

— **„We Still Breathe their Air“**  
(a radio documentary on Roma writing  
in the Czech Republic and Britain)

**Introduction**

*“My music is about the experience of the problems of my race, because I’m a Gypsy, and I can say – yes, I’m angry, but it’s also funny. I want to provoke on both sides, not only the white side but also I want to provoke Gypsies and everyone who’s listening.”*

(Czech Romany Rapper “Gipsy”)

*“I think it’s time for the Romanies to realize that they don’t just have to be one thing. Just as long as you are what you are in your heart, it doesn’t matter which language you’re using or how it’s coming out.”*

(English Romany Gypsy poet Hester Hedges)

*Square pegs in round holes  
yet ready for what life unfolds  
we know what the future holds  
for the Gypsies  
it is the gift for the precious few  
but the Gypsies know  
Move on, that’s what the Gypsies will do.*

(From “Moving On”, by Hester Hedges)

Two young people from very different parts of Europe expressing themselves in very different ways and yet they share the desire to deliver a common message. Romany rapper “Gipsy”, from Prague talks about the difficulties faced by his people, the Roma in the Czech Republic.



| Rapper Gypsy. Foto autor |

Hester Hedges from an English Romany Gypsy family uses poetry to express her desire not to be seen as a square peg to be driven into a round hole. These two young people are part of a growing number of Roma who are now using the power of the written word to make their voices heard outside their own communities.

But in so doing they are not simply casting off or disregarding their own history and culture, they are drawing upon the older oral traditions embedded within the arts of song, music and storytelling. The work of contemporary Roma writers in Britain and the Czech Republic was the subject of a recent radio documentary, made in English in co-production between Czech Radio and the BBC.

The programme came about through a chance encounter. Last year I contacted Simon Evans, a British radio journalist and

author of several books about Romany Gypsies in Britain. I was looking for inspiration for Radio Prague's Romany website [www.romove.cz](http://www.romove.cz). While combing the internet I had come across an impressive web page that Simon had put together, combining photographs, text, interviews and songs to capture something of the life – past and present – of Romany Gypsies in the English county of Kent ([www.bbc.co.uk/kent/voices/](http://www.bbc.co.uk/kent/voices/)). I visited Simon in England and we began to talk about Roma writing in the two countries.

We realised that in both countries there is an expanding Romany literary movement, and we decided to talk to Czech Roma and English Romany Gypsy writers about their work – about how they started writing, who they write for, what they write about, and what language they choose for their writing. This was the core of our radio documentary.

We approached writers including Ilona Ferková, Andrej Giňa and Tera Fabiánová from the Czech Republic, as well as songwriters and musicians like Vojta Fabián and the rapper “Gypsy”, who is quoted at the beginning of this article. From Britain there was the novelist Bill Lee, poets Hester Hedges and David Morley, as well as the prominent Romany academic Brian Belton. The programme also presented the writers' work, including the

first ever English translations of some of the poetry and prose of the Czech Roma writers featured.

In the programme the writers speak for themselves, and we tried not to draw too many conclusions or make any sweeping generalizations about Romany writing today. Although we looked in parallel at writers in the Czech Republic and Britain, it would be a mistake to force too many comparisons between Romany writing in the two countries. However, as I hinted in the quotes at the beginning of this article, the writers do share many common concerns and common sources of inspiration. Here are a few of the common areas that came out very clearly from our interviews.

## Historical experience

The traumatic and rapidly changing experience of Roma communities in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is central to many contemporary writers. The older writers we spoke to from both countries combine nostalgia for an old Roma way of life that has been destroyed – often violently – with a painful and bitter sense that Roma experience is defined by a sense of loss on the one hand, and by a collective memory of suffering and oppression on the other. Making others, including non-Roma, understand this experience is a strong imperative. In the case of Tera Fabianova's writing, her poems go so far as to ask repeatedly the not-so rhetorical question: "why has this all been allowed to happen to us?"

The novelist, Bill Lee, draws from his own rich experience as a child growing up in an extended family of nomadic Romany Gypsies in Kent in south-east England, an area well known for its cultivation of fruit and hops. From spring to autumn they would move from farm to farm, first pruning trees and stringing hops, then picking the fruit as it ripened. It was a tough, hand-to-mouth existence – the way Kentish Romany families had lived for several centuries, but in the course of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was a way of life that almost completely disappeared, as farming practices changed, and a more strictly regulated society became less tolerant of the old nomadic way of life. This is how Bill recalls his childhood memories in the programme:

*"We would pull into a farmer's field of about twenty or thirty acres. They would always pull up around the edge. You could look out and you would see the fires starting to glow up. I'll always remember seeing the black shadows that moved as the night drew in around the fires. But you could go to that fire. Even people you didn't know, and they were older people than*

*yourself – straight away you'd adopt those people. You'd call them 'aunt' and 'uncle' and in that way you showed them respect, and they would treat you with respect as well. They'd ask you who you were and you'd tell them your name. And then they'd start telling you stories about your people.*

*"There were songs that they'd make up and sing. They'd be standing in a group and they'd say, 'to you, bruv,' or 'to you sister', and they'd 'chuck' the song. They'd sing it so far and then you had to pick it up and take it over. It would be a little bit different every time you heard it, because someone had a new verse. They just made it up.*

*"My father always said – they say 'the good old days', but it was the bad old days. In 1947, they were staying in these woods. It was the only place that wasn't frozen up. Everywhere there was ice and snow. The birds, you could pick them out of the bushes, they were frozen to the branches. The life was so hard for them.*

*"It was a two-mile walk with a two-gallon churn, and by the time they got the water back it was frozen solid in the churn. All they used to do, my father and Alfie, was to carry water and get firewood to keep the fires burning and keep my granny and grandfather alive and Alfie's mum and dad, because otherwise they wouldn't have made the winter. And he said the following winter was just as bad."*

*"And then, come the summer, if you were on the side of the roads, you had the police on you all the time. It was just a vicious circle that went on and on."*

Bill Lee's novel "Dark Blood" is rooted in this remembered experience. This is a scene from the novel, set in Kent about half a century ago, where the main hero is arrested on false charges of rape.

*The police used the main entrance of the farmyard. Looking across, they saw the Gypsy wagon, with a fire burning, and some chickens running about. Anne was busy around the fire, getting breakfast ready for the children. Tucker was having a shave in a bowl of water that stood on a stool by the wagon wheel, his white shirt almost seeming to glow in the early morning light.*

*The police officers marched up, kicking the cooking pots over. Some of the water spilled over the fire, half dousing it, and the rest went over Anne making her scream as the boiling hot water touched her hands and arms. Tucker jumped up, but was knocked back down by the two police officers.*

*'You dirty Gypsy bastard,' they spat at him. 'You're under arrest!' Tucker tried to get back on his feet, but the two police officers grabbed him, one holding him while the other rained punches to his chest and face.*

*‘This is what we do to rapists,’ one of the policemen shouted to Tucker’s wife, grabbing her by the back of the head, twisting her left arm behind her back and forcing her down onto the ground, face first. He then left her and marched away with the other policemen and Tucker. The police officers threw Tucker into the back of their van and took him away.*

Czech Roma writers like Andrej Giňa and Tera Fabiánová draw from memories that would sound very familiar to Bill Lee. Here, for example, is Andrej Giňa:



| Andrej Giňa. Foto Chad Evans Wyatt |

*“I grew up in Eastern Slovakia. There were 7 families in our settlement. In 1942 the Slovak fascists came and made us move. They demolished our cottages and we had to move 2km out of the village. I was 6. We were very poor. That year it was very dry. My parents begged and went to collect rotten potatoes left on the fields. It was dreadful. Hunger. Our mothers carried us from house to house, begging the peasants for food. At the harvest time our people worked for the peasants. They paid us in food. Life was very tough.”*

These memories inform Andrej Giňa’s short stories about life in the settlements of Slovakia, as is also very much the case with Tera Fabiánová’s writing, both her stories and her poetry. Both Tera Fabiánová and Bill Lee say they did not make an active choice to write, but felt an impulse within them. It was something they must do. They are capturing a lost world for the sake of their children and grandchildren, for whom the direct bond to the past is broken. They are also writing with a sense of raw anger. Their readers, whether Roma or non-Roma are reminded of a history of enforced poverty and discrimination, and – perhaps for the first time in Roma history – we sense a strong desire to inform the non-Roma about the way that Roma live.

## School

The writers who spoke in the programme, whether they were from the Czech Republic or Britain had strikingly similar experiences of school. They all had this strong sense that the school system was not made for them. Tera Fabiánová has written vividly about her first days in school in Slovakia before the war.

*Once I was very hungry. It was at carnival time. The peasant women were baking and cooking, but in our “gypsy” settlement we were as hungry as ever. The teacher asked the children what they’d eaten.*

*“We’ve got nothing at home. We never eat till Mama gets back from the village, Bango says. “So we don’t eat in the morning.”*

*It was true. Our first meal was in the afternoon, when the mothers returned from the village and brought potatoes, curd cheese, milk, or whatever the peasant women gave them for cutting their wood, cleaning out the pigsty and scrubbing the oven clean.*

*“And what did you eat?” the teacher asked me.*

*“Wow.” My eyes lit up like stars. “If only you knew everything I’d eaten. A biscuit with curd cheese and butter, soup, buns, cake...!”*

*“How come you ate, when your sister hasn’t eaten anything since yesterday?” the teacher interrupted.*

*“Why are you lying? Stick out that lying tongue of yours, and see how it feels to have my ruler across it!”*

*I had to stick out my tongue, and the teacher slashed down on it with her ruler. It hurt dreadfully. I couldn’t even talk. When I’d recovered a bit, I said, “I wasn’t lying! I did eat it all. In my dreams. Last night I dreamed that I was eating.*

*The teacher went red, said nothing and turned her back to me.*

In Britain, until very recently, many Romany Gypsies were more or less completely illiterate. Because – to a greater or lesser extent – they continued to be nomadic, children spent very little time at school. Bill Lee, who is now in his late fifties, is a case in point. When he started writing his book “Dark Blood” he was still unable to read. He dictated the story into a dictaphone and his daughter later transcribed it. He emerged from a completely oral tradition, in the same way that Tera Fabiánová, when she first started “writing” her poetry in Romany, would “recite” it out loud, but never even thought of encoding it in written form. The same is true for another writer, Ilona Ferková. For all her literary talent, it was years before she even thought of herself as a “writer”.

In the programme the English Romany poet, Hester Hedges, who is a generation younger than Bill, speaks of the deep problems that English Roma have with a schooling system that is not designed for them.

*“The teacher, a lot of the time, doesn’t even understand you. I’ve seen teachers do horrendous things to Traveller children, not realising that actually what they’re doing is infringing on their cultural values and what they’re comfortable with. I worked as a support assistant for a time as well for the Traveller education team in Cambridgeshire, and some of the things the teachers do....*

*“Sometimes they’d shout at the children and say – ‘If you turned up more often, this would happen and that would happen. The reason why you’re stupid is because you’re never here. You’re too stupid to know that it’s good for you to turn up. But the thing is that they couldn’t possibly turn up any more than they were anyway, because with their family moving around they were in school as much as they could be.’”*

Hester’s words have echoes of Tera Fabiánová and her childhood memories, although she is talking about life at opposite ends of Europe and sixty years apart. This is the experience that she mentions in the poem quoted at the beginning of this article, that of being a “square peg in a round hole”.

For all the problems of school, there is a strong sense of the need to learn. Bill Lee has gone out of his way to make sure that his children have got a decent education. This is in many ways a painful transition. In both countries there was a tradition of isolation – not only forced from the outside, but also voluntary. This is what Ilona Ferková has to say:

*“We lived our own lives. We weren’t like Czech children – we didn’t have after-school activities and things like that. All the Roma children played together in one street. We would go and play there with the ghetto kids. People would talk a lot there. When the old people got together in the courtyard, drank beer and played music, they started telling stories. I loved listening to their stories. They were amazing. I loved going to the ghetto to hear what the old Roma said.”*

There was a sense in both countries, that education, on the “Gadjo’s” terms risked meaning a total loss of identity. And this is in great part because of language itself.



| Tera Fabiánová. Foto Chad Evans Wyatt |

## Language

Unlike in the Czech Republic, in Britain the Romani language has survived only as a dialect, but the speech of British Romany Gypsies is still very rich in Romani words, words that Czech Roma would instantly recognise. It is only in the last few years that this dialect has begun to be more broadly appreciated. For many it is too late, just as in the Czech Republic, where the number of Roma who grew up with Romani as their mother tongue is shrinking fast. The pace of assimilation has been fast in both countries, but the writers in the programme all spoke of the importance of being able to keep possession of the language you

use – even if this does not necessarily mean using the Romani language in its “pure” form. In Britain Romany children were spared some of the excesses of forced assimilation seen in Czechoslovakia during the 70s and 80s, a process that Ilona Ferkova speaks of vividly as she remembers the early 70s:

*„People of my generation were beginning to have children. At the time everyone said to us, ‘Speak Czech with your children, so they can get somewhere. If they speak Czech they’ll do well at school.’ They hammered this into our heads. We felt that we hadn’t had a chance, but at least our children would. They started taking Roma into kindergarten in preference to Czech kids. The Roma children were guaranteed places. We thought – if our children are going to school, the teacher won’t speak Romany – he won’t understand what she wants, so we started to speak Czech at home with our kids – including myself. Because we started speaking Czech, our parents learned Czech from us. Otherwise they wouldn’t understand their own grandchildren. This was a big problem for my father and mother. I called my oldest daughter Yveta – that’s not a Romany name – and my mother didn’t even know how to pronounce it.*

*„We made a big mistake in starting to talk Czech at home and everywhere. Romany began to disappear. When the children were teenagers we would still speak Romany at home – my husband and me and my parents – so the children came to understand it. But they*



*couldn't speak it themselves. Sometimes they'd put Romany endings on the end of Czech words – so they'd say things like: 'turn on the electricos' – because 'os' is a Romany ending.*“

Ilona Ferková writes in Romany, and her daughter – also Ilona – has also started writing in the language of her ancestors. The interesting thing is that young Ilona had to relearn the language – virtually from scratch. In the programme her mother recites a poem young Ilona has written about her new-born son (she's too embarrassed to read it herself, because she knows her pronunciation is not perfect and that her mother will point out the mistakes!):

Sar mange ul'ilal,  
Perši raz tut dikhlom,  
Ke ma tut kikiďal.  
„Som tiri daj,“ phendom.

Kamavas čhajora  
U tu sal muršoro,  
Kalore jakhora,  
Ciknoro mujoro.

Sar mare pre mande,  
Gendalos miro sal,  
Duminav me mange,  
Pre ma tut sa čidiďal.

Pal o dad o bala,  
Kale sar angara,  
Kamav tut čhavoro,  
Dav tut mro jiloro.  
(Ilona Ferková, mladší)

Hester Hedges has noticed how, with so many British Romany Gypsies abandoning the nomadic way of life and their previous isolation from the rest of society, much of the old dialect and many of the old words are dying. She feels that some of the responsibility lies with Roma themselves.



| Ilona Ferková. Foto Simon Evans |

*"Because the younger generation has settled down, a lot of Gypsy parents are saying now, 'Well, they're not Gypsies like we were Gypsies,' and things like that. But are they actually speaking to us like their parents spoke to them as well? Are they actually passing on all these words? I'm not so sure that's actually happening. But the words that they have taught me and the words that you get, you do actually use. And it sounds very strange next to the English language, as well. It's like bringing in Indian words. But sometimes I've written stories and I'm telling it, as if I'm telling it to a Gorjer, but when I have conversations between Romany people in the stories, then they will speak Romany."*

Mothers singing beyond walls and over waters  
the voice of the Gypsies  
And the young will renew the old  
as memories are retold, retold  
for what is time to all of we  
for we are every Romany  
Move on again, Yes that's what we do  
and we will find a tale or two  
The old world is our breath, our heart  
and our start, is where we finish  
forever, moving on.

(from "Moving On")

## Transition

To begin writing when for generations your culture has had little to do with the written word is difficult. The writers featured from both the Czech Republic and Britain had similar experiences of how strange it was to begin writing. Ilona Ferková and Bill Lee both speak vividly about how there was even something unpleasant and unnerving about the process of beginning to write and of seeing their own words – which in spoken form were always shifting and alive – fixed and motionless on the printed page. When Ilona first showed one of her stories to a friend, the friend just glanced at it, gave it back and said: “This isn’t for us. This doesn’t mean anything to us Roma.” But Ilona picked up the book and started reading out loud, bringing the written words back to life, and her friend listened with fascination and a broad smile. Here is Bill Lee talking about when his first book was being published.

*„It was strange to see the words written down, because when my daughter wrote it down in text form, I had it in a box on the front seat. I was taking it over to my agent, and I just sat looking at it. And Sylvia said to me – she was sitting in the back of the car – she said, ‘What’s wrong?’ I said, ‘It’s a very, very strange feeling. The people in this book: my father’s in there and all the uncles and people we knew, all these people are in here. For the last three years they’d been in my head, and I’d been talking to them, working with them. I said, ‘They’re here, but I can’t communicate with them any more. They’re here, but they’re asleep and I can’t wake them up.’ I was just looking at the pages. I knew then that I had to learn to read, because I had to wake them up again. And that’s when I started reading the book.”*

So, strangely enough, the first book that Bill Lee ever read was his own novel, “Dark Blood”. He had mixed feelings.

*“I was wrestling with what I was doing. Was it right for me to be doing it? It didn’t feel right. I used to ask my father if it was OK. I knew he wasn’t too happy about it, because we grew up keeping ourselves to ourselves, not letting people know too much. Even when it went for publication, I’m still thinking – did I do right?”*

A younger writer, like Hester Hedges, doesn’t have the same misgivings, perhaps because unlike Bill Lee, she is from a generation that already grew up in transition, with the old life and culture fragmented and knowing how much was at stake.

*“If they never pass that on, because of the way the culture works, then we will actually miss that. You know, just things that we will never experience any more, and it’s those things that we need to keep. Even though I do believe that the culture will move and adapt, we’ve still got all that stuff we don’t actually want to lose.”*

And here is what Andrej Giňa had to say on the subject.

*“In Rokycany, there used to be a very cultivated, educated man, Dr. Jágr. He got on very, very well with Roma, especially children. He would come to us. Once, mum was telling old Roma stories. He heard them and was impressed. He said they should be written down. I remember to this day a comparison he made. He said, ‘Andrej, look. There’s an old church in Rokycany. It is full of history, and if it were demolished, then we would also lose something. It’s the same if a story is lost.’ This captured my imagination. I talked about it with my mother. I recorded her telling the stories and then I wrote it down. “*

The Prague rapper “Gipsy”, who at twenty-three is the youngest of the people who feature in the programme, does not speak Romani and as a young Prague citizen is far removed from traditional Romany culture of his ancestors. But it’s interesting that “Gipsy”, who comes from a family of Romany musicians, feels very relaxed and confident about his Romany cultural identity. Here is what he had to say, and his words formed the more or less optimistic conclusion of our programme:

*“Roma culture is many things. It’s language, music, maybe it’s how we were, and I don’t think that all these elements should survive. I’m looking in the future, I’m not looking in the past. The past is behind me.*

*„I’m rapping, I’m not playing in a Roma band. The question is, why not? You know, on my album there are a lot of instrumentals from Roma culture. You know, I didn’t miss my music. I just changed it to the future.”*

## **Impact of the programme**

The documentary was 45 minutes long, unusually long for a radio programme. It was called “We Still Breathe their Air”, named after an old English Romany song, and was broadcast in January 2005, first to a British audience on BBC Radio 3 and then to a worldwide audience

through Radio Prague. A full transcript can also be found on [www.radio.cz](http://www.radio.cz) and on [www.remove.cz](http://www.remove.cz). In Britain the programme was very positively received and is to be repeated later this year. The University of Hertfordshire contacted Simon Evans and myself, as they would like to include some of the writers in a series of new publications to promote Romany writers in English translation. The project is still at an early stage, but hopefully European Union money will help to speed it up. Professor James Naughton from the University of Oxford, who is Britain's foremost specialist on Czech literature, contacted me not long after the programme was broadcast, saying how pleased he was that it had helped to draw attention to an internationally almost unknown aspect of Czech literature.



| Bill Lee. Foto Simon Evans |

The timing of the programme was interesting. It came just at a time when the British tabloid press (and unfortunately also several of the so-called “quality” papers) were engaged in a particularly unpleasant “anti-Gypsy” campaign. On the one hand there has been a furious campaign against Romany Travellers buying pieces of land and setting up their own sites. The press have accused them of flying in the face of planning regulations – but without offering alternative suggestions as to where these people should be allowed to live. There is little acknowledgement of the Romanies’ right to continue their nomadic way of life. The press has also engaged in a particularly nasty campaign of accusing people of “not being real Gypsies”, as if they had the right to decide on another person’s identity. This is one issue that Simon Evans confronts very well in his recent book on the Roma of Kent, “Stopping Places”:

*“This false analysis is a ploy which is frequently used to deny that today’s Travellers have a culture and history of their own. Once robbed of their identity, they can be dismissed as mere vagrants, itinerants and scoundrels – anything but ‘proper’ Gypsies. Yet, in common with the rest of humanity, there have never been any racially or culturally ‘pure’ Gypsies. All races of people have evolved over the centuries; cultures are a blend of nationalities and global*

*influences, the product of invasion, immigration and colonisation, of trade, travel and communication.”*

At the same time there has also been a depressingly ignorant and prejudiced campaign (that began in the 1990's) against Roma who have come to Britain from Central Europe. In the run-up to the general election in Britain at the beginning of May 2005, the opposition Conservative Party focused in particular on the issue of immigration and asylum seekers. Their rhetoric was of a kind not seen in Britain in recent years: nationalist, xenophobic and sometimes even openly racist. The party did not win the election, but they did help to feed a sense of fear and suspicious of Roma – and, for that matter, of anybody who is in some way different because of their creed, colour or way of life.

In this respect the documentary “We Still Breathe their Air”, although it will only have reached an audience of a few hundred thousand, does, I hope, offer a refreshingly different angle on Romany life and culture to English speakers. It is a reminder that Roma are not a “problem”, but a people with a huge cultural legacy that deserve to be heard today. As Europe's largest single minority, Roma have an immense cultural wealth to offer the continent.

## Resumé

**David Vaughan**

**“We Still Breathe Their Air“ (Ještě dýcháme jejich vzduch)**

Rozhlasový dokument věnovaný romské literatuře v České republice a Velké Británii

Leden 2005, plný přepis viz [www.radio.cz](http://www.radio.cz), [www.romove.cz](http://www.romove.cz)

*„Přestože náš pořad zasáhl jen několik stovek tisíc posluchačů, doufám, že nabízí britskému publiku jiný, svěží úhel pohledu na romský život a kulturu. Připomíná nám, že Romové nejsou ‚problém‘, ale lidé s obrovským kulturním dědictvím, kteří si zaslouží naši dnešní pozornost. Romové mají se svým rozsáhlým kulturním bohatstvím našemu evropskému kontinentu jako jeho nejpočetnější menšina rozhodně co nabídnout.“*

(David Vaughan, “We Still Breathe Their Air“)

Cílem koprodukčního pořadu Českého rozhlasu a britské BBC „Ještě dýcháme jejich vzduch“, jehož autory jsou David Vaughan a Simon Evans, bylo představit posluchačům jeden ze skrytých fenoménů současného společensko kulturního života – rozvíjející se romské literární hnutí. Vznikl tak komponovaný pořad, který poskytl prostor devíti současným romským spisovatelům z České republiky a Velké Británie k představení jejich tvorby, její historie, směřování a vlastní motivace. Českou republiku v pořadu zastupovala Ilona Ferková, Andrej Giňa, Tera Fabiánová, Vojta Fabián, a romský rapper Gipsy, z britských romských autorů se v pořadu objevil Bill Lee, Brian Belton a bás-

níci Hester Hedges a David Moreley. V programu se objevily i úryvky z jejich literárních děl a básní. Ukázky tvorby romských spisovatelů v ČR tak zazněly poprvé v anglickém překladu. Jak v závěru svého článku upozorňuje David Vaughan, pořad vzbudil velkou pozornost University Hertfordshire, jejíž zástupci projeví zájem podpořit anglické překlady romských autorů a zařadit je do své ediční řady. Je tedy možné, že se romští autoři z ČR dočkají rozsáhlejších anglických překladů svých děl, a otevře se jim tak cesta na světový knižní trh.

David Vaughan, ve svém článku upozorňuje na některé společné rysy, které obě romská literární hnutí sdílí, přestože vznikly a vyvíjejí se nezávisle na sobě. Především je to rozporuplný vztah k historii, ve kterém se mísí nostalgické po ztracených „zlatých časech“ a zároveň kolektivní paměť utrpení, pronásledování, nekonečných ústrků (autoři například shodně vyjadřují pocit své nepatřičnosti ve škole). I samotný koncept „zlatých časů“ má, jak z výpovědí autorů z obou zemí vyplývá, (shodnou) dvojí tvář: na jedné straně stojí drsné materiální podmínky, na straně druhé jistota emocionálního bezpečí jedince uvnitř semknuté romské komunity.

Ze vztahu k minulosti vychází i impuls, který (některé) romské autory „donutil“ psát: snaha zachovat starý svět pro své potomky alespoň ve svých literárních dílech. A zároveň rozhodnutí informovat Neromy o tvrdých podmínkách života Romů. Rozhodnutí otevřít se okolnímu světu je opět komplikováno několika faktory, z nichž nejzávažnější se týká přechodu od orální kultury ke kultuře psané. Velmi ilustrativní jsou okolnosti vzniku románu Billa Lee-*ho Dark Blood* (Temná krev): v době, kdy román vznikl, byl Bill Lee negramotný, a celý románový příběh proto nahrál na diktafon, nahrávku přepsala jeho dcera a společně pak přepis upravili do výsledné románové podoby. Na dokreslení rýsujících se paralel David Vaughan připomíná dnes již slavné vyprávění o vzniku první básně Tery Fabiánové, kterou zapsala Milena Hübschmannová cestou v autě.

S otázkou zápisu vyprávění přímo souvisí otázka jazyka, ve kterém je zápis proveden. Snaha uchovat pro budoucí generace mizející historii a kulturu se opět jasně projevuje i na vztahu zmíněných romských autorů, bez rozdílu věku, k jazyku: navzdory asimilaci, která romská společenství v obou zemích zasáhla, se všichni autoři shodují na tom, že je důležité udržet si, být schopen používat svůj vlastní jazyk, přestože již nejde o „nejčistší“ romštinu. Jak toto rozhodnutí může zpětně přispět k obrodě jazyka dokládá příklad Ilony Ferkové mladší. Báseň, kterou napsala v romštině, přestože se romštinu musela sama od začátku naučit jako cizí jazyk, čte v pořadu její matka.

Především povzbudivé jsou však výpovědi mladých romských autorů o jejich vztahu k romskému kulturnímu dědictví. Hester Hedges a český rapper Gipsy shodně mluví o tomto dědictví jako základu a inspiraci k jejich vlastní, moderní autorské tvorbě, která pracuje především s moderními uměleckými trendy a romskou kulturu tak místo konzervování dále posunuje a rozvíjí.

*„Romská kultura je spousta věcí. Jazyk, hudba, možná i to, jací jsme, ale nemyslím si, že je bezpodmínečně nutné, aby se zachovaly všechny tyto prvky. Já se dívám dopředu, ne dozadu, do minulosti. Minulost mám za sebou. Dělam rap. Nehraju v romské kapele. Otázka zní, proč ne? Víte, na mém albu najdete mnoho instrumentálních úryvků romské hudby. Není to tak, že bych naši hudbu úplně vyškrtl. Jen jsem ji upravil pro budoucnost.“*

(Gipsy v pořadu D. Vaughana)

Zpěv matky doléhající zpoza zdi,  
na pozadí tekoucí vody, to je hlas Romů.  
Mladí obnoví staré,  
vzpomínky, které se vypráví dál a dál.  
Co pro nás všechny znamená čas  
my všichni jsme Romové  
a jedeme dál, tak to je  
a pár příběhů najdeme.  
Starý svět je náš vzduch, naše srdce.  
A začínáme tam, kde jsme skončili,  
navždy v pohybu.

(Hester Hedgesová, úryvek z básně V pohybu)

*Helena Sadílková*



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