



Stories of Roma Heroes in Hungary

AMONGST US

2024



independent
theater



Independent Theater Hungary

2024

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Káli-Horváth Kálmán
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Lakatos Mónika
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Ternipe Association



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AMONGST US

STORIES OF ROMA HEROES IN
HUNGARY

INDEPENDENT THEATER
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introduction

Once upon a time, there were ten daring young people. They participated in a training and then held various workshops for their peers about European Roma dramas and the heroes who live amongst us. Alongside these workshops, they also put together a publication about 14 Roma heroes, who, for various reasons, are inspiring and hold valuable significance for them. Among these heroes are men and women, young and old, representatives of different professions, for whom different values, thoughts, and experiences were pivotal in embarking on their journeys and in continuing to contribute something on a day-to-day basis to the world we share. The young people convey the stories, thoughts, and experiences of these heroes to the readers through short writings.

Should anyone be willing to learn more about the work of any of these heroes, links have been included in the publication to facilitate further exploration. We hope that the stories, created without striving for completeness, will urge more and more people to seek and find heroes in their own surroundings as well as within themselves.

This publication was created as part of the project Roma Heroes in Theatre and Everyday Life. We hereby thank our partner, Ternipe Association in Slovakia, for encouraging our team to create a publication about Roma heroes playing a crucial role in their lives and living among us, by sharing the method they have developed.

Illés Márton



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'I Have Always Motivated Myself'

I moved to Budapest with the intention to get my handball career started. I thought I would continue playing in the top league (NBI), that I could make it to the national team, and that everything would be going like clockwork. But soon after moving here, I tore the cruciate ligament in my knee, and it was not until six months later that I had surgery. Afterwards, I could not get along with my team as I had hoped, something that happened again with the next team. I kept pushing hard at handball for a long time because my dream was to reach the Olympics together and represent Hungary. I felt that by achieving that, people would love and accept me. Following my injury, I hit rock bottom. I had no idea what to do next. I was attending a sports school, and even there I was unable to show what I was capable of though I wanted to so badly; and it felt so terrible having to walk around on crutches. I could not do anything despite being a talented athlete. It felt as if life were interfering and telling me that I had to give up handball; still, for a while, I took no notice of it. I experienced the whole thing as a failure. Eventually, as it turned out, this was a challenge all along.

In sports, perseverance is crucial. Sometimes you put in a lot of work, but results just do not turn out the way you want. You have to be able to get back on your feet and keep going. I needed a tremendous amount of willpower and persistence to prove that I was indeed good enough and that I could reach the level of the national team in kickboxing. I did not want to be pushed aside because of my Roma background. In Hungary, representing anything as a Roma and being featured on posters come with extreme difficulty. Whenever I come up against this sort of things, I become quite embittered, and it makes me feel bad.

But then I remind myself that, in fact, I have accomplished everything on my own up to this point. I have achieved the results I needed to, put in the work; and if I have done it alone so far, then I can keep it going. Even now, I have a strong drive to prove that I am good enough and that people should not look down on me. I want to be someone to be reckoned with and want them to realize this is Melinda Zsiga – someone with a name and someone who has capabilities.

If you put in plenty of hard work, luck will also be on your side – and you need that everywhere. When I won third place in the world championships for the first time, I was truly in the right place at the right time, as the event was held in my home country, it was my first world tournament, and I had a great draw. I could have faced the world champion right off the bat, but, luckily, I was matched up against a girl with similar capabilities though with several matches under her belt.

Competing gives me tremendous confidence, and, truth is, I really am good. But at the same time, there is another side to me – my stupid demons putting ideas into my head: ‘Do not go getting ideas that you are capable of anything or that you are any good.’ I am constantly battling with that. I grew up in the foster care system, living with three different families, and sometimes I wonder why my mother even gave birth to me, why I am alive at all; or that if I died, no one would really notice, and I honestly have no idea what is the point of me being here on Earth like this. But even with that, I would not change anything because my life turned out for the best this way.

Everything in my life happened for a reason, and better and better things came my way. I might just as well say that things could not have turned out any better.

Compiled by Vass Ágnes



ZSIGA MELINDA

kickboxing champion, fitness model, trainer

LATEST ACHIEVEMENTS:

2024: WMAC World Cup winner – free boxing, 55 kg

ICO Hungarian champion – K1, 57 kg

WKL world champion – K1, 55 kg

WAKO Hungarian champion – K1, 56 kg

FIND OUT MORE:

Social media: www.facebook.com

Video: www.444.hu

Article: www.wmn.hu

‘Fraternité oblige’

I did not know the meaning of many Hungarian words, as we spoke Romani at home. I had to learn Hungarian in order to communicate with my friends, the Hungarian boys and children. I learned a lot from them as well. Of course, by the time school started, I had already understood quite a bit. From the third or fourth grade onwards, I spent all of my time in the library. That was the trend at the time; because we had neither television nor radio. But you could go to the library. In the third grade, I was still reading by syllables, but by the fourth or fifth grade, I could read completely fluently. I would read fairy tales to the elderly all the time. In my view, the teachers of that time showed much more solidarity towards Roma children. I never felt any prejudice on the part of the teachers. Of course, sometimes they would give us a slap on the wrist or pull our ears, but only if we had not done something [right] – no different than they did with the Hungarian children.

I was not a bad kid; in fact, I could behave exceptionally well. There were times when I would go on trips with my uncle, who raised me, together with his wife, Lala. They were my father's neighbours, and thus, luckily for me, I could be a child in two homes at the same time. So, I would travel around the villages with my uncle, as he was a blacksmith, and he made things out of iron that people in the countryside needed. He would make roofing nails, horseshoes – basically anything, everything. Even baking pans and cauldrons. He worked professionally, and I helped him wherever I could. But when I turned seventeen or eighteen years of age, I became a bit more reckless and caused a lot of headaches for my parents. As a young man, I drank and got into fights...

So, I grew into such a troublemaker, and I stopped being a good kid; I had too big an ego. I did not help my parents as much as I should have, and now in my old age I have come to realize that I was quite disrespectful to them. I regret that a little bit.

What does a sibling mean to me? I grew up in a large family with seven other children besides me. I remember once when my father came home after a long while away – we clung to him like apples on a tree. For me, my sibling is my equal; I consider them just as valuable as I am. If I do not take care of myself, I am not sure I can take care of them. In some cases, they might even mean more to me than I do to myself. Throughout every moment of my childhood, I felt that my siblings were always there with me. Of course, I loved some of them a bit less, but brotherhood obliges. Even if the other one is being a jerk, they are still my sibling. This is unbreakable. No matter what they do, except for threatening my life, almost anything can be forgiven because they are my blood.

In the wintertime, the Hungarians in the street would slaughter pigs and bring us some titbits – it was a pretty amazing experience bringing us a taste [of the slaughtered animal] as if they had taken us for their own brothers. We could not be left out, you see? I believe brotherhood is important. I have also started translating Hungarian authors into Romani language, including Imre Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* (*Le Manushli Tragédia*).

Compiled by Nagy Henrik



NAGY GUSZTÁV

writer, poet, literary translator

FAVOURITE ROMANI WORDS:

patyi 'respect'

kamipe 'love'

phralipe 'brotherhood'

szlobodia 'freedom'.

FIND OUT MORE:

His life: <https://www.memoryofnations.eu>

Interview: <https://nepszava.hu/>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com>

‘Thanks to Our Families, We Will Never Forget Where We Come From’

I was born into a Vlach [i.e. here Romanian] Roma family, and I am a traditionalist. We speak the language, and we try to pass on the customs we have learned from our ancestors. I proudly embrace my Roma identity, and I wear skirts, not trousers. This does not make me feel a lesser or greater person; in fact, I feel richer because of my dual identity. As the saying goes, the more languages you speak, the more personalities you have. My immediate family and the community in which I live are indispensable to me. To preserve who we are, it is important not only to express our Roma identity in words but also to live it through our actions.

When our community regards us with humility, respect, and love, it always helps us move forward. They are the heroes that I always look up to. Without them, I could not be where I am today. In the family, I receive an enormous amount of energy from my grandchildren, from the little ones, which works as a fuel for me in all aspects of life. I adore them, and with them on my side, I can endure anything. I always stress that first and foremost I am a mother, a wife, and a grandmother. These are the most relevant roles for me.

God is very important to me; without Him, nothing would exist. God’s will is paramount, something that humans cannot change. I believe human values are far more important than musical or other talents because those are gifts we receive from God, and they are not ours by right. In my work, I take good care to filter the remarks and opinions. I can accept constructive criticism and try to learn from it, but I disregard malicious people.

In the Romengo band, it is our perseverance and unity that keeps us moving forward. Our band is made up of musicians – and we also enjoy playing with musicians – whom we respect as individuals and value. The members of Romengo are: Guszti, Tibi, Misi, Mazsi, and myself, the five of us; and it has always been the human cohesion, respect, and love that have enabled us to achieve success and create something of value.

Compiled by Baranyi Csaba



LAKATOS MÓNIKA

Hungarian Roma singer, vocalist of the Romengo band

AWARDS:

Anna Lindh Award, 2007

Award for Parallel Culture, 2013

Award for National Minorities, 2014

WOMEX Award, 2020

Pro Cultura Minoritatum Hungariae Award, 2020

Kossuth Prize, 2022

FIND OUT MORE:

<https://www.lakatosmonika.hu/>

‘I Do Not Long to Go Abroad’

Many artists who graduate from Hungarian art schools stop painting after their university studies, as there is no institutional framework to ensure and encourage free artistic creation. I also considered it at times, as there are always difficulties and failures that inevitably raise this question. However, quitting painting was never a real option for me. In moments of uncertainty, I always come to the bottom line that quitting would not solve anything, but it is myself that I still have some work to do with.

I lived in Malta for a while, but that was not a real career opportunity. Culturally, Malta does not even come close to Budapest, not even to a small Hungarian town. If you want to build a career, to aim for international fame, then you should go to Berlin, New York, London, Barcelona, or Paris – that is, to the hubs. I do not long to go abroad. If I were to leave, it would be nothing short of an escape. That is why leaving does not feel right. I would not leave because my heart is set upon it but because I am disheartened by something here. Being expelled from somewhere is not the same as being intent on going there.

Previous generations attached importance to Roma consciousness and Roma existence becoming visible. In the past, the focus was set on authentic Roma folk art and narrative works. Kunhegyesi had an exhibition titled *Utolsó mítoszok* [Last of the Myths], and, indeed, we no longer create myths but rather engage in critical and conceptual art. For me, Roma content does not always take centre stage in my paintings, and it does not necessarily manifest in painting Roma subjects.

Nevertheless, on the back of my abstract paintings, I write Romani words as titles. This way, when gadje purchase them, it is like buying furniture from IKEA with names that sound completely baffling to us, as if they were some blessings or spells. On one of them, I wrote szesztipe 'health'. On another one, tromáipe 'courage' or phralipe 'brotherhood' or ternipe 'youth'. Yes, I really do love them, these words, and on the rare occasions when I wish to name something in Romani, I call Gusztáv Nagy to translate it for me.

Compiled by Nagy Henrik



OLÁH NORBERT
painter

FAVOURITE WORDS:

Phralipe (brotherhood)

Ternipe(youth)

Szesztipe (health)

Tromáipe (courage)

FIND OUT MORE:

Exhibition: <https://eriac.org>

Video: <https://www.youtube.com>

‘Through Photography, I Can Best Reflect on Myself’

I have spent almost my entire life on trains. Ever since I was a first grader, my brother and I have commuted, and this routine has been part of me to this very day. Back at home, the school was only two streets away from us, but my parents wanted us to receive proper education, so we went to school in Székesfehérvár.

I also went to high school in Székesfehérvár, graduating in textile design. It was not a positive experience. I struggled because I did not know what interested me, what I wanted to do after secondary school. I was lacking self-confidence and was afraid to try out new things. On one occasion, I ended up at a photoshoot by accident, as I had been asked to pose as a model for a friend’s wedding dress catalogue. The photographer handed me the camera and told me to give it a try. At first, I did not want to accept it, as I was scared I would spoil it, but after much persuasion I took a look and thought, ‘Okay, I will try this out.’ That is when I started taking photos. Six months later, I applied to university.

Looking back, I now realize how gutsy I was, considering I had no prior experience with photography.

During the preparation for the university entrance exam, I felt the lack of having never wandered around with a camera hanging from my neck, but I was given the chance to try myself out there. I immediately found myself in a very creative process, which changed my way of thinking. It was necessary since, up until then, it was as if I had lived in a shell.

I When I moved to Budapest, I felt that not only my world but also my way of thinking expanded. It was so encouraging to experience my teachers seeing something in me.

The environment at the university was fantastic. No one expected me to talk about my origins. It was so uplifting that no one wanted to impose anything on me, but they let me express myself the way I wanted. One time, a new teacher came, to whom we had to introduce ourselves. That was the first time I created a performance about my Roma heritage. I went to class wearing jeans, a white shirt, and sneakers. I stood in the middle of the room, played a Romani song through a speaker, and started to change. I put on a gold-and-red patterned skirt, a red blouse, earrings, applied some lipstick, and let my hair down. When the song ended, I stopped in the centre of the room, looked around, and saw that everyone was crying. I felt that something had been liberated within me, as I was able to say something about myself the way I wanted to, and not because it was expected of me. I was able to be completely authentic.

It is very important that in my own work I try to present the multi-layered nature of identity. Though in my art I make use of my Roma background or femininity, these are not exclusive elements of what I do. Many other things interest me. I do not want to be just this or that, as all of us are many things. It might appear so that my images narrate about myself and my own life, but they are not only about me. You do not have to be Roma or a woman as a receiving person to be able to connect with them.

Compiled by Nagy Henrik



HORVÁTH ANITA
photographer

WISH LIST
visiting Italy

WORKS:

<https://designisso.com/2024/08/23/en-mondom-meg-hogy-milyen-vagyok-horvath-anita-fotosorozata/>

<https://www.metropolitan.hu/horvath-anita-fotografia-alapszak>

‘He Was Recognized, and He Began to Believe in Himself’

A little boy was born into a large family. Nobody wanted him. That is how he felt. As he grew up, they took him to a place called ‘The Institution’. He did not feel sorry for himself; he accepted it – this was his life. He had no idea that one day he would look at himself with pride, be proud of his life, and be grateful to God for everything.

The years passed, and he discovered that he excelled at writing and that he could paint too. These abilities helped him stand out, pulling him away from the grey everyday life. Within the walls of the Institution, unhappy carers drilled it into every child that they would either end up in prison or cleaning toilets. It was then that he realized the world was not a safe place, and if he were to ever start a family, he would make sure to adopt a child who had been abandoned by their parents.

He knew that even though he wore the same clothes and had the same haircut as everyone else, he was somehow different. He was talented. Then a competition came along, where he had the chance to showcase his skills – and the world opened up for him. He was recognized, and he began to believe in himself. A great many challenges awaited him outside the Institution, but he knew they would help him grow. He knew that good things attract good people, and even if he was often surrounded by bad people, a single gesture was always enough to help him move forward.

He worked in theatre and then in television, where he built a successful career. He wrote a teachers’ manual on Roma folk knowledge, for which he received a state award. He saw the world, gained teaching experience, and eventually returned home to take a position at a ministry.

He participated in the founding of Roma colleges, and one day he found himself appointed as the director of one of them. Even though he felt unprepared to fulfil this duty, he mustered all his courage and dived right into it. He felt that now was the chance to give back all the good he had received from others in his life. And he did just that whenever he had the chance. Becoming a leader, he was able to provide many students and young people with a safe environment and the opportunity to pursue their own goals.

Compiled by Farkas Ramóna



KÁLI-HORVÁTH KÁLMÁN

Director of the Budapest Reformed
Roma College,
painter, performer, communications
specialist

FIND OUT MORE:

Videó: <https://www.youtube.com>

‘After Two Decades of Denial, There Came Release’

As a high school student, I was hoping that by the end of my final year I would know what I wanted to do. Well, that was not the case. My parents supported me in everything, but I had to learn a profession, so I went to the University of Pécs to study as a moderator. I had always been interested in media and communication, and I felt that I was good with words. The world opened up for me. I got to know the civil sector and started volunteering on various issues for different organizations. I fell in love with this world, and I had the impression this could be my path. There was a common point in all initiatives: we worked with children. Even back in my childhood, I enjoyed taking care of younger kids, and I could easily connect with them. It was then that I realized I wanted to support young people. After that, I also completed a degree in social work, but I do not feel like a social worker, and even to this day I have difficulty defining myself. I am a helping professional, a mentor, if I may say so.

I mostly work with people aged between 14 and 22 years. I believe that adolescents and those transitioning from teenagers to adults face a great many challenges. As you realize that you are becoming an individual, that things are changing, you have opinions and a sense of justice, you face some difficult decisions you have not encountered before. This age group is particularly sensitive. It is important there is someone beside them who listens to them. In these situations, it is not just Roma or disadvantaged youth who need support, but really everyone. I always think back just how hard the period of high school was for me and how much I needed someone who would be close to my age, and a cool guy at that, whom I could ask for advice, who I felt comfortable enough to ask questions.

It was at university that I realized I wanted to take up mentoring, although at the time no such profession existed officially. In 2017, I officially started mentoring at the Snétberger Music Talent Centre. If I were to choose anything at all, I do not think I would want to do anything else more than this. I feel like I was born for this. My current goal is to train my mentees to become mentors. Over the past six years, I have mentored 50-60 young adults, and I hope one day some of them will become my colleagues. I want to pass on the knowledge I have received, which is also a professional challenge for me. I now coordinate art projects where art serves as a tool for self-awareness, helping young people become the best versions of themselves.

Even in high school, I was afraid to admit that I was Roma, and when people said, 'you have such beautiful black hair', I would reply, 'I have dark brown hair.' Because, you know, black hair was associated with Roma, and Roma were rumoured to be no good people, and I did not want to be a no-good person. If, during a conversation with my friends, someone uttered the word 'Roma', my stomach would turn, and I would immediately change the subject. A few years ago, a story was published featuring a Roma character, which caused a big uproar on Facebook. And I wrote that if I had had the chance to read in a storybook about a girl with beautiful black hair and black eyes, I would have surely loved myself more. It is important to see examples and people to whom we can relate in order to get to know ourselves. University and civil organizations helped me with this; I also joined a Roma college. All these influences and people supported me in embracing my Roma identity. It was during this time that I became stronger: after two decades of denial, there came release.

Compiled by Merina Camacho Abigail



KÉKESI ALEXANDRA MANDARIN
mentor

FAVOURITE ROMANI WORD:

Vulica (street)

KEDVENC IDÉZET:

Favourite quote: 'Nothing is as valuable as what
you are in others and what others are in you'

Esterházy Péter

‘You Have Been Given a Huge Task Again’

When I received the diagnosis, I was alone, I mean no one accompanied me; I went by myself. I have a very strong personality. Life has taught me that. Even before it was revealed that I had cancer – let us call it what it is –, I had already faced many struggles. However, I never viewed any problem as a struggle; I simply faced everything head-on. This has to be done. That’s it, you need to get over it. When I got the diagnosis, of course, it felt like being hit in the head with a jackhammer. I got into my car. At times like that, you collapse and start crying. But there I was looking out and thinking how nicely was the sun beaming down.

‘You have been given a huge task again’, I told myself, and I looked up at the sky. I thought, surely, I was given this challenge for a reason. Because the first question that comes to my mind was ‘why me?’ Then I realized this would once again be a learning opportunity in my life. I did not even see it as a disease but as an enormous task. And that is why I created a TikTok channel – I did not even know back then that such a thing existed at all, and I certainly did not know how to go about it, as this sort of technology is not my world –, to instil strength into my fellow sufferers and into women, that they should not fall into despair, that the world has not collapsed because of a diagnosis.

This disease is the outcome of a long-standing spiritual struggle of mine. I know that I had a very bad marriage, from which I fled with my child, and I carried that burden inside of me for years. I am one thousand percent convinced that if a woman develops a female-specific cancer – whether it is uterine or breast cancer, as in my case –, it is because her womanhood has been deeply wounded.

I was able to process that realization within myself, and then I started working on letting go of the anger, resentment, and bitterness that I had carried from my bad marriage, in order to heal.

I was always close to my father, and to me, he was my hero, but next to him my mother as well. It was an incredible thing that there were eight of us siblings, and my mother worked while raising all eight children. She had more than one job, and yet our home was always spotless. She tended the garden, raised animals, we produced everything ourselves, and there was always cooked meal. I do not know how they did it. My father was a remarkable man. He too came from a family of musicians, but as he became an orphan at the age of four, he was taken in by relatives. This way, although everyone in the family was a musician, he became a driver, using his natural intelligence. Later, he became an honorary citizen of Veszprém.

When my cancer was detected, I was the hero who had learned from my father that nothing was impossible. I recovered. It is very important that we know how to give thanks and that, when difficulties come our way, we fight through them. They visit us for a reason, and we have to deal with them.

Compiled by Baranyi Csaba



RUPA ILONA
folk singer

AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS:

First place, National Folk Song Competition, 2000

Human Voice prize, 2016

Hungarian Tolerance Grand Prize, 2022

FIND OUT MORE:

Video: <https://www.youtube.com>

‘A Dream Turned into Reality’

I was born a feminist. Even as a child I was one, and I would speak out against injustices, just as I do today. I believe most Roma women are feminists. A grandmother who works in a factory or out in the fields expresses her own thoughts just as I do, only in different ways.

When I first entered the Central European University building, I came across a stand with various brochures on it. The first one I picked up was a publication of the Gender Studies programme. As I started reading it, I could not believe my eyes that there was a programme where one could learn about the role of women in society, in history, and in the arts. Right there, I promised myself that I would apply to this programme. Throughout my life, in every school I attended, even at university, I missed the opportunity to learn about any topic from a woman-centred perspective. In fact, no one in my family had even attended secondary school, let alone university. Therefore, it had always been a dream of mine to become a university student. Eventually, however, my years in Nyíregyháza did not bring the experience I had been waiting for. I did not enjoy university life there. But when I picked up that brochure in 2015, I felt that everything was going to change. I pinned it to my bulletin board in my room. Every morning, it was the first thing I saw. Every single day, it would be within my sight. It was never a question for me – this was my path.

However, my first application for the scholarship program was rejected. Although I had given it my best shot. That was my life. I could not understand why others did not see that. Why had I not deserved the scholarship?

Sometimes, no matter how much you want something, no matter how good your academic results are, you just do not fit the profile of the institution. That was a huge blow for me, as my dream was shattered. I spent a whole week not knowing what to do with the news. It was during that time that everything collapsed. My family was not in a position to support me financially. I had to figure out quickly what to do next. I believe this state of mind is common among Roma, especially Roma women. I mean, it is easy for us to become exasperated. But we are forced to move on. Quickly. Because there is no social or financial safety net underneath us to catch us if we make a mistake, or if things do not turn out the way we hoped. I had to move on immediately, but I kept my plan, and a year later, I applied again.

The second time, I was accepted. Success often comes from the fact that failure does not take our strength away. We get up and keep going. Since then, I have successfully completed my degree in gender studies, something that I am proud of to this day.

Compiled by Kovács Dezdemóna



CSIKÓS MARINA
gender studies expert

GENDER STUDIES EXPERT

Romaversitas Alapítvány/Emma Egyesület – Nőgyógyászati
kórképekkel küzdő roma nők és lányok interszekcionális
tapasztalatai

German Marshall Fund - The Place of Roma Women and Girls
in Hungary's Social Integration Strategies - A Gender Analysis

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT:

Programme Officer, Fondation CHANEL

‘Transgenerational Heritage or Coincidence?’

I am currently studying to become a maternity nurse; I am in my second year. I always knew that I wanted to work in healthcare, and it was never a question that I would specialize in areas focused on women and children. I cannot explain why. I love children, but, oddly enough, my work does not concentrate on them as much as it does on the mothers. In our profession, the focus is more on women.

Due to my future profession, helping others is part of my daily life. Since I am still in the early stages of my hospital practice, I assist with smaller tasks in caring for pregnant women, gynaecological patients, and I always try to ensure that they receive as much kindness and humanity from me as possible, since in such vulnerable situations, we as healthcare workers are the only ones they can rely on. A kind word or a smile can ease the fear that most women feel in such moments.

That little miracle – when we are waiting and finally hear the cry of the newborn. The moment when we quickly place the baby on the mother’s chest. I try to hide it from the mothers, but often my eyes, too, fill with tears. I have always thought of birth as something magical, and it really is that part of healthcare where we do not deal with death and illness, but the complete opposite. With childbirth. With life. It is so wonderful to witness that.

I grew up in a poor family, and I was always driven by the desire not to remain poor. From an early age, my teachers told me how smart I was.

Yet the biggest push came from my parents, who also encouraged me, saying that I would go a long way. The Arany János Talent Support Programme was the first stepping-stone that led me to where I am now. The world opened up to me and made me realize that despite being a woman, being poor, and being Roma, I had some opportunities too.

Recently, in the past one or two years, well after I had been accepted into the midwifery programme, I looked up the meaning of my name. That was when I read that my surname comes from the word baba ['baby']. Then it dawned on me this may have been my ancestors' occupation. I find the coincidence quite intriguing. Personally, discovering this has had great emotional significance for me.

I am proud I have never given up on my dreams, and I do everything in my power to make them come true. While building my own life, I also help my younger siblings so that they too can set out on their own paths.

Compiled by Kovács Dezdemóna



BABAI ANNAMÁRIA

university student, Semmelweis University,
Faculty of Health Sciences, specializing in
midwifery

FAVOURITE BOOK:

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

‘Yet I Returned’

I did not set out to become an actor. After my mother passed away, I turned to poetry and expressing emotions. On stage, I was able to experience everything, which had a therapeutic effect upon me. At home, there was no room to talk about emotions or grief. I was accepted into the studio of Bárka Theatre but then got sacked after a year. Yet, I returned – as a set decorator at first, and then I continued as an actor for several seasons. During that time, Maladype Theatre also took me on. I completed a drama pedagogy course, was accepted into the Academy of Drama and Film, but this time it was me who ended up leaving it.

Eventually, I found my place in the world of rap and slam poetry. I had always created through writing and loved rapping, but it was during my time with Maladype Theatre that I started to delve deeper into poetics. While filming *Egy hét* [One Week], I met the members of *Kezdet Phiai* [Sons of the Beginning], and this encounter and friendship inspired me to write and perform.

Writing lyrics became a way for me to express myself. For a long time, I did not show my writings to anyone. They were not for others but for myself. It was my way of understanding the emotions and thoughts within me, especially when something bothered or upset me. This is where my identity as a slammer was born. It irritated me to see how people view things in black and white, on both an individual and societal level. Also, the unspoken truths and the questions that no one dares to ask motivated me to stand on stage and talk about them.

I founded the *Tudás Hatalom* [Knowledge Is Power] troupe at the request of the Roma Education Fund.

Initially, we were asked to make a music video, but it eventually turned into a ten-year collaboration. We held solo performances, forum theatre productions, and drug prevention presentations. We had no idea at the start that this would be a long-term commitment, nor did we have an initial goal, but we received many invitations. Now, our goal is to create experiences and involve children in a shared creative process. We have grounded our activities in mental health, so art and creation serve as tools to care for our mental well-being.

My greatest dream is to create a school where children can encounter the arts and creative processes. Through these school activities, they will be able to develop themselves, meet different people, and experience situations that together will shape their tastes and personalities. My hope is that these children will embrace some values and remain open to the world. My journey was not always an easy one, but expressing myself through art has always steered me in the right direction. I chose this path because I could not live without it. Now, as a father and an artist, I am still looking for ways to inspire others.

Compiled by Abi Merina Camacho



KRISTÓF HORVÁTH (SZÍNÉSZ
[ACTOR] BOB)
slam poet, actor

FIND OUT MORE:

[Tudás Hatalom](#)

[\[Knowledge Is Power\]](#)

Közösségi média: www.facebook.com

‘I Cannot Explain How I Can Love Someone Else’s Child This Much’

The village where I lived as a child is called Prügy. I have fond memories of that time: we would always play outside and were always together. I was the little princess, the only baby in the family, but I never envied anyone. When we played with the other children in the family, everything was shared. We looked after the younger ones when our parents went out to have some fun or do anything. Even back then, I tended to pamper the younger age group. That is where my love for children must have started, as I was always surrounded by little ones.

Back in the day, I was the favourite wherever I would go. At twelve years old, I moved to Budapest, but going to school there was harder, and it was strange to be in a new class with unfamiliar children. In one of the schools, they had difficulty accepting my Roma background. There comes a point when one gets fed up with being called a filthy gypsy. Later, we found another school, where all children were welcomed.

I never had to choose between family and education. You do not have to make an exclusionary decision in matters like that because you can choose both. I have always loved learning, have had a passion for it ever since I was little, and my mum encouraged me as well. Rightly so, as nowadays even a cleaning lady is required to have a high school diploma. My decision to train as a nursery assistant came spontaneously. Before I realized it, I was already attending the course. The training and the curriculum were structured extremely well. I am proud that I passed my exams easily. Also, I thoroughly enjoyed my practical training in a kindergarten, which was part of the course.

Once, at my suggestion, we organized a Halloween event at the kindergarten, where the nursery teachers and assistants created together figures out of sweets. Along with the children, we decorated the kindergarten with Halloween ornaments, and parents could buy the sweets for a few hundred forints. This brought everyone closer together and turned the mandatory programme into a community experience. After the event had taken place, the director said, 'A little trainee arrives and pulls off something like this, while we have been here for ten years and never did anything of the sort!' This recognition was a great success for me, just as that everyone found great pleasure in the event.

At the moment, my top priority is finding a job as soon as possible. That is on the top of my agenda. Unfortunately, however, it is extremely difficult – there are very few openings. Once I travelled nearly sixty minutes for a job interview only to be told on the spot that the position had already been filled and that I could go back home. Despite all of this, I do not regret choosing this profession, and in the future I would also like to complete a training course to become a kindergarten teacher. I cannot explain how I can love someone else's child so much. Of course, they sometimes get on your nerves, but that comes with the job.

Compiled by Czeglédy Sára



BÓNI MÁRTA
kindergarten teacher

FUTURE GOAL:

Become a kindergarten principal or work with children with special educational needs.

ROLE MODEL:

my mother, who is always on the go and just never seems to tire.

‘Dancing Brings Enormous Joy’

‘Wow! I have never seen someone dance with such passion.’ I must have been eleven when Jancsi Balogh said this to me after he had seen me dancing with his niece. I will never forget the look in his eyes or those words. His opinion always meant a lot to me. I grew up under his guidance, in Roma camps, back when they still existed – places where I could learn so much about Roma values.

Back then, I used to travel a lot with my paternal grandfather on the ‘black train’ in the 70s–80s. My grandfather would take me with him to Szabolcs on it. At that time, people would work in Budapest for a month or two and then return to Szabolcs loaded with food, drink, and musical instruments. They would dance and celebrate during these trips. My grandfather encouraged me, too, to dance for the people. I had no idea then how significant that would be in my future.

Years later, out of nowhere, I got a phone call: ‘Zsolti, we are expecting you at Almássy Square on such and such a date – you have to lead a dance house.’ I had no idea how. Luckily for me, at the Almássy Square festival, there were folk dance movements and dance hall events before the Roma programmes. I would be watching them from the outside, envying, ‘Good Heavens!’, how amazing it feels looking at what they were doing. That is where I picked up some of the methods. As a child, I never thought this would become my career. I believe that dancing brings enormous joy. When you dance with joy, it does not matter what your movements look like, who you are with, or where you are headed. Close your eyes and just dance!

I dived in and learned along the way how to organize a good dance house. What makes my dance teaching unique is that it is accompanied by live music performed by my family, my sons, and my relatives. I really feel that it does not matter who comes to the dance – we welcome one another as one big family. For quite a few years now, there has been a lovely venue, the Kesztyűgyár [Glove Factory] in District VIII, where the sessions are held completely free for the participants. This way, everyone can attend: children, adults, young people, Roma, non-Roma, all together. There is room for everyone.

I have passed the torch to my sons. My eldest son also started as a dancer but now is more engaged in music. At barely three years old, my younger son learned the Nyírvasvári botoló [a stick dance from Nyírvasvári (a village in Hungary)], which has almost gone extinct. I have paved this path for them, and now they can decide for themselves what they want to carry on. I take so much pride in them. Looking back, considering where I started from and the journey I have since travelled fills me with pride. I am grateful to God and my grandfather.

Compiled by Fenyvesi Krisztina



BALOGH ZSOLT
folk dancer, dance instructor

FIND OUT MORE:
[Nagyecsed-i cigány táncház](#)

‘I Work with Human Lives, and I Cannot Make Mistakes’

I loved reading. My grandfather had a large library at home, so I fell in love with books from a very young age. When I was only nine or ten years old, my grandfather would hand me Dostoevsky, Victor Hugo, Chekhov, and similar works. The school librarian, however, eventually banned me from the library because she thought I laughed too loudly, but I loved going there nonetheless. Anyone who reads tries to write as well. When I was eleven, we wrote an essay in the library. At least we were supposed to... instead, however, I wrote a poem and accidentally handed that one in. When the librarian read it, she entered it into a poetry competition, and it ended up winning the Millecentenary Award. Ever since then, I have been writing.

I was a difficult child. My mother could tell you all about it, and my headstrong nature has not changed since then. There are five of us siblings, and I am the oldest one. My parents divorced, yet I grew up in a large family, as my grandparents moved in with us in our flat in District VIII. Already in my childhood, social justice was a topic at our breakfast table. My grandfather was a deep thinker, and through discussing major issues with me, it quickly became my conviction that every situation calls for a decision to be made.

I come from a family that is not religious but deeply spiritual. This means that we were ‘users’ of the Church – we used it for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but we were not regular churchgoers. We believed that God interweaves all visible and non-visible spaces and lives; that in order to live a complete life, we must recognize that what we do has indeed power, that our choices have positive as well as negative consequences.

Having grown up with this worldview, I am now a theologian, coordinating a religious freedom programme that unites seven organizations. It is an ecumenical initiative where people reflect together on the state of human rights in Hungary through their faith.

My primary job is to advise the Józsefváros Municipality on Roma affairs. The scope of my responsibilities covers education, culture, and social matters. In hearing the voices of the community, I was fortunate to be able to launch a civil society initiative with the aim of establishing 23 February as a day of remembrance for the series of murders committed against the Roma. Plenty of civil and non-civil organizations joined the cause, which required coordination. Besides me, a great deal of the work was carried out by Judit Bari, Béla Rácz, Szilvia Szénási, Szilvi Rézműves, and Dezső Szegedi.

Guided by a 'lucky constellation', the proposal passed the council, with everyone voting in favour. Later, it was brought before the city council, and they also voted to make it an official day of remembrance in the capital city of Budapest. I see that the civil society is continuing to advance the cause, which is very important. It is not about defeating a society, as without a just peace, we will but leave a troubled world behind. I work with human lives, and I cannot make mistakes. I cannot make any wrong move that would put their rights or lives in jeopardy – it would be an irreparable mistake that one could not simply write off as an accounting loss.

Compiled by Farkas Ramóna



GALYAS ÉVA KLÁRA

writer, poet, theologian, Roma advisor
for District VIII, and, above all, a
mother

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