioneering research work with her husband János Bársony relating to the genocide of the Roma during the Holocaust. Ágnes Daróczi's intellectual and political efforts contributed to shifts in the historical and cultural canon of the Roma.

MOST IMPORTANT WORKS · with János Bársony, *Pharrajimos – cigányok sorsa a Holocaust idején* [The Fate of the Gypsies During the Holocaust] (Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2004); with János Bársony, *Vrana Mami mesél* [Grandma Vrana Tells Stories] (Budapest: Sulinova, 2005); with János Bársony, *Kali Trash-Pharrajimos-Samudaripen: fekete félelem, szétvágatás, legyilkolás: a romák sorsa a holocaust idején Magyarországon II*. [Kali Trash-Pharrajimos-Samudaripen: Black Fears, Extinction, and Extermination: The Fate of Roma During the Holocaust, Part II] (Budapest: Cigánységkutató Intézet-Romani Instituto, 2015); Miklós Jancsó, dir. *Megöltétek ártatlan családom* [You Killed my Innocent Family], documentary film, 1994; Miklós Jancsó, dir. *Temetetlen holtak* [Unburied Dead], documentary film, 1995; *Hosszú út áll előttem. Tények és Tanúk sorozat* [A Long Way Ahead of Me. Facts and Witnesses Series], ed. Angéla Kóczé (Budapest: Magvető, 2023).

Angéla Kóczé

1 *Patrin* has multiple meanings: it is a symbol or signpost left for later travelers in Romani culture, but it also generally means a leaf, a page, a sign, a symbol or a clue.

CONTEXT

Ágnes Daróczi's contribution to scholarly and wider social, cultural, and political life has been insufficiently recognized. Her assertive presence as a Romani woman and her claim for rights and equality of Romani women, men, and children have been blatantly ignored by the representatives of the women's movement.

Since the last decade of state socialism, her great speaking abilities and personal charisma, as well as her rebellious acts, revolutionized the tiny group of Romani intellectuals in Hungary. Daróczi was a key activist in a male-dominated group of Romani intellectuals perceived by the socialist state as "radicals." The state took all possible steps to eliminate their political resistance.[2] This tiny group of Romani intellectuals dared to critically evaluate state policies on Roma and challenge their oppressive and discriminatory practices. The opinion piece presented here was written by Daróczi for the forum section of *Jel-Kép*, a quarterly scholarly journal on communication and media. Around that time, there was a significant shift in the political claims made by Romani intellectuals towards cultural recognition and representation. Daróczi, and other Romani intellectuals who had been stigmatized as "radicals" (Károly Bari, Jenő Zsigó, and in the late 1980s, Aladár Horváth) articulated a critical framing of ethnicity/ethnic identity in order to challenge the definition of "Gypsy" as either a primordial or socially "disadvantaged," "backward," "uncivilized" population. They unflinchingly claimed the political relevance of the emancipation and liberation of Romani identities, of oppressed Romani gaining political consciousness and dignity.

The forum in *Jel-Kép* consisted of three articles (one of them by Daróczi) on the possibility of publishing a "Gypsy journal" (*cigánylap*). This discussion reflected on important projected changes in the state socialist policy towards Roma. In 1984, the "Gypsy problem" had been assigned to the Patriotic Popular Front (Hazafias Népfront), which presented a new policy emphasizing cultural autonomy and self-representation. The Agitation and Propaganda Committee (Agitációs és Propaganda Bizottság) met on October 2, 1984, confirmed this political shift, and officially asked the Patriotic Popular Front, in cooperation with the Office of the Council of Ministers, to prepare a recommendation for improving Roma affairs and preserve/cultivate their cultural heritage. The Committee also requested to investigate the basis for a possible cultural organization/union that would promote social integration (*társadalmi beilleszkedés*) and explore the need for one journal for the "Gypsies."[3]

Daróczi aligned herself with the two other authors in the Forum in *Jel-kép*, who also supported the launch of a bilingual (Romani and Hungarian) journal. One of

2 Majtényi and Majtényi, *A Contemporary History of Exclusion*, 103.

3 Hajnáczky, *"Egyértelmű, hogy a cigányok nem tekinthetőek nemzetiségnek": cigánypolitika dokumentumokban, 1956–1989*, 315.

them was Mrs. Vera Kozák (in Hungarian, she published under her full married name, Kozák Istvánné), the Secretary of the Gypsy Coordination Committee, who had been at the meeting on October 2, 1984. In Daróczi's recollection, unlike other political functionaries in the Committee, Kozák was someone who helped and supported the process of Roma emancipation.[4] The forum provided a scholarly (semi-independent) platform to deliberate the necessity of launching a "Gypsy journal" as discussed in that meeting. In her piece, "Is There a Need For a Gypsy Journal?" Kozák argued that numerous studies from various perspectives already dealt with the integration of "Gypsies," however they themselves seldom had the opportunity to shape and forge discussions about them: "Debates always take place somewhere above, without them."[5] The third author, Gábor Havas, was a sociologist who belonged to the research group led by István Kemény that in 1971 showed, via empirical research, that the Roma in Hungary were living in deteriorating conditions and were in their majority excluded from every area of life. In the 1970s, Kemény was "silenced" by the party-state. Havas titled his piece with the rhetorical question "Do We Need the Question Mark?"[6] He avoided going into the perennial definitional debate on whether the Roma are a national minority or social issue, arguing instead for collective recognition and rights. He maintained that a bilingual journal would be a platform for the Roma to articulate their interests and a catalyst for shaping policies that relate to the Roma. Both Kozák and Havas supported Roma self-determination via the Romani language as well as public platforms, such as the journal.

The sequence of articles showcases different approaches to the Roma. The first was written by a representative of the party-state, the second by a scholar, and the last by Daróczi as a Romani activist. She began with a rhetorical question "... if a few Gypsy, or non-Gypsy people nod or protest now, does this give us a Gypsy magazine?!"[7] Any analysis of her text would be incomplete without understanding the symbolism of a bilingual Romani magazine and its legacy of cultural and political emancipation. In this regard, Daróczi followed in the footsteps of Mária László (1909–1989), the first Romani woman who received a mandate from the socialist state to establish and lead the Hungarian Gypsy Cultural Association (HGCA, Magyar Cigányok Művelődési Szövetsége) and take the highest office. Although her leadership as Secretary of the HGCA was short-lived (1957–1958), László became a very ardent and effective leader, providing political, economic, and administrative support to Roma.[8] She turned the HGCA into an organization that represented Roma minority rights and culture and ceaselessly worked for official recognition. She believed that the "elevation"

4 Daróczi, *Hosszú út áll előttem*, 96.
5 Kozák, "Kell-e cigánylap," 73.
6 Havas, "Kell-e a kérdőjel," 74.
7 Daróczi, "Vállalhatóvá tenni a cigányságot," 75.
8 Dupcsik, *A magyarországi cigányság története*, 140.

of Romani minority culture, including language, music, literature, and dance, was the best way to boost solidarity in society and emancipate Roma. Mária László was also part of women's history as she paved the way for broader Romani emancipation, and from the late 1970s onwards remained a source of inspiration for several Romani intellectuals and feminists who challenged the politics of state socialism. Her political mission was revived by Daróczi and highlighted in her article.

Another important legacy for this discussion is the *Rom Som* bilingual Romani Journal for the Gypsy Club, edited by József Choli-Daróczi and his disciples.[9] The first volume was published in 1975, a period of ambiguous policies, as the party-state tried to strike a delicate balance between prohibiting and tolerating, promising, and quickly limiting, the possibility of cultural emancipation.[10] The *Rom Som* journal was conceived as an apolitical monthly program guide for the Gypsy Club in Budapest. However, under the guise of a benign program magazine, Romani intellectuals used it as a public forum to publish pieces in the Romani language. This subversive undertaking was not tolerated by the socialist state, who consequently banned it in 1978.

Daróczi is an influential cosmopolitan Romani intellectual in Hungary and beyond. She has been involved in international Romani politics since the early 1970s. Her first international intervention was at the Third World Romani Congress in Göttingen, Germany Federal Republic, in 1981, where she was one of the very few Romani women out of 300 delegates from twenty-two countries. With this international knowledge and background, she contributed to some remarkable ideas and programs that relate to the cultural and political emancipation of Roma.

Daróczi has had an indisputable influence on Romani women's activisms and feminisms. She is one of the strong, radical—in the sense of uncompromising when it comes to her goals—and most straightforward Romani female activists in Hungary and beyond, who never fails to challenge injustices and engage in controversies to fight for the emancipation of Romani women, men, and children.

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Angéla Kóczé

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Ágnes Daróczi

Making Gypsiness Bearable

My answer to the question "Do we need a Gypsy magazine?" is a definite yes. But let me ask a question, too: If a few Gypsy or non-Gypsy people nod or protest now, does this give us a Gypsy magazine?! Or does it make sense to let the genie out of the bottle by organizing a public debate, knowing that the question has been on the agenda in various fora for the past ten years as a concrete proposal: Let us have a Gypsy magazine!

But, well, we still do not have one.

Of course, the exact undertaking of such a magazine—as well as its target audience and themes—are still open questions. Anyway, no matter whether the magazine talks to Gypsy people by reflecting their social expectations, or is about Gypsy people, presenting good and bad examples of mobility, or is a platform for (scientific or not-so- scientific) writings that reflect upon Gypsy people, or a combination of these three—I do feel we need a Gypsy magazine.

Liberation after the Second World War undeniably brought about the possibility for Gypsy people to live a dignified life, too. However, equal rights do not mean equal opportunities. Looking at the Gypsy population in Hungary from the two aspects of social life—that is, culture and economy—I have the strong feeling that, without equal opportunities, social inequality is simply reproduced.

One of the components of the so-called "Gypsy problem" is made up of economic and social problems. A few data in order to have a clearer picture: the

employment rate of Gypsy men hardly (with 3 to 5 percent) deviates from the national average; when we look at Gypsy women, the situation is worse (approximately 50 percent), but this is justified by them having more children, and also the fact that there are less day care institutions, kindergartens, or job opportunities in villages (where 78 percent of Gypsy people live, as opposed to 55 percent of the non-Gypsy population). However, if we take a look at the division of labor, we find that approximately 2–3 percent of Gypsy men working are intellectuals, 13–15 are skilled workers, and 82–85 percent are unskilled. It seems that a major task for the future is to bring along changes regarding this startling disproportion in order for the Gypsy population to take part in the hierarchy of social work-share in accordance with its share of the population.

The other aspect of social existence is culture. To me, the "cultural difference" (as put by Mrs Dr Kozák [in the essay before Daróczi's in the same journal issue]) of Hungarian Gypsies, besides having a different mother tongue (in Hungary, 80–100, 000 Gypsies speak Gypsy and 25–30,000 speak Romanian as their mother tongue), also implies the presence of certain "underprivileged" subcultures separated from the majority. I could talk of several examples when young people who finish primary school with good grades, or are even skilled workers, or finish a secondary school, stay to work as skilled workers in brigades consisting of villagers and acquaintances since they cannot handle the difficulties of leaving their community and being excluded. The reason behind this is not only the fear of prejudice, but also communication in its entirety, or how we build relationships. In situations like these, the integration of whole groups—engendering upward social mobility for whole communities—could be a solution. But at least the conditions of group integration and acceptance should be secured. That is, creating the possibility of integration is a precondition—a precondition of assimilation.

Besides "cultural difference," several segments of the Gypsy population show definite cultural backwardness. There are still many who are illiterate: the last study, conducted in 1971, showed that 39 percent of the approximately 160,000 Gypsy adults were illiterate or semi-illiterate. At present, only approximately 60 percent of Gypsy youth finish primary school by the age of 16. I do not think we need to speak further about the impact of cultural conditions on people's economic circumstances.

But you may ask: How is this related to the question of creating a Gypsy magazine?

Of course, I do not believe that a magazine can bring about basic changes in the level of people's education. But I do think that it can contribute to the clarification of one's relationship to themselves. And someone with a positive identification acts more self-confidently and assertively, may have more achievements, and face less failure and disappointment. They can socialize the tensions caused

by mobility, and thus fewer of them take the path toward alcoholism, criminality, and maladjustment. (I am referring here to the results of the study conducted by the Faculty of Law: 40 percent of Gypsy people convicted of committing a violent crime were at least partly motivated by the indignation caused by offenses, be they real or imagined, because of their Gypsy identity.)

These all show that the meaning of the word 'Gypsy' must change and be purified from pejorative connotations so that Gypsy identity depends on someone's choice and not on external constraints. We need a tolerant public consciousness, free from harmful negative conditioning, so that everyone can decide whether they want to be Gypsy or not. One's origins cannot be determining factors. Language cannot define community anymore: as a survey conducted in 1971 shows, 21 percent of the Gypsy population speaks Gypsy and 8 percent speaks Romanian, thus it would be most adequate to consider it as the assumption of identity. But for this, we need to make being Gypsy bearable!

All of this means that a Gypsy magazine would face many difficult tasks, as it should undoubtedly contribute to this process. The magazine should also be bilingual: certain pages should be in both Hungarian and Gypsy or Hungarian and Romanian.

Besides the positive experience of being recognized, the publicity of the magazine could also spread values brought from home, opposing these to expected values, and creating a space for the former among the latter. Thus, the mistake frequently made at school—that is, educating against what is taught at home—could be avoided.

The Gypsy magazine could also present the efforts of Gypsy people to take the path of betterment, not only for themselves, but for their wider community and environment, too. This is proven by the one-hundred-and-fifty Gypsy communities that have formed cultural clubs and bands countrywide.

A Gypsy magazine would inform people about the troubles in villages and urban areas, about the joys of family, and, if necessary, could ask for social help and attention—not charity, but solidarity and sympathy. It would help take an objective stance on the so-called Gypsy problem without idealizing.

I could also talk about the astonishment with which simple, unschooled people listen to bilingual (Gypsy and Hungarian) poems. I could tell you how popular the news items or reports about them are. Since Gypsy folklore is still based on oral traditions, these stories are almost immediately transformed into legends. The illiterate ask others to read out what is printed; and the Gypsy topics (even if they are merely rumors) are discussed at family gatherings.

I could say that what they perceive as pertaining to them travels fast, getting into the innermost parts of the country very quickly.

But it is more important to talk about the remarkable examples of neighbouring friendly countries. Chronology requires that we mention the Soviet Union

first, where the first Gypsy magazine in the world (entitled *Romani Zorya* [Romani Dawn]) was published. The theatrical group called Romen, which was established in Moscow, is also world- famous. In Bulgaria, there is a radio show on Wednesdays and also a regular television program that deals with Gypsy people. In Yugoslavia, besides radio and television program, there is a magazine called *Krlo e Romengo / Glas Roma* [The Voice of the Roma].

We hope that Hungary will be next in line.

Translated by Beáta Sándor