

EXEMPLARY ROMAS AND THEIR IDENTIFICATION PATTERNS

“My music’s colour blind, everybody should be colour blind!”
(LL.Junior)

“Decolores. Life is colourful, splendid”
(Cursillo march)

Abstract: The aim of the study is to present exemplary figures found in Roma culture. The author distinguishes two main types: Roma exemplary figures arising from official knowledge and from informal knowledge. He includes in the former category historical heroes, artists and stars, while the latter comprises everyday heroes (unheroic heroes). One of the main conclusions of the study is that the Romas either have only superficial knowledge of the Roma exemplary figures existing in official knowledge (e.g. historical heroes, artists), or they project a stereotypical image of Romas (e.g. celebs), that make them unsuited to promoting Roma integration. Then, through the example of the community-shaping influence of the Cursillo chorus of the Gypsies in Szendrőlád who have converted to Catholicism, he shows how everyday heroes can provide the identity-shaping influence that is present only superficially in the cult of historical heroes, and as a consequence how they can become foundation stones of Roma integration.¹

Keywords: Roma heroes, Roma celebrities, unheroic heroes

The Roma Pride day was first held in Hungary on 19 October 2013. Around a thousand people of Roma origin paraded through the streets of Budapest. The chief organiser of the event, Jenő Setét emphasised that the aim of the march was on the one hand to strengthen Roma self-awareness and on the other to dismantle the negative prejudices that have arisen in the majority society. “The Romas have cause to be proud,” said Setét “they have produced countless cultural and historical achievements that we can be proud of in the life of the country, and there are very few moments when we can hold them up and make them visible.

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We decided to set aside a day when we tell the other Roma people why they should be proud to belong to the Roma community, and show our non-Roma compatriots the cultural and historical values around which we would like to organise our identity."² The Roma March aimed to hold up Roma cultural values and their outstanding historical and cultural figures to counter the extremely negative view of the Gypsies. The participants marched with banners and the Gypsy flag, many held photos of famous Romas that the organisers distributed. There were a number of familiar faces among them: Charlie Chaplin, Michael Caine and Elvis Presley as well as such popular Hungarian singers as Caramel, LL. Junior or Laci Gáspár.³ But there was a striking absence of historical figures linked to the Hungarian Romas. If we then begin to search for Roma heroes, we find on the various websites, among others, the images of Yul Brynner, Andrea Pirlo, Robert Plant and Bill Clinton.⁴ The question inevitably arises of whether these are really the most exemplary figures to hold up for Hungarian Romas.

The present study is an attempt to answer, through examples from Hungary, the question of the extent to which contemporary Roma celebrities can make up



Posters for film stars Charlie Chaplin, Bob Hoskins and Sándor Csányi at the Roma Pride Day 2013. (Source: [http://szinesgyonyok.hu/portfolio-items/roma-pride-roma-buszkeseseg-napja/#iLightbox\[gallery-1\]/6](http://szinesgyonyok.hu/portfolio-items/roma-pride-roma-buszkeseseg-napja/#iLightbox[gallery-1]/6))

² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pJA_rxb8UI (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

³ Caramel, LL. Junior and Laci Gáspár are popular pop singers who have openly accepted their Gypsy identity. They are highly popular performers not only among the Romas in Hungary but also in the eyes of the majority Hungarian society.

⁴ Among others, on the website of the Hungarian Roma Press Centre.

for the lack of Roma historical figures serving as points of orientation. It also aims to show, through the example of a small religious community, the possible influences of everyday heroes on shaping identity.

The exemplary figures

The study of examples and heroes is a tricky field in identity research. While they quite clearly represent the current state of social development in the given period and set a pattern for the development of national identity, the various types of heroes show only the surface and definitely do not reveal the deep processes occurring in the development of identity. We therefore need to state as a point of departure that the cult of various heroes can serve as a guide, but it does not provide a solution in the course of the current political and cultural transformations. Heroes are undoubtedly points of orientation for individual and ethnic national identity, general moral norms and behaviour patterns are manifested through them and become understandable for ordinary people, but they cannot offer the concrete help either in everyday life or in extraordinary events (such as revolutions, wars, sudden changes, economic crises) that is able to lift individuals out of their everyday life circumstances. Their mental and social psychological influence should not be underestimated as they can be an important source of motivation through their own examples, but the inhabitants of a settlement facing multiple disadvantages will not necessarily be able to break out of their situation simply because they respect their historical heroes. We must therefore emphasise that for the Roma population (of Hungary) neither the presence nor the absence of Roma heroes represents the main basis for the formation of their ethnic identity, but it can make a significant contribution to strengthening or weakening that identity. In addition it is important to stress that we certainly cannot speak in general about the *exemplary figure* or *the hero*, or of *the influence the exemplary figure or hero* has on the shaping of community identity as there are many kinds of exemplary figures. Some are created and held up by official knowledge because they played a central role in some important historical event. For example, as they faced the enemy revolutionaries and freedom fighters were always headed by heroic leaders who risked their lives for others; mediaeval martyrs gave their lives for their faith and their community, setting an example and giving strength to others. Their memory has been preserved for centuries in chronicles, legends, history books, museums, and streets, squares and institutions have been named after them, in many cases a cult has been built up for their veneration. There have been and are also heroes who became famous among the people, independently of official knowledge or political systems, entirely on the basis of informal knowledge. Legends, stories and ballads about them were born in vernacular culture,

but in most cases their memory faded within less than a century and they were forgotten. Their cults are short-lived and often remain within subcultural frames.

In the following we examine the types of exemplary figures – who are not the same as hero types! – in official culture and informal culture. First, exemplary figures in official culture:

1. historical figures from both the profane and religious spheres (e.g. rulers, politicians, military leaders, religious figures, saints, blessed)
2. artists, scientists, inventors
3. stars (e.g. singers, actors, sportspersons, fashion models)⁵
4. invented figures, hero characters widespread in the genres of popular culture, such as comics heroes, e.g. Superman, Spiderman, film heroes.

The theses of M. Gregory Kendrick⁶ on the common characteristics of heroes can be applied to these four types of exemplary figures, namely: (1) they are not ordinary people; (2) they do things that most people either cannot or will not do; (3) they dedicate their lives to some abstract ideal – glory, god, excellence, beauty, the end of history; (4) they defend the status quo or create a new one; they are accorded in life special honours, privileges, and wealth by their peers and inferiors and (5) they enjoy a measure of immortality after death through cults, monuments, stories, poems, and songs.

Separate from the former, figures based on informal knowledge – in earlier periods in vernacular culture, today in pop culture – can also be exemplary figures:

1. earlier folk heroes (e.g. bandits)
2. everyday heroes (firemen, rescuers, doctors, social workers, monks, nuns, etc.).

In contrast to the previous group it is characteristic of these people that (1) they are ordinary people; (2) they do things that are not necessarily regarded as extraordinary; (3) they devote their lives to helping others; (4) they generally do not receive any special material or moral recognition for their actions, and (5) they often remain known only at minor subcultural level, without a cult.

There can be transitions between the two main groups of exemplary figures: in the great majority of cases, hero cults or saint cults spread from above are based on existing mass attitudes, or in many cases a hero cult created by official culture becomes part of popular culture. To sum up, starting from the values and merits needed to become an exemplary figure of hero, it can be said that exemplary figures are persons who, placing themselves in the background, basically serve others or their wider community and are prepared to accept suffering or even risk their own lives for this. They may be imagined or real persons, heroes from

5 *Celebs*, or in the terminology of Chris Rojek *celetoids* (ROJEK 2001) have been intentionally left out of this list. It is now entirely true of them that their fame is based on their notoriety. Nowadays to acquire this they do not use one of their positive capabilities (e.g. in the field of sport, music, acting); in many cases they gain brief exposure in the media for their scandalous behaviour.

6 KENDRICK 2010.

history, myths, tales or legends, who have attracted respect, a cult or admiration, or they may be everyday heroes, atypical celebrities, or “unheroic heroes”, known only by a small community, or who become the object of respect anonymously, on the basis of their general merits and characteristics – e.g. firemen, soldiers, doctors. As the psychologist Philip Zimbardo noted, such merit or heroism “means taking action on the behalf of others for a moral cause, aware of possible risks and costs and without expectation of gain.”⁷

Types of exemplary figures among the gypsies

Exemplary figures of the official culture

If we then turn to the Gypsies – in our case the Gypsies of Hungary – and analyse the types we find there, we obtain the following results.⁸ Among exemplary figures of the official culture:

1. The *historical actors* are practically entirely lacking. The explanation for this clearly lies in the basically oral nature of Gypsy historical memory. It is well known that Gypsy history does not have its own historical sources, there are no works preserving the memory of important figures in their history. As a consequence their historical memory is of a different nature from that of the host Hungarian culture. While in the case of the Hungarians – and of European culture – we find that popular historical memory is basically focused on individuals, that is, the most important events are generally coupled with historical figures, the Gypsies remember in an entirely different way, practically as a people without a history. Száraz notes that this is due not only to their own lack of literacy but also to *mulo*, their fears connected to the dead, the obligation to remain silent about them. “Gypsies are not interested in the past. They must take care of today, perhaps also tomorrow. The past is of no interest. Of course the law of silence does not mean immediate forgetting, the memory of the dead is very much alive. [...] But *mulo*, the ban on remembering aloud prevents the Gypsies from devoting themselves to study of the past and as a result their historical memory is very short.”⁹ Although all this is now changing with the weakening of the traditional belief system

7 <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/guest-blog/too-hard-for-science-philip-zimbardo-creating-millions-of-heroes/>

8 The results are based on interviews by questionnaire (250) over a period of two years and personal interviews. The questionnaires covered the cult of celebrities of Gypsy origin known among Hungarian Gypsies, the values and attitudes attached to their persons. They examined how well Gypsy historical figures are known among the Romas in Hungary.

9 SZÁRAZ 2007. 17.

and *mulo* has also lost its symbolic significance, the effect of its operation in the past is still felt. The historical memory of the Gypsies in practice shows a similarity to the historical memory of traditional (non-literate) society (reaching back 3-4 generations), with the only difference that it lacks the historical hero legends with their heroes based on real persons of the past. There are in fact historical figures of Gypsy origin who performed heroic deeds, whose memory has been preserved in Hungarian accounts, but as our survey by questionnaire testifies, these figures are hardly known at all among the Gypsies. Among others, they do not have a degree of knowledge about either Captain Balázs Lippai,¹⁰ or Ferenc Sárközi, Kossuth's Gypsy lieutenant¹¹ that would allow us to conclude that their deeds and behaviour could function as a point of orientation for the Gypsies. Perhaps the only exception is Ceferino Giménez Malla (1861-1936), known by his Gypsy name El Pelé, beatified in 1997, who died as a martyr for his Catholic faith during the Spanish civil war. On the one hand his cult is still evolving, while the Catholic Church uses his figure for pastoral activity among Gypsies, such Catholic pastoral activity is itself still in its infancy. On the other, it must also be taken into account that not all Romas are religious, and the religious Romas are not all Roman Catholics. As a consequence, Blessed Ceferino can offer an effective behaviour model only for Romas who actively practice their faith. Of course, at this point, another doubt can impede the attempt at objective interpretation, namely whether the cult of saints still has the power to actively shape behaviour and opinions that it presumably did in earlier periods.¹² To what extent can the cult of Ceferino become an integral part of constructing vernacular religiosity at the individual level, or does it remain "merely" at the level of official memory and veneration?¹³

2. *Among artists, scientists and inventors* we can find practically only the former. Artists, violinists, cimbalom players, etc. have been well known in connection with Gypsy music for centuries and the most famous (e.g. Panna Czinka, Jancsi Rigó, Pista Dankó¹⁴) have also become part of official memory, the name of Pista Dankó is preserved in statues, streets and squares throughout the country. At the same time their fame and their presence in everyday Gypsy culture

10 Balázs Lippai Hajduk captain was one of the second-in-command during the Bocskai freedom struggle (1604-1606); István Bocskai ordered his execution in 1605, probably because he had grown too strong.

11 Ferenc Sárközi (1820-1897) Gypsy musician; at the time of the 1848-49 freedom struggle Lajos Kossuth made him a lieutenant and head of the Gypsy musicians serving in his army. He took part in a number of battles.

12 MÁTÉ-TÓTH – NAGY 2008.

13 The cults of Blessed Ceferino and Kali Sara ("Saint" Sára) form an interesting contrast. While the former was beatified by the Roman Catholic Church, the latter is treated as a saint of Roma vernacular religion without any canonisation by the church.

14 Panna Czinka (1711-1772) was the first female Gypsy lead violinist (*primas*). Pista Dankó (1858-1903) was far the most successful Gypsy musician who wrote the music for over four hundred poems. Jancsi Rigó (1858-1927) was a famous Gypsy *primas*, one of the first Gypsy stars.

shows ambivalent results. The survey by questionnaire found that knowledge about Panna Czinka or Jancsi Rigó is superficial (9%), while in contrast Pista Dankó with 76% recognition has quite clearly become one of the foundation stones of Roma consciousness and view of the past. The respondents to our questionnaire knew practically no Gypsy painters by name, and among the Gypsy writers and poets only József Choli Daróczi was better known (43%). However, this is perhaps also due to the fact that in the past decade he also appeared in popular television shows.

3. The category of *stars* shows a one-sidedness similar to the previous two categories. The great majority of Roma stars are singers or musicians, with a few sportsmen. An investigation by Munk et alia in 2012 confirmed that the great majority of television programmes also feature a number of Roma stars, but most are participants in current reality shows and pop music performers. "In the Hungarian media in the period examined [...] the most frequently appearing Romas were VV Fecó, Caramel, Laci Gáspár and the Bódi family. Ferenc Snétberger and Béla Szakcsi Lakatos¹⁵ as representatives of high art and the hip-hop artist LL Junior outstanding in the niche genre are at the bottom of the ten top star lists everywhere. In addition to musicians, there are also well known sportspersons, actors and politicians who openly embrace their Roma origin in the public space, but – by profession – it is the musicians who dominate in the group of Roma stars. There are many different kinds of Roma stars on the music scene, from Hungarian art song singers, through classical musicians, rappers and jazz musicians to pop stars."¹⁶ On the evidence of our survey by questionnaire the Romas are familiar with the stars of Gypsy origin and follow their lives and news about them. The most popular singers, such as Caramel or Győző Gáspár, who became famous as reality-show participants, both have 100% recognition! Another example that can be cited are the Hungarian art-song singers who have been performing for decades, such as Margit Bangó (96 % recognition). Within Hungarian media studies, Gábor Bernáth and Vera Messing, and also Veronika Munk have made the most detailed study of the media representation of Gypsy stars. Bernáth and Messing pointed out that the presence of Gypsies in the Hungarian mass media became measurable by the mid-nineties, but these representations remained around the negative stereotypes of Romas that have been formed in the society, portraying them as a uniform, homogeneous group.¹⁷ Munk attributes the fact that the Romas began to appear in large numbers on a regular daily basis and, in departure from the earlier mainly news reports, also in the entertainment media, to the growth of the tabloid media, television talk shows and talent quest programmes around the turn of the millennium; indeed she stresses that because of the Győzike

15 VV Fecó is a celetoid from a reality show; Caramel, Laci Gáspár and the Bódi family are famous pop singers while Snétberger and Szakcsi Lakatos are internationally well-known Roma musicians.

16 MUNK – MORVAY – SZABÓ 2012.

17 BERNÁTH – MESSING 1998.

Show there was a time in the history of Hungarian media when for months a Gypsy family were the main protagonists in the most viewed television programme.¹⁸

Of course, two questions can arise in this connection. On the one hand the Roma image appearing in the media is only one side of the story, there is also a need to throw light on the cult of Roma stars, the nature of their presence in vernacular culture, that is, we need to examine the image of them among the Romas and the values they associate with them. On the other hand, where can all these trends lead? Can they result in the dismantling of the Gypsy image based on uniformising and stereotypes and could they lead to the appearance of the complexity and diversity of Gypsy culture in Roma representation? The values associated with Roma stars basically reflect five different attitudes. Firstly they appreciate their talents, continuously stressing that they have exceptional voices and musical sensitivity. Secondly, regarding a number of the stars, such as Béla Szakcsi Lakatos and Margit Bangó, they note that “they are not heroes in the classical sense”, but they have done a great deal for Gypsy culture, for the popularisation of Gypsy identity, showing it in a more positive light. Thirdly, in a number of cases we found that they respect the given stars because they have openly embraced their Gypsy origin (e.g. Caramel, Gergő Oláh, Misi Mező,¹⁹ LL. Junior, Bangó, Szakcsi), while fourthly, there was respect for their actions and help for Gypsies (Caramel, LL. Junior, Margit Bangó, Bódi family). Finally, apart from these four categories there is a rejecting, negative attitude, mainly in connection with Győzike, the principal figure in the scandalous reality show who is becoming an anti-hero. If we draw a conclusion from this, we can say that the cult of Gypsy stars is practically nourished by the same modern myth based on individuality that we have already seen in the general analysis of the star cult.²⁰ Accordingly, the main message of the Gypsy stars is an individual message to their fans, saying in essence that the successes they have achieved can also be reached by any talented Roma with a lot of work. A secondary message, that less often comes to the fore, is that in the midst of success it is possible to remain an (ordinary, “average”) Gypsy. The community aspect, that they must use their success in the interest of the Gypsies and help the Gypsies was only occasionally mentioned beside the individual reading, as a third message. Taking all this into account it can be said that Gypsy stars in general are not suitable for dismantling the uniformising, basically negative stereotypes that have become associated with the Gypsies. As Munk put it, in the case of Gypsy stars, with time the information concerning their origin loses its news value in reports on them.²¹ In this connection

18 MUNK – MORVAY – SZABÓ 2012.

19 Gergő Oláh is a famous singer who won a talent show, while Misi Mező is the singer of famous rock band Magna Cum Laude.

20 Povedák 2011, Povedák 2014a, Povedák 2014b.

21 “Thus with stardom, ethnic origin is relegated to the background, it gives both Romas and non-Romas a safe, levelling field. In the remaining one quarter, the positive stereotype of musicality appeared in connection with the most prominent Gypsies, a talent that the majority society also

Bernáth and Messing stressed in their earlier mass media studies that “... 48 per cent of the cultural reports [on Gypsies] appeared in the tabloid media. Much less than a tenth of materials about the Roma in the other media were related to culture. The greater part of the articles that can be coded under culture did not mention Roma culture (or in most cases, it did not mention Romas either): they generally dealt with participants in television talent quests who incidentally happened to be Romas. In contrast with earlier singers who identified themselves as Roma (such as Caramel, Ibolya Oláh) these new talents did not appear as specifically Roma and showed evidence of full assimilation”.²²

4. Similar conclusions can be drawn regarding *invented figures, heroic characters* (comic heroes, film heroes) in the genres of popular culture. The market for documentary films on the situation of the Gypsies, the functioning of Gypsy society is so insignificant that it can practically only be measured among specialists dealing with the topic and the Gypsy intelligentsia. Other Roma characters appearing in – Hungarian – films do not go beyond the negative stereotype figures that have long existed in folklore, building on and reinforcing the two-dimensional portrayal of Gypsies familiar from news programmes where they are shown as either disadvantaged or criminalised.



LL. Junior hip-hop star at the 2013 Roma Parade

(Source: <http://magyarnarancs.hu/belpol/fel-ciganyok-roma-buszkeseget-napja-87061>)

recognises and provides with scope for its unfolding.” MUNK – MORVAY – SZABÓ 2012.
 22 BERNÁTH – MESSING 2012.

Exemplary figures of informal culture

If we now examine the types of exemplary figures based on informal knowledge we find an ambivalent picture. The *earlier memory of folk heroes*, like the historical heroes in the previous chapter, is practically missing (I do not include folk take heroes²³ in this category).

In contrast, there is a gradual increase in the importance of *everyday heroes*. This, of course, can be said to be true not only for Gypsies, there is basically a general trend towards emphasis on the value and accessibility of “heroic” deeds that can be and are performed in everyday life.²⁴ In general the category of everyday heroes can be suitable for building up a basically community-, human-oriented mythology in place of the individual mythology behind the star cult, one that is based on the level of lived experience. The everyday heroes become exemplary figures of small communities in an organic way, but everyday heroes can also become better known, exemplary figures who, like the historical heroes, can have a motivating influence on communities. Roma everyday heroes first earned relatively wider recognition in Hungary with the book by Pál Závada and Péter Korniss introducing twenty-four Roma,²⁵ then since 2015 the Roma Press Centre has organised annual voting to elect the everyday Roma hero of the year, who receives the Gold Band award.²⁶

Roma everyday heroes from the church. The example of the Szendrőlád Choir

One of the most striking examples of the influence on the community, behaviour and opinions that everyday Roma heroes can have is found in Szendrőlád in Northern Hungary, a village with a large Roma population in one of the most backward regions of the country. Just reaching the settlement from the central parts of the country takes longer than it does to fly half-way across Europe. In spite of the continuously low standard of living, the deteriorating work conditions and the mass emigration of Gypsies, this village where the great majority of the inhabitants are Romas has earned a positive reputation – even if only among those who follow the pastoral activity of the Roman Catholic church

23 On the subject of Gypsy folk tales and folk tale heroes, see: <http://www.mek.iif.hu/porta/szint/human/szepirod/nepkolt/szogkir/szogkir.htm#10> (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

24 On this see Zimbardo’s project: <http://heroicimagination.org/> (Accessed on 4 October 2016.) Krisztián Nyáry’s literary-type presentations of everyday heroes have also been very popular. NYÁRY, Krisztián (2015): *Igazi hősök. 33 magyar. [Real Heroes. 33 Hungarians]*. Budapest, Corvina Kiadó.

25 ZÁVADA, Pál, KORNISS, Péter (2011): *Egy sor cigány - Huszonnégy mai magyar. [A Row of Gypsies – Twenty-four Contemporary Hungarians]*. Budapest, Corvina Kiadó

26 <http://romasajtokozpont.hu/hetkoznap-i-hosoket-keresunk-jelold-ismerosod-az-aranyant-dijra/> (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

among Gypsies. During our fieldwork we visited Jenő Rézműves and the Roman Catholic church choir he leads who over the past decade and a half have become emblematic actors of pastoral activity among Gypsies in Hungary aimed at their conversion.

The Roman Catholic spirituality movement that originated in Spain²⁷ appeared in Szendrőlád in 1996. When we visited the village in 2015 the leader of the local Cursillists, Jenő Rézműves told us that more than 800 local Romas were participating in it. He himself also stressed that this naturally does not mean that everyone who takes part in the Cursillo is converted and changed at a stroke, but the change that can be felt in the relations between Gypsies and Hungarians and in public morals and the general mood in the settlement quite clearly shows the transformation taking place. Completing the Cursillo movement does not mean an obligation for the person concerned to become part of the community. Joining depends on the individual's decision.

All the active participants spoke of a conversion experience during the Cursillo weekend, as something that radically changed both their family and human relations, as well as their ties to the community – both to their own fellow Gypsies and to non-Gypsies. In the words of Mrs József Ádám, a member of the Szendrőlád choir:

“We behaved differently at home, and in the street too. With patience, love and acceptance. And that was a really big change in those days. Many people noticed it. But we warned each other, Gypsies too, that the way we are living is not right. We lived a sinful life, oh yes, we did too before!”²⁸

Under the influence of the conversion experience the course of their personal lives took a new direction, it switched over to the opposite. But the Cursillists who gave up roistering, drinking, playing cards and noisy behaviour found it

27 We took this brief introduction to Cursillo from János Székely, assistant bishop and spiritual leader of the movement in Hungary. “Cursillo is a church spiritual movement that originated in Spain (more precisely in Mallorca), one of the first such secular initiatives. A number of spiritual movements (e.g. Marriage Encounter, Antioch Community, Neocatechumenal Way, CFM – Christian Family Movement) have drawn on the charisma, the basic thoughts and method of Cursillo [...] Cursillo originally prepared pilgrimage leaders for El Camino, but soon widened that goal. At present it prepares people for the pilgrimage of life, and tries to make them authentic Christians and apostles. [...] The characteristics of the Cursillo method are friendship, naturalness, sincerity and inner fire. In Cursillo participants come into contact with themselves, with God and their fellows. They experience a triple meeting. Cursillo generally enthuses participants, moves them and fills them with strength. Many people experience a turning point in their life. Often important friendships and new communities are formed through Cursillo. [...] Cursillo speaks not only to religious people but to everyone with an open heart and mind who sincerely seeks the meaning of life, and strives to live an authentic life. The Cursillo is held on a weekend, from Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon. It then continues in a refreshed, renewed life.” <http://cursillo.hu/customPages/a-cursillorol?subSiteld=1> (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

28 Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015.

difficult to overcome the community's attitude towards them. Their appearance at mass first caused consternation among the Hungarian congregation.

"At first they tried to freeze us out, when we wanted to sit somewhere they said the place was reserved but in the end no one sat there. They asked us what we were doing in the church, we had no business there, but we went back again the following week. They still didn't let us sit down, we stood in the doorway. It went on like that for a while until they realised that we too are following the Lord."²⁹

"For a Hungarian to give me a kiss of greeting, oh, I would never have thought that possible. Now they come and are grateful, they shake hands with us."³⁰

However, it is not the conversion experience that is most interesting in the operation of the Szendrőlád Cursillo choir, after all, there are many reports of similar about-turns in the literature on the psychology of conversion.³¹ Liberation from sin and seeing the light are characteristic features of practically all conversion narratives. What is extraordinary in the operation of the group is the open and



The Szendrőlád choir in the local community centre. (Photo: I. Povedák 10. 11. 2015)

²⁹ József Ádám, Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015.

³⁰ Jenő Rézműves, Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015.

³¹ SÜLE 1997.

uncompromising stand that, among others, took them to Rome where they met the Pope, or to Berlin where they sang at a mass in memory of the victims of the Porrajmos. It is not only the activity that must be taken into account, but the activity they carry out in all cases for the cause of the Romas. It was as representatives of the Romas that they visited the Pope and sang in Berlin in memory of the Romas.

“Hitler is turning in his grave in Berlin that we Romas sang there in memory of the Gypsy Holocaust!”³²

But they also lead the Romas in procession each year at the Gypsy church feast at Mátraverebély-Szentkút, and they participate in family days held in dioceses at the other end of the country to help Roma-Hungarian coexistence.³³ In 2016 they also appeared in Szeged, almost four hundred kilometres from Szendrőlád in their battered up old car to lead, practically without payment, the first three-day Gypsy Cursillo to be held there.³⁴ In this case too their influence resulted in amazing narratives. “I had been a drug addict for a year, I fell back into the habit a few times, but I always got back on my feet. I’m not very religious, but I will be now. What I got from Jenő and the others at the weekend was love, empathy and affection. They’re a very kind and wonderful team. I became very fond of them. If I had a hat I would raise it to them! They helped me a lot, and will help me again in my life. There’s something extra in them that you don’t find in every Gypsy. If only everyone were like them. If only I were like them too!” said Erik Oláh, a young Roma participating in the programme.

The members of the Szendrőlád choir are in continuous contact with the Romas. As a consequence their word and its lived experience must be in harmony. In this way they have become exemplary figures not on the basis of a pseudo-experience or a media appearance, but through direct experience. If their credibility were to evaporate, they would also lose their legitimacy as everyday heroes in Szendrőlád.

“I believe that the Lord has blessed Szendrőlád. We are not outstanding financially, but we have practically everything we need for a happy life. We accept our situation, we don’t rebel, we try to live in a way that is pleasing to the Lord.”³⁵

32 Jenő Rézműves, Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015.

33 POVEDÁK 2007: Én mindent tudok Rólád, Te semmit rólam. [I know everything about you, you know nothing about me]. *Família* June 2007. 12. pp. http://www.familiamagazin.hu/cikk/2007.junius/en_mindent_tudok_rolad_te_semmit_rolam/2/ (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

34 Four male members of the choir led the Cursillo on 14-17 April 2016 and three women members on 21-24 April in Szeged, 400 km from Szendrőlád. Reports are available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XW4B3CBukPw> (Accessed on 4 October 2016.)

35 Cinu Rézműves, Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015



Participants in the Gypsy Cursillo in Szeged. (Photo: Csomo Sárközi, 17. 04. 2016)

It can be seen that the members of the Szendrőlád Cursillo choir became exemplary figures and everyday heroes spontaneously, on the basis of their personal efforts and the example of their life for the conversion of the Gypsies and thus the improvement of their life situation. When I asked him what it felt like to be an exemplary figure, Jenő Rézműves replied without hesitation: “The glory it not ours, it belongs to the Lord above.”³⁶

Conclusion

If we approach the topic of our study from the angle of applied social science research, we can say that there is a need for both exemplary figure categories: figures created partly or wholly from above, and those arising as a grassroots movement – and not only in the case of the Gypsies. They serve to satisfy a certain psychological need arising at the level of society, behind which we find on the one hand the demand for behaviour patterns shaping values and opinions and on the other the need for aspirational models. The various kinds of exemplary figures, whether lieutenants, Gypsy violinists, pianists or singers, are in all cases identification patterns. In general they represent the way of life to which the individual aspires.³⁷ We can observe this kind of psychological need when we see participants in the Roma Pride Day carrying images of Charlie Chaplin or Elvis

³⁶ Jenő Rézműves, Szendrőlád, 10 November 2015.

³⁷ Povedák 2011. 94–100.

Presley, the same need lies behind the cult of Blessed Ceferino, and is also felt by the fans and followers of Roma stars. What is problematic in this case is the most important contradiction between heroes and stars, inherent in the deep structure, namely that the cult of heroes can be defined as following traditions while that of stars is following fashion. In both cases the “following” and “copying” results in superficial similarities, but the essential content behind them is different. In the former case we find collective values and in the latter individual values.

By following tradition individuals also maintain it and adapt it to the current circumstances, but in doing so they are not performing an individual series of actions. In part because in the great majority of cases following tradition occurred in community spaces, individuals represented both their own personal and their collective identity before the community and the community reinforced the individual in all this. In part because tradition is always at the same time a symbolic storehouse of the values, knowledge, reflexes of the community, of the information needed for its survival. In this connection, while the appearance of historical heroes, their deeds and the cults that arose around them basically occurred in circumstances where community values were placed in the fore, that is, they performed their individual deeds in the interest of the community, of the “people”, in contrast the entire existence of the stars is based on individualism. We cannot find a hero who became a hero because he wanted to be in the centre of attention and achieve self-fulfilment, but there are countless examples of heroes who put aside themselves, their personal desires, goals and interests to act and suffer for others. Thus heroes can never be interpreted in themselves, only as members of a community, as its symbolical embodiment, that is, they serve as a collective identity pattern. In contrast, the cult of the stars is linked to a kind of “bourgeois mythology” centred around individual success. The essence of the mythical element is that it presents the success of market winners as though this success were possible without alienation, and in doing so it can be said to legitimate the entire system of “mass culture” at the level of world order. It projects a false image offering compensation to the little people following them that makes them believe that the star’s path and situation is within their reach, in other words, it offers an individual identification pattern whereas in fact it is only an illusion of attainable reality. It is at this point what heroes the Romas have (or do not have), and with what stars they try unsuccessfully to fill the gap caused by the lack of heroes becomes important. In their case it is not that the popular stars are negative, weak persons unfit to be models to follow, but rather that what following them is able to offer is not sufficient for the healthy functioning of Roma identity.³⁸

38 It should be noted that the relationship to the majority society also stands or falls on such factors. If there are no historical heroes, there are no founding myths (of events or persons) that confirm in symbolical language their belonging to the nation. As Miklós György Száraz aptly expressed it: “If they say Gypsy, it does not occur to us that, say, the Gypsy is beautiful. [...] It might perhaps occur to us that they are exotic, but it will certainly come to our mind that the Gypsy is not us. The Gypsy is always They. Not us. Even so, we are the Gypsy too [...] What I have in mind is not that we are all human-beings, but that the Hungarian Gypsy is Hungarian. The French French, the Spanish Spanish, the American American.” SZÁRAZ 2007. 17.

All the more so that their activity building Roma identity appears only sporadically. As Munk also pointed out, the Roma stars themselves rarely speak up (or they are not asked to speak) on social, political or economic issues or even on questions touching on their identity.³⁹ In this situation the lack of Roma heroes as exemplary figures is again an urgent matter, and this brings us back to Boorstin's thesis that "we can fabricate fame, we can at will (though usually at considerable expense) make a man or woman well-known but we can never make him great. We can make a celebrity but we can never make a hero. All heroes are 'self-made'."⁴⁰ With this in mind we must turn towards the everyday Roma heroes who could be the foundation stones of a new Roma image built from below.

39 MUNK 2014.

40 BOORSTIN 1982. 48.

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