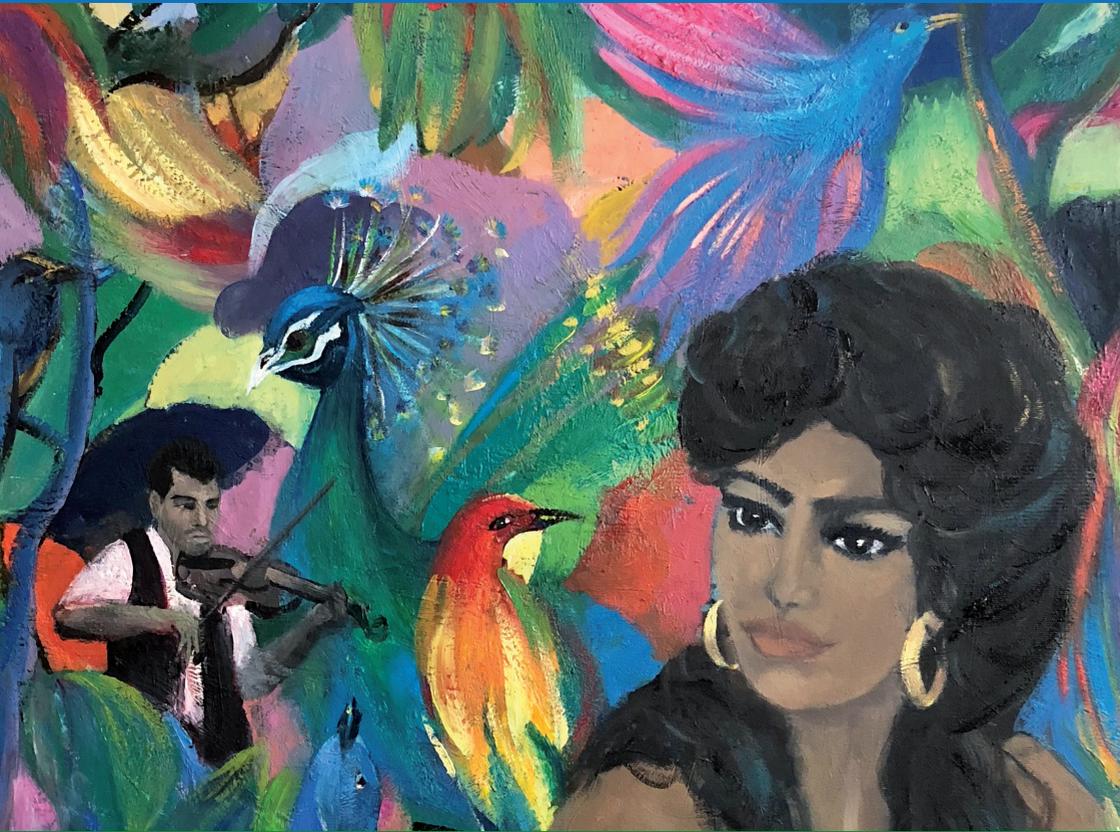




A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO LATVIAN ROMANI CULTURE



Photographs from the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre, archives of the the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation, private archives of the Leimanis family and Ēriks Kleins.

Cover painting “Attraction of Paradise” by Ornella Rudeviča.

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Layout: „Sava grāmata”.



Kultūras ministrija



This project is co-financed within the framework of the Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme of the European Union.

The present material has been developed under the project "The Latvian Roma platform 3: fostering cooperation and participation" with the financial support of the European Union Rights, Equality and Citizenship Programme 2014-2020. The Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia and Elvita Ruka is responsible for the contents of the material. It does not reflect the opinion of the European Commission.

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There is no way to happiness, the way itself is happiness!

(*Romani wisdom*)

Every country of the world has its own gorgeous adornment – Roma, which is the largest ethnic minority in Europe¹. In Latvia this national minority has been known as *Gypsies* for centuries and with this name it has become a part of Latvia's country, cultural environment and common mentality. Even though by numbers it has always been a small part of our residents, still it is compact, visible and slightly diverse. The name “Gypsies” has arrived with this nationality from other countries, it has spread its roots in the community, cultural heritage, literature and arts.

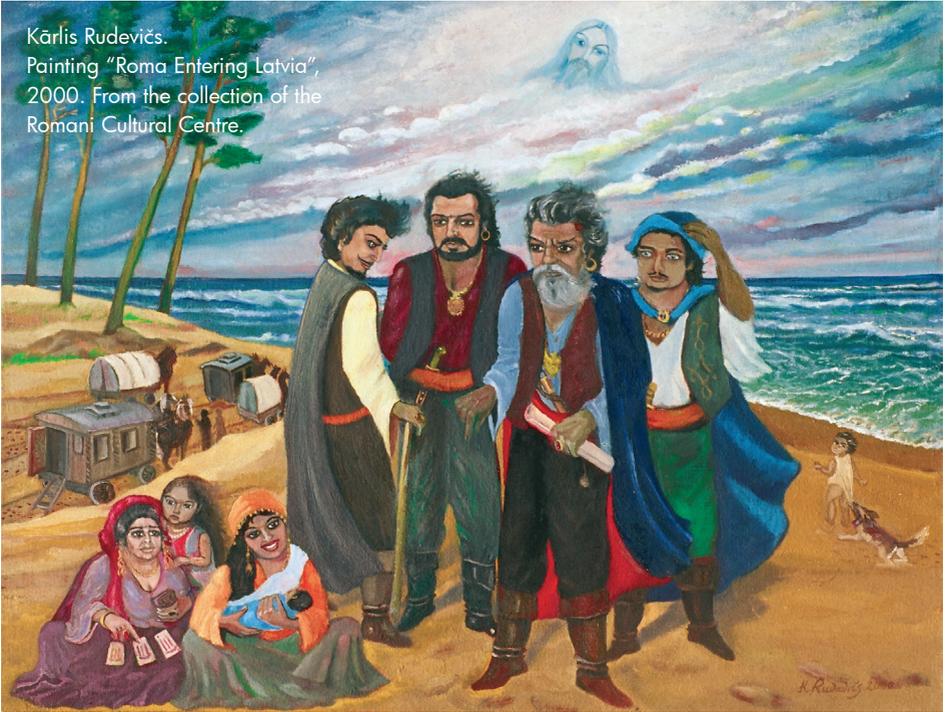
Everywhere they go they both belong to the country's own people and are strangers in the country, both well-known and different. It is the fate of people that do not have their own ethnic country, but have a deep and strong self-preservation code – survival instinct, the ability to adapt, faith in God and bright character. It is the fate of people whose origin are still entwined in secrets and legends, people that pass over their culture, life wisdom of generations collected on the road by word of mouth – from heart to heart.

People that have been wandering through centuries by crossing continents, overpassing mountains, have survived persecutions, have been both loved and hated – the people that are and remain unique. The exotic past when Roma wandered from place to place, borrowing the most magnificent, best, brightest features from every culture – in garments, music, language – is a heritage of centuries in the blood. Adaption to the country of residence is a sign of the recent past. It is significant to remember that Roma have preserved their peculiarity, they still differ in each country.

Latvian Roma reflect the local features of character. Living together with Latvians and other nationalities in Latvia, they have become more down-to-earth, they have grown roots in Latvian climate and mentality. The colourful garments, golden jewellery, proud hearts and impetuous characters remain just for movie screens and novels, the Balkan temper and Russian countryside. However, Latvian Roma have a reflection of their fiery tribe in their eyes – those are people who through all the times have been able to preserve happiness for life, wit and warmth at the family hearth.

¹ Information from the website of the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights <https://fra.europa.eu/en/>

Kārlis Rudevičs.
 Painting "Roma Entering Latvia",
 2000. From the collection of the
 Romani Cultural Centre.



OUTLAWS OR CHOSEN ONES?

Academic literature presumes that the ethnic country of Roma is India, the territory in the valley of the River Indus that currently is a part of India and Pakistan. There is no archeologic or written evidence to prove that, but the language and anthropological studies clearly point in this direction. The legends bring to Egypt and even to the God of the Sun, Ra, relate with Kurds and Afghans, adorn with the Arabian guitars and nails forged for the

Jesus' cross and later stolen, incite curiosity and hide tracks. The locals were curious to know – who were they and where did they come from, these visitors that differed by appearance and behaviour. Roma arrived in Europe in the Middle Ages, their second country and still the largest territory of residence was the Balkan region. Some groups travelled further, gradually spreading across the world. Roma arrived in Latvia as peaceful strangers who had home everywhere under the Sun. On their way they needed to feed their horses and light up a campfire, they had to get their daily bread, therefore they had to make friends with the locals. Roma were

doing it in their own way – they entertained the settled people with their songs, dances, fortune-telling, circus tricks, offering their crafts and practicing their cult trade – horse boarding. They brought along changes and some news, decorated the everyday routine, inciting curiosity, admiration and disdain at the same time. They were diverse and belonged to various sub-culture groups, they had a distinctly different social life, while from the outside they were all associated with “Gypsies”. Their different appearances and lifestyle arose suspicions – often they were driven off, whisked away, chased with claims that they were all thieves, swindlers and frauds.

Thus, inspired by their free lifestyle and on the road to a better life, in the 15th-16th century Roma arrived in Latvia from Poland and Germany². This is reflected in their family surnames. The surnames Kleins, Leimanis, Neilands, Erberhards, Šimanis prove their origin from Germany, while the surnames Putrašēvics, Marcin-kēvičs, Kozlovskis, Dombrovskis suggest of roots in Poland. Most of Roma were living and still live in Kurzeme region. They have settled in the valley of the River Abava, crowning Sabile as the unofficial Romani capital. Even though historically wandering has been known as the most characteristic feature of this national minority, Latvian Roma were not travelling that much. Having arrived in this country

and having felt a rather friendly attitude, Roma made their roots here and wandered only seasonally within the borders of the closest region. They were quite peacefully living side by side with the local residents, they had distinct areas of trade and territories. They were mostly living in the country, creating and deepening an impression that all “Gypsies” are children of nature and feel the best in a fresh air. They would gladly live in a green meadow with their carriages, make campfires, breed horses, men would go to town just to sell something with a gain, have fun in a pub, pray to God and then return back to the settlement where everybody has his wife and children, where there is freedom, song and dances. According to the Romani traditional perception of life, not much is needed for happiness, but the honour of the family, togetherness and living in nature are the most important things.

Happiness or “Baxt” in the Romani language is the basic value that every Roma wishes others from the whole heart – it is the richness of the soul, success, family welfare and the gift of God. That is how they lived, seeing the mission of life in the family and community.

The idyllically romantic vision of life of Roma had just two significant drawbacks – Latvia’s short summer and the

² Apine, I., *Gypsies (Roma) in Latvia// The Fiery Tribe* (Riga: publishing house “Imanta”, 2007.), p. 11

need to earn bread. The long autumns and cold winters forced them to look for at least seasonal shelter, mostly provided by friendly farmers and town people. Also, they needed their daily bread. Not everything could be provided just by men selling horses and women telling fortune or bargaining – activities that could be compared to exchange of services and witty begging at the same time. According to the Latvian and Roma folklore, the Romani women with their character and psychological skills in a way were serving as countryside psychotherapists – women were walking from home to home, offering to listen in on the joys and sorrows of the house, sharing advice or telling fortune, helping out with small everyday chores, and in exchange receiving food products or household goods. The conception that a real Rom considers paid work beneath him is an exaggerated generalisation or an echo from the ideals cultivated during the hippie era – sources suggest that Latvia's Roma had to take up work from the very start. The history of Latvia tells not only about workers, but also horse traders, craftsmen, famous fortune tellers, artists, cultural activists, etc.

Latvia's population census in 1897 shows³ that less than 10 percent of the 1,942 Roma registered in Latvia were working in farming. Agriculture could not be the traditional lifestyle of nomads, they had to learn this as a new skill. Horse

boarding and crafts were more common occupations, many Latvian Roma were blacksmiths and cobblers, while the majority of Roma earned their daily bread in seasonal and casual jobs – initially with the German barons, then with Latvian farmers, and later, during the years of Latvia's first independence, in large farms. Urbanisation of Latvian Roma is a historically new feature and happened unusually fast in their community. In 1935, just 7.3 percent of Roma were living in cities, while others remained in the countryside. The Soviet regime tried to put an end to the nomad lifestyle in the whole Soviet Union with administrative means. In 1956, a special decree demanded registration of all "Gypsies", their association with a permanent place of residence in cities or villages and engagement in paid jobs. The ancient, romantic nomadic lifestyle was left in the past like a distantly glowing campfire. Today's reality, the practical care for living and family welfare have pushed the ideals even further away.

CAN BIRDS OF PASSAGE BE COUNTED?

According to an old legend, all Roma were once birds. One day while flying over the country, they saw a wonderful palace shining in the sun. Driven by longing, Roma – birds flew into the palace that was full of

³ Apine, I., *Gypsies (Roma) in Latvia// The Fiery Tribe* (Riga: publishing house "Imanta", 2007.), p. 13



◀ Kārlis Rudevičs.
 Painting "Once We
 Were Birds", 1993.
 From the collection of the
 Romani Cultural Centre.

geese, hens and turkeys. They were in awe of the guests' beauty and started to entice the colourful birds with gifts, gold and precious stones – to make them stay in the palace. Soon all Roma were dressed in shining gold. Only one bird resisted the temptation and did not touch the gold. It called on everyone to fly away, but nobody listened to him. With a heavy heart he flew up to the sky and then crashed into the ground as a stone. His death made all other Roma return to their senses. They tried to fly with their wings, but gold had made them too heavy. A small red feather came down from the sky. It released Roma from the heaviness of the possessions, but still it was not able to lift them up on their wings any more. The feather took off with the wind and flew away into the world. Roma were following it and, anxiously beating their wings, turned into people. Only their souls

remained unchanged – they stayed with the birds who have forgotten to fly⁴.

If this beautiful legend can also refer to the Latvian Roma, then a part of this anxious soul is flying among us. It is a part of the imperceptible myth of Roma that suits them so much. Even their exact population number has never been certain. While wandering, Roma had often hidden their identity or avoided being counted. Before the war, there were about 4,000 Roma in Latvia (3,839 registered in 1935), and half of them was exterminated during the terror acts of the Nazi in a period of Second World War. After the positive growth of the Roma population during the Soviet period, their number increased considerably. According to the population census in 2000, there were 8,024 Roma,

⁴ In an interview with Kārlis Rudevičs in January 2001.

accounting for 0.3 percent of the overall population in Latvia. On January 1, 2007, there were 8,559 Roma registered. In relation to the intense migration to other European countries, mostly the UK, in 2019, there were only 7,060 Roma registered in Latvia⁵. But Roma still believe that the number is twice as large – those who have remained in Latvia and those who are living outside Latvia, but have maintained their Latvian citizenship and family ties. Irrespective of their exact number, it is a small minority in Latvia that is connected to our land by ancient cultural ties and loyal attitude to the state. Thanks to the natural gifts, Roma quite easily learn to speak a foreign language, therefore it is easier for them to integrate among the native population.

It is important to know that Latvian Roma are divided into several subgroups based on the migration history, places of settlement and cultural traditions. Non-Romani community identify them as representatives of common nationality of “Gypsies”, but it is an oversimplification. Roma are distinct about their national identity and are aware that, while originating from one source, they have divided later into different streams – like in other European countries, also here the Romani community is not ethnically homogeneous and there is a variety of dialects of the Romani language. There are two largest Roma groups in Latvia – Latvian and the

Russian Roma. The first one is called *Lotfitka Roma* or the *Chuhni* by Russian Roma, while the other is called *Xaladitka Roma* or the *Fandari* by Latvian Roma.

The most visible difference is everyday language they use besides their native language – Latvian or Russian, but there are also differences in character, everyday traditions and culture. Latvian Roma admit that they are calmer, have a different character, and they always add that “they are more like Latvians”.

For many people Roma associate with the image created by movies and performances, where the bright-coloured skirts of the women are fluttered around, while men definitely have a knife in their boots which will flash in the air at a moment of passion... However, life is not a stage, therefore both Russian and Latvian Roma in many areas have merged within today's society. What are the differences that have remained and distinguish them among other nationalities?

Definitely, it is their native language (*Romanes*), as well as the internal social organisation and the sense of togetherness for those whose life is based on the unwritten and strictly followed *Romanipen* rules – in simple words, it can be called the nation's inner Constitution. There are a number of Roma who do not hide their identity are proud of it. They are those who honour and develop the cultural heritage of Latvia's Roma, while for other Roma it should be learned anew – they have forgotten it in the haste of social

⁵ Data of the Office of Citizenship and Migration Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, 2019.

survival. The person's position in the traditional Roma community depends on belonging to the certain social class or "zorte" as Latvia's Roma call it.⁶ When born in a Romani family, a person automatically inherits not only the ethnic origin, but also the social status in the community, and this status remains unchanged and determines almost everything – how children will be brought up, how guests are received, how much education and culture will be provided in the family. According to representatives of the traditional Romani community, in the mutual communication among Roma much depends on the "zorte" the family belongs to – whether the family belongs to the highest social class – "intelligentsia", the medium-class or so-called "Kolkhozniks" or "berry-pickers", or to the lowest class so-called "Chupari"⁷. Also, much of culture perception and awareness will be determined whether the Roma is born in a homogeneous or a mixed family, whether its members have assimilated or for some reason have been expelled from the traditional Romani community. This nationality is versatile, which can be brightly seen also in the cultural heritage of Latvian Roma preserved in personalities, their work, literature, art, poetry, songs – it is especially worth to highlight and popularize it in the modern global world.

⁶ Another word which describes different „social classes” in Latvian Lotfika Roma dialect is word „šlaka.”

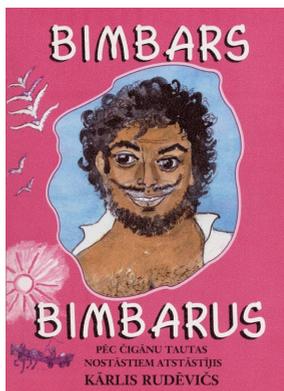
⁷ Kretalovs, D., *Dzimtes lomas un to pārveides romu ģimenēs Latvijā// Zinātnisku rakstu krājums „Dzimtes konstruēšana”* (Rīga: izdevniecība AVENS, 2016.), 79.lpp.

ANCIENT IMAGE OF ROMA/GYPSIES

Latvia's folklore sources reveal a Roma man as an ordinary, vital, slightly cunning, life-loving person – it is confirmed in folk songs, fairy tales, newspaper articles from the 19th century. Their dignity and wisdom of life is reflected in a folk song that claims: *“I was a daughter of a Gypsy, I learned all trades, I can do spells, I can practice sorcery, I can skin a lamb”* („Es čigāna meita biju, Visu darbu mācētāja, Māku burt, māku riebt, Māku jēru nodirāt.”)⁸ The positive and even admiring attitude is demonstrated in an article of the 280th issue of “Baltijas Vēstnesis” newspaper of 1884:

“You will seldom find such a nation in the world that is as wonderful as Gypsies. It is a wonder that this quite weird nation that has been living in civilised Europe for several centuries, scattered among other nations, has been able to preserve their features and traditions; time, climate and large political turns and examples set by other nations have not been able to introduce changes in their lifestyle.”

⁸ Website of the Academic Library of the University of Latvia www.acadlib.lu.lv/arc/cigani_Latvija



▲ Kārlis Rudevičs. Cover of book “Bimbars – Bimbarus”. Author’s edition, 2000. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

◀ Carl Huhn. Painting “Young Gypsy Woman”, 1870. From the collection of the Latvian National Museum of Art.

Colourful and touching scenes with participation of Roma have been featured by Latvian writers Jānis Jaunsudrabiņš (1877-1962) and Doku Atis (1961-1903), and also other authors have reflected on Gypsies. The famous Latvia’s Baltic-German painter Carl Huhn (1831-1877) created a romantic painting “Young Gypsy Woman” that features social reality and is a part of the permanent exhibition of the Latvian National Museum of Art. The painting made in 1870 depicts a young girl as a child of nature playing music – realistic and romantic at the same time. The best reflection of the national’s colourful image with an elegant ease has been created by the brightest Latvia’s Romani poet and

artist Kārlis Rudevičs (1939-2002), having developed the character of Bimbars based on tales of the Roma nation. In the introduction to his book, he characterised the Romani folklore and the living tradition of tales: *“Fairy-tales, legends, funny stories and folk songs played a significant role in the life of Gypsies in the pre-television era. Those were pastimes in cold winter evenings, sitting by a warm fireplace or in summer by a glowing campfire, and they were also the bonding point of families and whole clans. Fairy-tales, legends, songs and funny stories were listened to by everyone – the old ones, the young ones and children. A good story-teller was respected and warmly welcome everywhere. The Gypsy*

folklore is very rich, admirably colourful and full of fantastic imagination.”⁹

Roma enjoy stories about magic, rising of the dead from graves and other supra-national phenomena. Roma and Latvians have similar folk songs about orphans, pubs and recruits, also stories and anecdotes about the witty “Gypsy” who fooled the landlord. The character of Bimbars was based on all these sources, and in Kārlis Rudevičs’ poetry demonstrates the archetypical image of Latvia’s “Gypsy”.

Already the first verse reveals features of the character and structure of the family and the whole nationality:

“Bimbars does not come from an ordinary family – it is famous on the Baltic coast; his father comes from the Bird tribe who is no friend to deceit and fraud, he raised his son decently – his first Gypsy boy. The only thing he was not able to teach him was to sow and to furrow. He himself did not have to do any job because his wife was the bread-winner – whisperer, fortune teller. Bimbars was growing up on his own, young and healthy as an oak in a meadow. Also, his eleven brothers were all musclemen. Still, Bimbars stood out among his brothers both in vigour and spirit – he was the strongest one, he was the smartest one.”¹⁰

Bimbars of course has his own special Romani wisdom. He is naive, even simple-minded, but kind-hearted and always optimistic. He is aware of his position in the world order and is not grumbling or complaining about it. He is driven by honest intentions, but his small cheats turn out as naive misunderstandings. He does not have an inferiority complex, he is sure that God wishes him only well. He does not lack initiative and self-pride – having no possessions on his own and with his single shirt on his back, he is proud to present a simple bean to the baron as a gift. Bimbars is polite and well-wishing, therefore he receives presents for all his completed and uncompleted works. Bimbars is able to laugh at himself – when he is sawing a branch on which he himself is sitting, when bragging in a pub he orders a bowl of mustard or is pretending to be a dead man rising. This is what he is:

“You may ask whoever you want – Bimbars is well-known among people, he is still alive in Latvia. He is somewhere among Roma. A simpleton and a daredevil, helpful and kind-hearted, a strongman, but naive as a child, always the merry Gypsy boy, exactly what Gypsies always have been.”

We can only agree with the author – life would be much sadder without Bimbars and his compatriots!

⁹ Rudevičs, K., *Bimbars* (Riga: author’s edition, 2000.), p.5

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9.



▲ Choir of “Friend of Gypsy” organisation on April 29, 1933, at the Latvian Conservatoire. Jānis Leimanis in the centre. Photographer Roberts Johansons. A photo from the archives of the Museum of the History of Riga and Navigation.

75 NOTEBOOKS AND FIRST BOOK

During Latvia’s first independence period, the Romani cultural heritage gained a visible shape. The archives of the Latvian folklore received 75 notebooks where the Romani folklore was described in a very careful and round-lettered handwriting in two languages at once – the native Romanes and Latvian language. It happened in 1933 and 1934, when this invaluable contribution to the cultural history was ensured by Jānis Leimanis (1886-1950),

nicknamed *Berņis* – a religious, educated and bright Roma man. This outstanding cultural activist was born in Skrunda in 1886 and until 1898 spent his childhood among nomads in Kurzeme forests. He finished the school of Kuldīga Russian orthodox parish, went to Aizpute district school, but did not finish it because of the poor material situation¹¹. Being a strong believer, he studied the Bible and in 1931 completed its translation into the Romanes. He established an organisation

¹¹ Viksna, M., Introduction//J.Leimanis “Gypsies in Latvia’s forests, homes and markets” (Riga: publishing house Zinātne, 2005.), p. 9.

“Friend of Gypsies” (“*Čigānu draugs*”) whose members gathered in a building belonging to the Edinburg Orthodox Church at Jomas Street in Jurmala. Jānis Leimanis conducted the organisation’s choir, organised concerts and became a remarkable cultural activist. In 1933, he at his own initiative started work as a temporary employee at the archives of folklore, collecting Romani folklore – in total 500 folklore units were recorded in 75 notebooks, including legends, stories, fairytales, anecdotes, proverbs, songs, schlaggers, etc. His contribution proved that the Romani culture has ancient roots, that Roma understand the past and are also following the flow of time – integrating into the society, respecting the country, valuing education, not hiding their origin, but finding pride in it. There is nothing embellished in the stories recorded by him. It is a very vital world where people believe in fate, but do not stop playing with it. Based on Leimanis’ stories, the first Romani book was published in 1939, “Gypsies in Latvia’s forests, homes and markets”, whose author was then 33-year old Juris Georgs Leimanis – Jānis’ foster son.

Juris Leimanis (1916-1973) was born in 1916, in Yaroslavl, Russia, where his parents had been in exile, but in 1921 the family returned to Latvia. After the death of his father, Juris in early childhood was accepted in the family of his father’s brother Jānis. Leimanis senior was well aware of the role and necessity of educa-



▲ Juris Leimanis at the military service of the Latvian Army, 1938. Photo from family archives.



▲ Cover of book “Gypsies in Latvia’s forests, homes and markets”. Publishing house “Zinātne”, 2005.

tion, therefore he sent Juris and his two other foster sons to school. Juris finished Bulduri elementary school, studied at the Riga Teachers’ Institute, graduated from Rainis’ Gymnasium, served at the cavalry of the Latvian Army. After the army, he enrolled in the vocal class of Latvia’s Conservatoire, but World War II destroyed all future plans.

The Leimanis family was among those Roma who, *by the grace of God*, survived the genocide. They had settled in the vicinity of Talsi where, thanks to Kārlis Krūmiņš, the massacre against the Roma left them untouched. The book “Gypsies in Latvia’s forests, homes and markets” is a direct, laconic, but very colourful and vital portrait of the Roma nation. “A Gypsy is free as a cloud in the sky, and now you want to hold a cloud in the reins. What will come out of it?” women say in the

beginning of the book when their men started sending children to schools. Lei-manis' example shows that belief and education bring only good, and being a Rom is not an obstacle for active social life – quite the contrary.

SOVIET TIME AND “COMPLETE JAZZ BAND”

The Soviet period in the life of Latvian Roma meant that they had to settle down, work and send children to school even though the education level was not considered important in Roma families and higher education was not particularly valued – in their opinion, for working in a collective farm (*kolkhoz*) or factory and earn a living. Nobody was wondering why the Romani children arrived at school only in early October when the berry season in forests was over – the important thing was that they arrived at school at all! Gathering “fruits of the forest” (blueberries) was a traditional Latvian Romani occupation and it has not changed even today.

To a certain extent, the Soviet time was quite close to the traditional Romani lifestyle, especially in the countryside. Collective farms needed weeders, harvesters, workers in the forest and with the cattle – Roma were the ideal workforce for that. The Soviet children remember

Romani camps throughout summers with romantic nostalgia – there were campfires and horses, there were songs and tales, parties and pranks, but the family was sustained through the whole winter for the money earned in summer *kolkhoz* work and they could send their children to school! Those Roma who were gifted with agility and entrepreneurship soon started to use the weak points of the Soviet regime – *deficit*. They travelled around the vast country, they knew where and what could be obtained, how to buy, sell, profit and not get jailed for the crime of speculation – activity that today is considered legal business. Some Roma managed to live quite well during the Soviet times, but everybody had food and a roof over their head. The Soviet regime turned out socially well for Roma, and even culture was not forgotten.

The first decades after the war were characteristic with flourishing of amateur culture in all areas, including in the Romani community. There were a number of amateur groups during the Soviet period that sparkled for a short time, excited the audience and then disappeared. Those who took up music as their living – musicians on the stage and in pubs – were steadier in their art of stage. Natural gifts and popularity of Romani music ensured demand in the entertainment sector, the talented ones just had to learn and play music. *Ventspils Roma* shone especially bright on stage. Juris Lei-manis continued what his foster father Jānis had started in



◀ “Ame Roma” band – the brightest star on the stage among Latvia’s Roma. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

culture – he was singing, organised events with others, and in the early 1960s he created a performance of the Romani wedding with 60 participants. This troupe travelled across Latvia and other Soviet republics.

Juris Leimanis’ son Pēteris like other contemporaries worked as a musician both unofficially and in a paid state job – he played music in bands in the popular culture centre of railwaymen and in the city club and restaurants. Officially, he had nine Roma employees in the Ventspils bureau, but in fact there were many more musicians – there had been a “complete jazz band”, the experts claimed.¹²

FROM RESTAURANT TO PHILHARMONIC

Combining the ethnical Romani peculiarity and commercially profitable popular music genre, a professional band “Ame Roma” was established in Riga. Its ideological forerunner was Moscow’s “Gypsy” theatre “Romen” („Ромэн”), popular across the Soviet Union. In 1931 it was established by active Romani youth who wished to fight against the pseudo-Romani stage image – vulgarity and banality. During the Soviet stagnation period this theatre troupe was well-known among Latvian Roma and its guest performances were warmly welcomed. Cooperation and ties developed, and “Romen” artists became the authority for Latvian Roma musicians. When “Ame Roma” was established and made tours across the Soviet

¹² Tihovska, I., *Real Gypsy Music. Authenticity and Ethnicity in Music of Latvia’s Gypsies (Roma)* (Riga: Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia, 2017.), p. 176.

Union, the support of “Romen” empowered them. “Ame Roma” band was the brightest contribution to Latvian culture, which polished the zeal and the talent rooted in the genes to high professionalism. There were several leaders in the band and they changed. Those that were especially remarkable included dancer Valērijs Čunčukovs and musician Sando Rudevičs (1965-2012) whose talent and working capacity developed the bright image of the band and helped it to get integrated among professionals.

Vocalist and guitar player Arturs Kopiļenko (1939-2018) had been with the band for the longest time and became its leader. He was born in a family of Ukrainian Roma in 1939 who moved to Latvia in 1956 where he soon started the career of a musician. In the late 1950s, during his military service, he was already conducting an orchestra. Later, besides his work in A.Popovs’ Riga Radio Factory, he played in a band.



▲ Arturs Kopiļenko – a Romani musician all his life. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

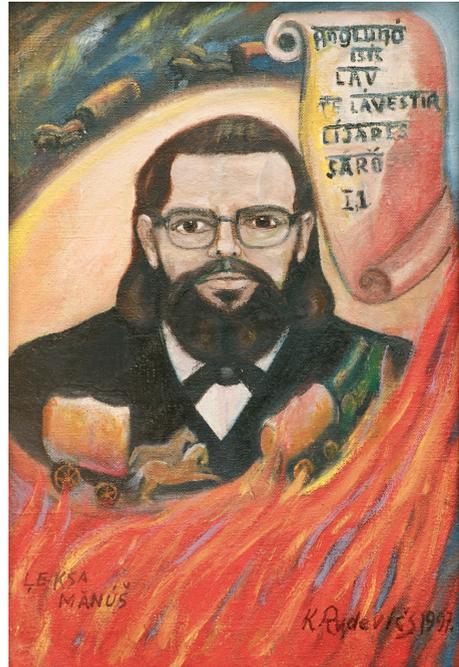
The refined restaurant culture of the Soviet times opened gates for Arturs’ musical career in Riga. Even though all people were considered equal, the restaurant atmosphere was enjoyed by the elite only and they dictated the demand – they appreciated Romani romances. Restaurant “Ruse” included Arturs Kopiļenko’s solo performance in the 1974 variety show, but in 1976, at the request of the restaurant’s administration, he created Romani band “Ame Roma”, gathering several Romani families in it. The band was loved by the audience and appreciated by professionals – evidence of which is visible in 1985 when “Ame Roma” was listed among the professional groups of Latvian SSR state philharmonic. The time until reorganisation of the philharmonic in 1990 was the band’s finest hour that lasted for five years – there were 30-40 concerts a month, the concerts were sold out and they excited audiences in Latvia and across the Soviet Union. Musicians enjoyed the fame and were actively travelling – the tour schedule was saturated, and the music touched the people’s souls everywhere they went. The repertoire included popular songs – Russian ballads, Romani folk songs and dances that were accompanied by the catchiest Soviet melodies. The audience was satisfied and the musicians also were able to achieve their goals – to promote the best of the Romani culture. Under the lead of Arturs Kopiļenko, they were doing it professionally, with devotion, zeal, keeping to high artistic

criteria and passed it over to the next composition of the band. The band's legendary leader passed away in early 2018 and was performing on stage until his last days. He was not only a talented musician and long-term leader of the band, but also an excellent teacher – having raised several generations of Romani musicians who are still touching people's hearts and souls, making them cheer and grieve.

LET DARKNESS LEAVE OUR LIVES

Two outstanding men were most passionate about the self-confidence, culture and future of the Roma nation – Kārlis Rudevičs and Aleksandrs Belugins (1942-1997). Their contribution to consolidating and educating Latvia's Roma community is indispensable. As Latvia restored its independence, they could make their dream of life come true – awaken the spirit of the national identity among their nationals, prove that they can be proud of their ethnicity. The main thing that is needed for that – awareness of their own culture and education! Their joint work is the Romani ABC book, the Latvian/Gypsy dictionary, formation of the first Gypsy National Culture organisation, and also their personal example played as important role.

Aleksandrs Belugins' family was multi-national, there were Russians, Latvians, Germans, Lithuanians, Poles and Roma



▲ Kārlis Rudevičs. Portrait of linguist Aleksandrs Belugins, 1997. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

among his ancestors. He wonderfully mastered different Romani dialects and devoted his life to studying this culture. After the military service, he graduated from the Faculty of Foreign Languages of the University of Latvia and adopted a creative pseudonym “Ļeksa Mānuš” for his further scientific work – “Ļeksa” is a short version of his full name Aleksandrs in the Romani language, while his surname “Mānuš” means “man”. Besides the scientific work, he wrote poetry, studied the Romani culture, translated and wrote publications about the Romani religion, culture and art.

In 1996, two Romani ABC books were published in Latvia – in Latvian and Russian Romani dialects, illustrated by his compatriot Kārlis Rudevičs. In 1997, the “Gypsy-Latvian-English and Latvian-Gypsy dictionary” was published which is a unique event in the scientific community and for the Roma nation.¹³



▲ Kārlis Rudevičs. Self-portrait, 1997. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

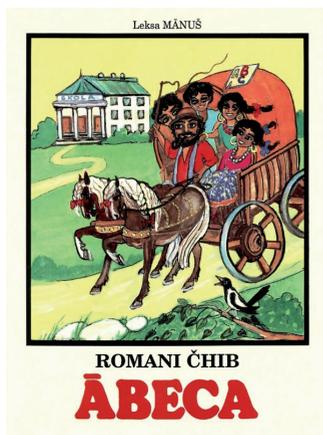
The brightest representative of the Romani culture, Kārlis Rudevičs, had a special talent in literature and painting, at the same time being a patriot of Roma nation, a good organiser and outstanding public

worker. His artistic soul was combined with strong leadership skills. He passionately believed in his ethnic nation and he excelled it by creating art.

Kārlis Rudevičs was born shortly before World War II as the tenth child in the family. He lost his parents quite early, therefore his life was not easy. Still, he studied at the prestigious Riga Secondary School No. 1 and was writing poems in Latvian starting from the age of nine. They were published in children's newspaper “Pionieris” (“Pioneer”) and turned out to be so good that he was awarded with a voucher to prestigious pioneer camp “Arteks”. Since the age of 13, Kārlis had to start an independent life and work hard, and it hardened his character and strengthened his willpower. Even though he was able to obtain only secondary education, the talented youngster studied the world's art on his own, literature, history, philosophy and languages. At the age of 21 he started a family that became the source of his pride and inspiration, ensured bright emotions for full-bodied art, and served as a moral example to others.

As Latvia restored independence, intense public activities were started. In 1991, Kārlis together with his son Normunds convened a meeting of Latvia's Roma at the House of Journalists and established the Latvian Gypsy National Culture Society. Sando Rudevičs was elected its chairman, and his duties were later taken over by his brother Normunds. 12 regional representations were established,

¹³ Information from the Romani Cultural Centre, www.romucentrs.lv



▲ Cover of Romani ABC book. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

events were organized to consolidate the Roma people and strengthen their cultural identity.

In 1996, the first solo exhibition of Kārlis Rudēvičs was organised at the Reutern's House. Latvia's cultural space grew richer with four collections of poems by Kārlis Rudevičs which were followed by a number of solo exhibitions of paintings. At the time of Millennium, he was shining like a shooting star at the sky of the Latvian art, attracting with his bright talent and ability to reveal the vast soul of Roma. He strengthened the prestige of the Romani culture not only in Latvia but on a global scale. Kārlis Rudevičs was the first Romani artist, poet and developer of the Romani literary language in Latvia, the only Roma representative awarded with the Order of Three Stars, Latvia's highest state award. In 1997, a documentary was shot about the artist – "Sketches of Gypsies". In

his art, he both held close to realism and strived into existential contemplation. One of his most favourite motives was the road – a symbol that is an integral part of the Romani culture. The artist believed – *"there is no way to happiness, the way itself is happiness. While you approach your goal, your eyes are glowing and you are happy, but when you achieve your goal, the routine starts"*.

CONTINUATION OF CULTURAL WORK AND TRADITIONS

Latvian Romani culture – it is a campfire of the past and present where both representatives of other nationalities and Roma themselves can find wisdom of life and fulfil their hearts. The new Millennium



▲ Activist and organiser of Romani cultural life in Sabile, Ēriks Kleins. Photograph from the family's private archives.

has presented the same challenges to Roma as to other nations – pragmatic realism and globalisation is dominating the world. The social and material challenges are those that change models of living and cultural processes. There is less time and interest in amateur arts even though they are supported and promoted in different ways – Ēriks Kleins, Dainis Krauklis and Kaspars Arhipovs are especially active in strengthening the Romani cultural heritage, development of the cultural and civic society of their nation.

The creative temper of the Roma is present also in Latvia's popular music, it is an integral part of today's cultural life. This special sparkle strikes in the Romani songs and romances, including in musical performances when the Romani artists step on the stage, such jovial and talented Romani solo artists as Kaspars Antess, Dzintars Čiča and the brothers "Ričs".

The Romani folklore traditions on stage are continued by "Ame Roma" band and the Rudevičs family. Rokšana Rudeviča is the head of the Latvian Roma Museum of History and Art and organisation "Roma Cultural Centre" that actively presents the Romani art heritage, culture and traditions to a broader society, reducing the common stereotypes about the Roma. The organisation is respectfully representing Latvian Roma in the world – there is not only the Roma museum, but also there is publishing house, international cultural and educational events are organised. International Romani Culture Festi-



▲ Kārlis Rudevičs. "Portrait of Lawmaker Normunds Rudevičs", 2000. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

val "Roma World" that has been held since 2015 is a colourful, world-level and popular event, while the public education is conducted by events organised by the "Roma Cultural Centre" on the Romani culture and history, including the Roma genocide in Latvia during World War II. In 2016, the Baltic Roma Senior Conference was organised to commemorate the genocide victims, attracting more than 200 participants, and an archive of genocide eyewitnesses and survivals was established. In cooperation with organisation "International Romani Union", the "Roma



▲ International Romani Festival – the brightest Romani cultural event in Latvia. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

Culture Centre” in 2015 successfully organized the World Romani Congress that attracted participants from 27 countries of the world, and Normunds Rudevičs was elected the president of the International Romani Union.

Kārlis Rudevičs’ son Normunds Rudevičs has been the chairman of the National Culture Society of Latvia’s Gypsies since 1993, in 1998, he was elected as Member of Latvian Parliament of the 7th Saeima; in 2000, he became a member of the organisation “International Romani Union”, and, during the World Roma Congress in

Prague, he was elected the organisation’s High Commissioner. For many years he has been active in the Minorities Advisory Council of the President of Latvia, and the Consultative Council for Roma integration policy of the Culture Ministry. Normunds Rudevičs’ activities and achievements confirm that he is the ambassador of Latvian Romani culture and inspirer of many creative ideas both in the local community and abroad.

At present, the family's youngest representatives are on their way to fulfil their talents – Roksana Rudeviča is singing and dancing in “Ame Roma”, she is active in civic, public and cultural work, while her sister Ornella Rudeviča, in addition to performing arts, has taken up painting. She is proud of the Roma ethnic temper and the rich culture that is reflected in the explosion of colours and exotic themes.

“*It is the soul of my nation*” said the promising artist who is reaching for high goals. Ornella marked her 21st birthday with the first solo exhibition at the Riga City Council, and the exhibition gained popularity. She wants her art to inspire the whole Romani community that has its indispensable role in the culture of mankind. Both sisters want to strengthen the conviction – Roma have many things to be proud of!



▲ Roksana and Ornella Rudevičas – caretakers and guardians of the Romani culture. From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.

◀ Union of Integrated Society ALTERNATIVES. 2018.

► Ornella Rudeviča. Painting "Kanaudz", 2018.
From the collection of the Romani Cultural Centre.



Kultūras ministrija

A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO LATVIAN ROMANI CULTURE

