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## **Beginning of Roma Literature: The Case of Alexander Germano**

### **Abstract**

This article traces the beginning of Romani literature. It focuses on the work of Alexander Germano in the context of the history of a unique Romani literacy project developed in the USSR before World War Two. It shows the peculiarity of the Soviet Roma literature and in particular the personal activities and contributions of Germano, the man considered the progenitor of contemporary Romani literature (with works in all three main genres of literature: poetry, prose, and drama). The study is based on a number of years of archival work in a variety of archives in the Russian Federation and to a great extent in Alexander Germano's personal archive, preserved in the town of Orel (Russian Federation). The documents studied allow us to clarify the blurred spots in his biography, to reveal his ethnic background and identity, and to highlight the reason for the success of the Romani literacy project. The example of Germano shows that the beginning of a national literature depends on the significance and public impact of the literary work of a particular author, and is not necessarily related to the author's ethnic origin and identity.

**Key words:** Alexander Germano, Romani literature, progenitor, USSR, ethnicity, identity

### **Introduction**

Although Roma have lived in Europe for centuries, since the Middle Ages, the vast majority of them did not belong to enlightened and highly educated parts of society. For centuries the majority of them were illiterate and poorly educated. This explains why Roma literature emerged and began to develop only relatively late, in the modern era, and de facto in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The question of the roots and beginnings of Roma literature, as well as what is meant by the term "Romani literature" itself, remains complex and even controversial (for more details see: Toninato 2014; Zahova 2014; 2016). In our article, we will not pay special attention to the issues related to literary analysis or literary theory. Our aim, instead, is to discuss the emergence and early development of Romani literature in terms of its history, briefly outlining the first steps in this early stage. Special attention

will be paid to the personality and the role of Alexander Germano in the development of early Roma literature.

### **The very beginning of Romani literature**

The first texts authored by Roma during the Middle Ages are preserved in historical archives and are mainly different types of petitions to central and local authorities and court institutions (see e.g. Marushiakova and Popov 2001; Mróz 2001). The first books published in Romani (apart from fragmentary records of folklore) were translations into the Romani language of the New Testament (specifically separate Gospels), made by non-Roma, beginning with the translation of the Gospel of Luke (Embéoe Majoró Lucas) in the dialect of the Spanish Caló by George Borrow, printed by the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1837/1838 and a revised version in 1872 (Collie and Fraser 1984: 109-117).

The first comprehensive text written by a representative of the Roma community to enter the public space dates from 1867. Entitled “Letter to the Editor”, the text appeared in the context of the developments in the Ottoman Empire, in the Bulgarian Newspaper *Македонија* [Macedonia], published in Istanbul (Един Егюптиянин 1867: 3; Marushiakova and Popov 1995: 39-42). The text of this letter was written in Bulgarian and signed by “an Egyptian” (at that time in many places in the Balkans the Roma were called Egyptians by their surrounding population, in the respective local languages). It was authored by Iliya Naumchev from the town of Prilep (today in the Republic of Northern Macedonia), and almost nothing is known about him; he died as a priest at the Bulgarian Orthodox Eparchy in the first years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Naumchev pleads in his letter for the creation of an “own” Christian church with services in their “own” language, “own” education, and “own” society (i.e. own state). In fact, this comprehensive journalistic text is the first public manifestation of the nascent movement for Roma civic emancipation in the modern era, part of the development of national movements in the three multinational empires (Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian) in Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Marushiakova and Popov 2017a: 33-35; 2020).

The first creative literature texts in the Romani language written by Roma authors also appeared in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most often the beginning of this process is associated with the name of Gina Ranjičić. Little is known about her, or more precisely, nothing is known for certain. The only source that contains biographical information about her is Heinrich von Wlislöcki’s book *Aus dem inneren Leben der Zigeuner: Ethnologische Mitteilungen*, in which a special chapter “Eine zigeunerische Dichterin” is devoted to her and it also includes examples of her poems in the Romani language (Wlislöcki 1892: 180-213). All the work of Heinrich von Wlislöcki, however, was seriously criticised

because of plagiarism and falsification of published material, especially the Romani texts (Lípa 1968). This leads many researchers to more or less doubt the authenticity of the realities he also presents about the life of the Roma (for more details see: Hohmann 1995). The description that Heinrich von Wlislöcki makes of Gina Ranjičić's life reads more like an adventure story, taking place throughout the Balkans, Italy, North Africa, and France, to her death in 1891 in Slavonia (then in Austro-Hungary). Inevitably, serious doubts were raised as to the authenticity of this story, and hence, in general, the authenticity of Gina Ranjičić's poetic work (for example, it is possible that her poems were a mystification written and created by Wlislöcki himself). Despite this, according to some authors, especially the creators of the Roma national historic narrative, Gina Ranjičić has to be considered a progenitor of Roma literature (e.g. Djurić 2002: 40; 2010: 88). And as is usually said in such cases: *se non è vero, è molto ben trovato*.

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a small circle of Roma intellectuals, including János Ipolysági Balogh (1802-1876), József Boldizsár (1825-1878), and Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka (1855-?), produced translations in the Romani language and created original literature themselves, besides their work as dictionary editors (Orsós 2015). The main drive in the process appears to have been a wish for the creation and the publication *Ő császári és magyar királyi fensége József főherceg magyar és cigány nyelvű gyökszótára. Románé álvá. Iskolai és utazási használatra* [His Imperial and Hungarian Royal Highness Archduke Joseph on Hungarian and Gypsy language roots. Roma words. For school and travel use] of one of the members of the Habsburg Dynasty, Archduke Joseph Carl Ludwig von Habsburg (1833-1905), Palatine of Hungary, who at the same time was also one of the founding and active members of the Gypsy Lore Society, and its sponsor (Záloagă 2014). But the general historical context and the spirit of the time are the main factors that influenced the processes of the emergence and development of the ideology of new modern nations in the region of Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, in the paradigm of which the emergence of a movement for Roma civic emancipation is also included. It was initiated by a relatively small circle of the Roma elite. This is very similar (at least as a model) to the creation of all other new modern nations in the region of Central, South-Eastern and Eastern Europe, where it was the elites who created national concepts that were subsequently adopted by the masses (Hroch 2005).

In this context, the place of Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka and his dictionary of Romani language (Sztojka 2007), and literary texts (poems, two historical dramas), and especially the epic poem *A cigányok vándorlása* (The Wanderings of the Gypsies) (Sztojka 1886), should be noted. This poem clearly highlights the author's interest in the origins and early history of the Gypsies, which is fully in tune with the increased interest in these topics at the dawn of early modern nationalism throughout the region. In fact, it was specifically this epic poem which created a new historical myth about the birth

and the early history of the Gypsies. *The Wanderings of the Gypsies* poem reflects on the arrival of the Gypsies in the Hungarian lands in the time of Attila the Hun (5<sup>th</sup> century). According to the poem, the Gypsies used to have their own fortress which even Attila was unable to conquer. However, soon after that, great starvation spread and that is the stated reason why some of them began to travel, to separate into nine tribes, which practised different professions (cauldron making, horse-trading, commerce, metalwork, masonry and carpentry), dispersed around various Hungarian regions, while some others settled permanently. Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka, well ahead of his time, did not look upon the “exotic other”, but attempted to formulate the Gypsies’ own narrative as a Roma author (Orsós 2015).

Concerning Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka, we have every formal reason to accept him as the progenitor of Romani literature. However, there is one serious obstacle in this regard. Sztojka’s literary texts in the Romani language (as well as those of Gina Ranjičić, if she really existed) had been published only in specialised academic editions of that time. Thus this text in practice remains completely unknown to the Roma. Literature is a social phenomenon too, not only an artistic one, and considering texts that are completely unknown to the relevant community as national literature can be done only conditionally. Paradoxical as it may sound, in fact, these texts have become part of the national Roma literature only today, i.e. this is a case where a newly emerging literature begins to rediscover its roots.

The literary work of Ferenc Nagyidai Sztojka, to a great extent, remains poorly known, including to significant numbers of Romani literature scholars. One possible reason for this strange situation is the paradox that, in practice, the majority of contemporary scholars of Romani literature do not master (and therefore do not use) Romani language. But this is a completely different topic.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a new genre emerged in the Russian Empire which could, although with some reservations, be at least partially related to the first manifestations of Romani literature. With the rapid development of interest in Russian high society towards Gypsy music, particularly the so-called Gypsy choirs, the growing repertoire included not only works based on folklore or romances by non-Roma authors but original texts written by Gypsy musicians themselves. On March 20, 1888, the operetta *Чавэ андро веша* (Children in the forest, in Romani, with the author’s title in Russian Children of forests and fields) was presented on the stage of the Maly Theatre (literally Little Theatre) in Saint Petersburg. The music and lyrics, mainly prized Gypsy songs and romances, were arranged by Nikolay Shishkin, one of the founders of a famous Gypsy music dynasty. The performance was periodically renewed and presented until 1906. In 1892 the premiere of the new operetta by Nikolay Shishkin *Цыганская жизнь* [Gypsy life] (Бауров 1996: 22-23; Бессонов 2002: 805-820) took place. Publications of texts of Gypsy romances (including those authored by Roma) of that time (the second

half of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) were numerous (see for a detailed bibliography Щербачова 1984: 158-172).

### **Nationalities policy of the early Soviet Union and the Romani literature project**

The period from the 1920s to the 1930s can be considered a new beginning in the development of an already genuine Romani literature in the early Soviet Union, when an impressive number of Roma authors appeared in the public sphere, and more than this, they found their audience within the Roma community itself.

This development can be properly understood only if it is regarded in the general historical and social context of the nationalities policy in the early USSR. Lately, this nationalities policy has often been referred to as *korenizatsiya* (literally “putting down roots”). However, for us, it is much more accurate and most appropriate to designate it as a policy of affirmative action (Martin 2001). If for no other reason, at least because in the case of Roma literature there was no return to the roots; on the contrary, there was an active fight against the so-called Gypsy *цыганищина*, referring to the Gypsy romances, which were declared inauthentic pseudo-art of the bourgeoisie (Штейнпресс 1934; Lemon 2000; O’Keeffe 2013). In the case of Romani literature in the early USSR, it is about the creation of a comprehensive new, holistic social and cultural phenomenon that finds its place in the lives of the Roma.

The nationalities policy of the early Soviet Union was based on the principles of equal rights for the individual peoples of the USSR and comprehensive support for their national development, including the creation of a written language and literature for those nationalities that had been lacking it until then. These fundamental principles, however, depending on the specific interests of the Soviet state, were applied differently, to individual nationalities. Nevertheless, towards the Roma the policy was definitely benevolent. Actually, the official term used at the time was *цыгане*, “Gypsies”. This designation, however, included not only Roma communities (and a small number of Sinti merging with Roma), but also Lom (named by the surrounding population Bosha or Posha) and Dom (named by the surrounding population Garachi or Karachi) communities in the South Caucasus, as well as Mughat (named by the surrounding population Lyuli or Jughli) and other “Gypsy-like” communities (Mazang, Tavoktarosh or Sogutarosh, Agha, etc.) in Central Asia (Marushiakova and Popov 2016a). In practice, however, the entire state policy in the field of education and literature (unlike other spheres) was directed only at Roma, i.e. in this specific case, Gypsies is a synonym of Roma.

An important component of the nationalities policy of the Soviet state with regard to the Gypsies was the development of a standardised codified Romani language, on that basis, the comprehensive education of the Gypsies: setting up Gypsy schools, preparing teachers, literacy

courses for the illiterate (called likbez), publishing textbooks, and teaching materials, etc. On May 10, 1927 Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, head of the People's Commissariat on Education (Narkompros) of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), issued the Decree *On Creating a Gypsy Alphabet* (O'Keeffe 2013: 79-80). In pursuance of this decree, the General Directorate of Scientific, Academic-Artistic and Museum Institutions (Glavnauka) at the People's Commissariat of Education of the RSFSR (Narkompros) held a Scientific-Consultative Meeting, where a committee for creation of the Gypsy language alphabet was established. Members of the committee were Prof. Maxim Sergievskiy from Moscow State University, his assistant Tatyana Wentzel, N. Rogozhin (editor and translator), and as representatives of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies – Nikolay Pankov and Nina Dudarova (Друц & Гесслер 1990: 295). The committee was a division of the Institute for Teaching Methods and was responsible for coordinating teaching and publishing activities of works in the Romani language, including Roma literature.

An extremely important role in the development of Romani literature was played by periodicals in the Romani language. The journal *Романы зоря* (Gypsy Sunrise) came out in 1927, with a total of four issues, published at irregular intervals (for the discussion on the date of issue of the journal see Шаповал 2019). In 1930 this magazine was replaced by the journal *Нэво дром* (New Way) which had 24 issues by 1932. The journals contained all sorts and all literature genres, including Gypsy folklore. Along with this, publishing books in the Romani language was a quite impressive activity (Shapoval 2020: 346-357). A Gypsy department was set up at *Центриздат* (The Central Publishing House) in 1930. By 1932 there were already Gypsy departments at four other publishing houses: *Селколхозгиз* (specialised in publishing books about kolkhoz-related and agricultural issues), *Молодая гвардия* (specialised in publications for students and young people); ГИХЛ (State Publishing House for Fiction); *Учмедгиз* (specialised in text books and teaching aids for Gypsy schools and for adult training), etc. In 1936 a total of eight publishing houses published books in the Romani language (Калинин 2005: 49).

It should be noted that the number of "Gypsies" (predominantly Roma) in the early USSR was relatively insignificant considering the vast size of the Soviet state. The population census in the USSR in 1926 reported 61,234 Gypsies, of whom 12,823 lived in cities and 48,411 in villages (Всесоюзная перепись 1926). The census recorded Gypsies according to their residence, and because at that time permanently settled Gypsies in villages were relatively few and only in some regions, it can be assumed that the majority of Roma registered as living in villages were nomads. The total population of the USSR was 146,637,530 people, i.e. Gypsies represented about 0.42 percent of this population and therefore occupied 44<sup>th</sup> place in the ranking of nationalities in the USSR by number. The 1939 USSR census reported 88,242 Gypsies (Всесоюзная перепись 1939). With the entire population of the

USSR totalling 170,557,093, Roma represented about 0.05% of it and placed 43<sup>rd</sup> in the ranking of nationalities in the USSR by their size (i.e. the changes from the 1926 data were insignificant). Of course, it should be borne in mind that these are official censuses in which parts of the Gypsies (especially communities living in Central Asia and the North Caucasus) stated another ethnic identity, which they, for various reasons, preferred or even experienced (see Marushiakova and Popov 2016a). In any case, the actual number of Gypsies in the USSR (and in particular Roma) was not so different from the official figures that it would significantly change their relative proportion of the total population of the USSR during this period.

It is natural to question the reasons for the huge amount of Romani books being published, given the small potential target of these publications for the scale of the Soviet state; was it a matter of short-sightedness of authorities, or it was a matter of making a political point. The answer here is completely unambiguous—it was a political decision, conditioned by the spirit of the times and the dominant ideology in the USSR, reflected in the leading nationalities policy, including in the sphere of publishing. The Soviet state listed Gypsies among those nationalities (“backward” according to the terminology used at the time), who were entitled to receive education and literacy in their own language with special priority, and who required special care (O’Keeffe 2010: 283-312; 2013).

The total number of books issued in Romani between 1928 and 1938 was over 250 (Русаков & Калинин 2006: 266-287; Shapoval 2021), and this is not the comprehensive number. Of course, not all of these publications should be considered Romani literature or at least there should be many reservations in this respect, as this number includes e.g. primers for students and adults, textbooks and educational materials, manuals for work on Gypsy collective farms and artels (production cooperatives), numerous propaganda and agitation publications in the spirit of the Soviet era (most of them translations from the Russian language). Significant numbers of other types of books were translations too, e.g. political literature (including some works of Lenin and Stalin), combatting religion, popular science, technology and industry, agricultural books, medicine and hygiene, family and education, etc. (for more details see: Marushiakova and Popov 2017b: 50).

For our topic, literature works (poetry, prose, dramaturgy, journalism) authored by Roma are the most important. Special mention should also be made of translations into the Romani language of Russian and world literature classics, such as books by Alexander Pushkin (short novels, fairy tales, and the famous poem *Gypsies*), Lev Tolstoy, Prosper Mérimée (the famous novel *Carmen*), Maxim Gorky (his stories devoted to Gypsies), including children’s books, etc. (for more details see bibliographies by Русаков & Калинин 2006: 266-287; Shapoval 2021). Creative translations are a separate literature genre thus they should be regarded as part of Romani literature.

All of this publishing of works in Romani ceased after 1938. Changes in Soviet policy towards the Gypsies after 1938, when Roma schools were closed and Roma publications stopped, should not be interpreted as a manifestation of any specific anti-Gypsy policy of the Soviet state but only as part (and by far not the most important part) of the overall change in the paradigm of Soviet nationalities policy in the 1930s, which ended the policy of affirmative action with respect to individual nationalities in the USSR.

Gypsies are not even specifically mentioned in the Decision of the Organisational Bureau of the Central Committee of Communist Party from December 1, 1937, which proposed (i.e. assigned) to Narkompros the task “to reorganise these schools into Soviet schools of ordinary type” (RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 633, l. 4), nor in the Decree *On the Reorganisation of National Schools* of Narkompros from January 24, 1938 RGASPI, f. 17, op. 114, d. 837, l. 100-101).

In this case, it is important to emphasise that the radical turn in the nationalities policy of the Soviet state does not mark the definitive end in the existence and development of Romani literature in the USSR. Sometimes, preposterous statements can be found met, such as “Romani literature and culture were unofficially banned” (Kozhanov and Makhotina 2019), which simply do not fit the historical reality. Works by Roma authors were also published after World War Two, until the collapse of the USSR in 1991, e.g. Alexander German’s collection of stories was published in two editions (Германю 1960; 1962). In some cases, Romani literature books were even published in print runs that were huge for their time (and even more so for the present day), for example the two collections of children’s poems by Leksa Manush (Alexander Belugin) were published in 300,000 copies (Мануш 1980; 1983), and his children’s book *Звездочка* [The Little Star] was published in 1,500,000 (sic!) copies (Мануш 1976). Restrictions in the development of Romani literature in the USSR at that time were in another sphere—firstly, greatly reducing the number of publications by Roma authors (when compared with the period of the 1930s), and secondly, stopping publication in the Romani language, the only exception to this being the academic editions of Gypsy folklore (Кантя 1970; Деметер & Деметер 1981). So, we cannot say that the Romani literature of the early USSR ended in 1938; moreover, the collection of poems by Gypsy poets (Саткевич 1974) includes works by authors from the 1930s as well as contemporary Romani poets, i.e. the continuity in the development of Romani literature is undeniable.

Going back to the period of the early USSR, it can be summarised that in the 1930s there were also more than 40 published fiction books by Roma authors, such as Alexander Germano (poetry, prose, dramaturgy, journalism), Ivan Rom-Lebedev (prose and dramaturgy), Mikhail Bezlyudskiy (poetry and journalism), Mikhail Ilyinskiy (prose), the poets Georgiy Lebedev, Ivan Khrustalyov, and Alexey Svetlov, the poetesses Olga Pankova, Evdokiya Orlova and Mariya Polyakova (see the exact

bibliographic data of all bibliographic publications in Русаков & Калинин 2006: 266-287; Shapoval 2021). The genres of these books included mainly prose and short stories, poetry, theatre plays, and journalism. It even inspired the beginning of a new genre, which nowadays is especially popular in Roma literature—the comics—with the main character Rom Pupyрка, published in the journal *Романы зоря* (Полякова 1929: 49; 1930: 63).

There is no doubt that the literature published in the Romani language influenced the development of the Roma community. This influence however touched mainly a relatively limited layer of the community, concentrated in Moscow and Leningrad, as well as those living in towns and villages where Gypsy national schools and/or Gypsy collective farms were organised. It's understandable that nomadic and illiterate members of the Roma communities at the time did not feel the need for such literature and that the Gypsy activists were unable to distribute the books widely among many of them, and numerous publications in the Romani language remained for many years, above all, in public libraries (in any case, it is extremely difficult to find preserved books or journals from the early USSR period in Roma homes today).

In this respect, it is interesting to note that during our field research at various places in the post-Soviet space, we repeatedly heard the phrase “Rom Pupyрка” over the years, which turns out to have already entered even the Roma folklore and colloquial speech.

### **Alexander Germano as progenitor of Roma literature**

Of course, it is naive to suggest that, in the context of the rapid development of Romani literature in the early Soviet Union and among a relatively large number of Roma authors, one could be declared the undisputed creator of Roma literature. However, unlike the assessment of literary texts in accordance with artistic criteria, which is always at least subjective, from a historical point of view, it can be considered that the closest in this respect is Alexander German (in his Romani language texts he signed himself Alexander Germano). His leading role in the process of the creation and development of Romani literature in the early USSR has been explicitly emphasised repeatedly by all the authors who have touched on this topic so far; there is only one, unexplainable exception—the Digital Archive of the Roma—where the name of Alexander Germano is completely missing (sic!) in the essay on Romani literature in the USSR (Kozhanov and Makhotina 2019).

The brief details of Germano's life and work presented below have been prepared on the basis of two years' work in the personal archive of Alexander German, preserved in his home city of Orel in The Russian Federation, in the State Literary Museum of Turgenev (OGMLT, f. 29). This archival heritage of several thousand pages is extremely rich and up to now has hardly been used by researchers. It includes not only Germano's publications (both books and articles in numerous newspapers and

journals), but also a large number of manuscripts, including literary works, as well as historical, folklore and literary studies, that have never been published. In addition, the archive contains numerous personal diaries and files that reveal different aspects of German's life. Also of interest is the collection of published and unpublished reviews of his work by literary critics and colleagues, including many letters from readers (Roma and non-Roma) that show the public impact of his work. All the documents preserved in this archive (including several autobiographies written on various occasions) allow us to clarify all the blurred spots in his biography and to follow his creative path.

Alexander Vyacheslavovich Germano was born on May 26, 1893 in the village of Startsevo-Lepeshkino in the Orlov region, although his family lived in the nearby town of Orlov, which is listed in the official documents as his birthplace. His parents were economic migrants from the then Austro-Hungarian Empire. His father's name was Václav (Russified version Vyacheslav) German, he was of Czech origin, was born in Hořovice (at that time in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, today in the Czech Republic, near Prague), and worked as a locksmith. His mother, Karolína, with the maiden name Knotek, was also from Hořovice.

These are the testimonies of German himself and there is no other documentary evidence of these data. In any case, the searches in the metric books and the administration documentation in Hořovice of his father's names (according to German the original surname of the family was spelled "Hermann") and his mother's gave no results and no documentary evidence of the birth and the existence of such persons during this historical period is indicated. There may be several explanations for this mystery—loss of documents, inaccurate memories of German, even conscious mystification—but in this case, the birthplace of his parents is not essential.

Alexander German's father was an evangelist (Lutheran) and his mother was Catholic (as German himself states in his notes, though in her documents she is reported to be the same religion as his father). Nevertheless, immediately after his birth, Alexander German was baptised into the Orthodox Christian religion (he himself kept an extract from the metric book of the church at Startsevo-Lepeshkino in his archive). Alexander Germano's father died a few months before his birth, and his mother lived very poorly with five children, although they owned a house in Orel (no longer preserved). Alexander German studied at first in a parochial school, then in an urban school in Orel. He interrupted his studies for a few years because of scarlet fever, and for a number of years he was "a street child" (at least, in the words of Germano himself, which is a romanticising mystification, following the example of Maxim Gorky's book *My Universities*, but in reality he had lived with his relatives, as he simultaneously mentions that his sister took care of him). In any case, with the help of his two older sisters, he managed in 1915 to graduate from a commerce boarding school in Sviatoshyno (now a suburb of Kiev). He enrolled as a student at the Kiev Institute of Commerce, living off private

tutoring, but after a year his study was interrupted yet again due to lack of funds. He returned to his hometown where he started working as a pharmacy assistant. For medical reasons (due to his previous illnesses) he was discharged from military service during the First World War.

From that time, during the First World War, we can date the first literary publications of Alexander German. In the collection *Орловцы – жертвам войны* [Orlov's Inhabitants – To the victims of war], published in Orel in 1915, he wrote a miniature *Червь грызёт* [Worm Bites] and a short story, titled *Иван Талыго* [Ivan Talygo]. After the October Revolution in 1917 Alexander German worked as a minor administrative clerk in Orel, he was an accountant with the Finance Department of the Orel City Executive Committee and then an instructor at the local Consumer Union. In 1919 Alexander German was drafted into the Red Army. In his public presentations later, he claimed to have fought in the Civil War “on almost all fronts” (this standard phrase was repeated frequently), but in fact, he had served in the army—initially in Petrograd (Saint Petersburg) as a clerk and head of the army warehouse, then in Orel as a clerk at local military establishments.

In 1921 Alexander German was demobilised and from then onwards he was entirely engaged in literary and journalistic activities, while at the same time working at different jobs, e.g. as a permanent contributor to several local newspapers, head of a literary circle and a theatre studio at an army club, instructor and head of the Literary Department at the Provincial Department of Public Education, secretary of the Editorial Board of the Provincial Publishing House, responsible secretary of the section of journalists in the local trade union, etc.

After the October Revolution in 1917 the topics of the literary work of Alexander German radically changed, and he was included in the general new Soviet Literature movement. During this period, he published numerous short stories, publicistic essays, feuilletons, miniatures, etc., including one satirical stage play, entitled *В некоем учреждении* [In one institution], which was performed at the City Theatre in Orel, and then in other provincial theatres in the region, and which had over 300 performances, and was published as a separate issue twice. From 1918 to 1925, five of his books (authored collections, which included mostly his press articles) were also published by various local publishing houses in Orel.

In the life of Alexander German a radical turn occurred in 1926. Let us hear his own words (according to one of his autobiographies) about this change:

In May 1926, I, a “provincial classic”, who did not know harsh criticism, went, full of bright hopes, to Moscow. In my portfolio, there were dozens of new and newly reworked stories, which, immediately after my arrival, I distributed among the publishers, and received one answer: “come back in a week or two”. That term passed – and alas! something does not fit the theme of the journal, something else does not fit the season, and another thing is generally worth nothing. One story was accepted but printed after a year [...]. Countrymen said, “Well, Sasha, prepare your feet and head back

home!” What discouraged me was the lack of money and shelter. In search of a permanent job, I was contracted to fill in the forms of postal orders for periodicals [...]. Somehow, someone from the Muscovites suggested that I apply to the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, as they needed an organiser of cultural events and publications in the Gypsy language.

On June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1926, I was appointed at the Gypsy Union [All-Russian Union of Gypsies—authors’ note] for the job of editing and publishing. This period of time was organisational in all respects for the people without alphabet. The Communist Party and the Soviet Government developed measures to facilitate the transition of nomadic Gypsies to a settled way of life. In order to conduct explanatory work, it was necessary to have literature in the native language of the Gypsies, who had suffered oppression and persecution during the Tsarist years and were still in the power of the tabor’s kulaks, and who treated with distrust the attempts to attract them into the working life under the conditions of equal rights. It was necessary to discredit among the wandering Gypsies home grown legends made up by the bourgeoisie about the Gypsy origin and history, which praised their eternal isolation and hostility towards their neighbouring cultural peoples. (OGMLT, f. 29, op. 1, d. 156, l. 4-5).

In June 1926 Alexander German offered his services to the All-Russian Union of Gypsies. In July of the same year, he was commissioned to start work on the preparation of a periodical magazine in the Romani language. From August 1926 he worked as Secretary of the Editorial Board of the journal *Романи Зоря* and right in its first issue, published in 1927, his first publication in the Romani language appeared, namely the short story *Руворо* [The Little Wolf] (Германо 1927: 30-32). This is how the glamorous career in the field of Romani literature of Alexander Germano began.

In addition to the work in the editorial office of the two Gypsy journals (*Романы зоря* and *Нэво дром*) in the 1930s, Alexander Germano also worked actively in a number of Soviet Publishing Houses, wrote a huge amount of journalistic articles and reports for central and provincial newspapers and journals, ran a literary group to train Roma authors, prepared two Roma poets’ Almanacs, and took part in various public committees, boards and councils. From 1927 Alexander German participated in the activities of *Лолы чергэн* [Red Star] Gypsy Club, held public talks, etc. In 1928 he was accepted as a member of the Literary Union *Кузница* [Forgery], uniting the left-wing proletarian writers, and in 1934 he was accepted as a member of the official Union of Soviet Writers (a significant soviet organisation supported by the authorities with important ideological tasks that provided its members with several social benefits). In 1929, Alexander German organised a Gypsy Literary Group the *Ромэнгуро лав* [the Gypsy word] and became its chair. In September 1930, along with Ivan Rom-Lebedev, Georgiy Lebedev, and other Gypsy activists, he participated in the Initiative Group on the organisation of the Gypsy Theatre, and he was the author of the first play *Джшибэн прэ роты* (Life on Wheels) to be presented on stage at the famous Gypsy Theatre Romen, newly created in 1931; until the end of his life he was a member of the Artistic Council of the theatre, where his plays were performed with great success. From November 1934 to December 1938 he worked as an editor in the National Sector of the State Literary Publishing House (Гослитиздат) for the production of literature

in national languages, and thus actually managed and coordinated all publishing activities in the field of Roma literature during its most flourishing period of publishing activity.

During the Second World War Alexander German remained in Moscow and worked in emergency-repair brigades, after the war he became a freelance writer and collaborated with various publishers and journals. He died in 1955 in Moscow, where he is buried.

The literary heritage of Alexander Germano is truly impressive. Here we will not present the full bibliography of his work. His productivity is remarkable, and he worked in almost all literary fields—poetry, prose, dramaturgy, journalism, translation, editorial work, etc. In the field of poetry, he published the collections *Лолэ яга* [Red fires], *Яв прэ стрэга* [Be on watch], *Гиля* [Poems], *Роспхэныбэна дрэ гиля* [Stories in poems], *Нэвэ гиля* [New songs] (Германо 1934a; 1934b; 1935b; 1937; 1938). In the field of prose, the following collections of stories were published: *Атасятуно бурмистро* [Yesterday's leader], *Лэс кхардэ рувэса и ваврэ роспхэныбэна* [He was called the Wolf and other stories], *Ганка Чямба и ваврэ роспхэныбэна* [Ganka Čiamba and other stories] (Германо 1930a; 1933a; 1935a); some of them were translated into Russian and published: *Ярга* (Герман 1930); after his death, two editions of selected stories and short stories were published (Германо 1960; 1962). In the field of dramaturgy, was published his playscripts' compilation *Романо театро. Кхэлыбэна. Джиибэн прэ роты. Машикур яга. Палага нэрво* [The Roma Theatre Life on Wheels, Between Fires, Palaga the first] (Германо 1932), and he also co-wrote with Olga Pankova the theatre play for children *Серёга Лагуно* [Serioga Laguno] (Германо & Панково 1933). In the field of journalism, collections of articles in the Romani language have also been published, some of them previously having appeared in the press, *Нэво джиибэн* [New life] (Герман 1929), translated and published in Russian under the title *Цыгане вчера и сегодня* [Gypsies yesterday and today] (Герман 1931), *Джяна нэвэ рома* [New Gypsies are coming] (Германо 1933b) and, co-authored with Mikhail Bezlyudskiy, *Ангил кэ буты: Со трэби тэ джинэс ломэ кэ вгэи дро колхозо* [Forward to work: what Gypsies should know when entering a kolkhoz] (Безлюдско & Германо 1933).

Publications of Alexander German (mainly journalistic material, but also literary works in Russian) in the press are extremely numerous - both in central Moscow publications and in other cities. Some of them are translations in different languages printed in publications of other nationalities in the USSR and abroad (with the support of specialised institutions for the international presentation of Soviet literature). As he wrote:

Since 1930, my poems (also stories, essays, articles, and fairy tales) have been translated into the languages of the peoples of the USSR and foreign languages: Ukrainian, Belarusian, Armenian, Tatar, Jewish, Lithuanian; [abroad in] English, French, German; possibly in other languages, but I have no information (OGMLT, f. 29, op. 1, d. 156, l. 8-9).

The important role played by Alexander Germano in the development of Roma literature should also be noted, especially in attracting, encouraging and assisting new (young and not-so-young) Roma authors to enter the field of literature.

Alexander Germano edited the vast part of original (i.e. authored by Roma) and translated literature in Romani language published at that time, which is understandable—he was the only Romani author at that time who had a comparatively better education and experience in editorial work. He was not only the editor of the two Gypsy journals but of several dozen books published in the Romani language. It is also interesting to note that he translated several books into Romani, including Stalin's biography (Товстуха 1933).

Alexander German's contribution to the development of Roma language education in Gypsy national schools is also significant. He is the author (or rather co-author) of 6 primers and textbooks in Romani, as well as of one reader.

Apart from activity in the field of literature, Alexander German prepared and published a unique scholarly work, *Библиография о цыганах. Указатель книг и статей с 1780 г. по 1930 г.* [Bibliography on Gypsies: Book of Books and Articles from 1780 to 1930] (Герман 1930), which is still a major source for the history of the Roma in the Russian Empire and the USSR.

Germano's exceptional working capacity and dedication is especially worth noting. In his archive, about two dozen manuscripts (some of them in several draft versions) of varying degrees of completeness have been preserved, which for various reasons have not been published.

Among them are the manuscripts: *Цыгане в русской художественной литературе (От Державина до Блока)* [Gypsies in Russian fiction: From Derzhavin to Blok], *Основы цыганского языка* [The basics of the Gypsy language], *Дополнение к библиографии о цыганах* [Supplement to the Bibliography of Gypsies], *Фашизм и цыгане в Отечественную войну* [Fascism and Gypsies in the Great Patriotic War], *Краткая история советских цыган* [A brief history of Soviet Gypsies] (in co-authorship with Ivan Rom-Lebedev), *Цыгане Советского Союза* [Gypsies of USSR], *Советские цыгане* [Soviet Gypsies], *Литература на цыганском языке* [Literature in Gypsy language], *Краткие исторические сведения о цыганах вообще* [Brief historical data about Gypsies in general], *Репертуар Стеши* [Repertoire of Stiosha] about to the famous 19<sup>th</sup> century Gypsy singer Stepania Soldatova, *Цыгане у современных поэтов* [Gypsies in the works of contemporary poets], *Цыгане в русской классике* [The Gypsy in Russian classics], *Цыганиана: цыганское в изображении художественной литературы* [Tsyganiana: The Gypsy in Fiction], *Сказки русских цыган* [The tales of the Russian Gypsies], *Краткая история Государственного Цыганского театра* [A Brief History of the State Gypsy Theatre], *Театр Ромэн во время Великой отечественной войны* [The Theatre Romen during the Great Patriotic War], *Материалы о советских цыганах и театре Ромэн*

[Materials on Soviet Gypsies and the Theatre Romen], *Театр Ромэн: Библиографический указатель* [Theatre Romen: Bibliographical Index], translations of the theatre plays of Pushkin, Mozart and Salieri and *Stingy Knight* in Romani, etc. (OGMLT, f. 29). As can be seen, the topics of Alexander Germano's interests varied—the history and language of the Gypsies, the place of the Gypsies in the work of Russian writers and poets, Gypsy folklore, the history of Theatre Romen, bibliographies, translations, etc. Besides Russian and Romani, he also spoke fluent German and Czech, and used (at least passively) English and French.

In his literary work, Alexander German constantly adhered to the societal requirements of the time: his first texts were written in the spirit of the patriotic military literature; after the October Revolution, they were already in the mainstream of proletarian literature; and after starting to work in the field of Gypsy activism, his publications actually lay the foundations of Romani national literature. Despite claims found in literature that the “Pan-Russian Romani Union” was “under the leadership of Alexander Germanov” (Hancock 1991a: 257; 1991b: 140), the archive lacks any evidence of him ever being a member of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, though he was involved as its representative in many artistic councils and editorial boards. Generally speaking, in all his activities and in his work, Alexander German was not so much a generator and implementer of new ideas and policies, but a talented and extremely workable propagandist of the already defined ideas and policies.

Especially impressive (and maybe even shocking) is his diary, which he kept writing for four decades (from 1912 to 1952). In this diary, he only recorded his literary activity over the years, and there are just two insignificant remarks of a personal nature. All other societal events (the First World War, the October Revolution, the Civil War, the Second World War), and his two marriages, proved to him to be less significant than his literary work, which, it would appear, was the most important thing in his life. This diary reveals Alexander German as a person who, from his school years, had a passionate dream of becoming a famous writer, and devoted his entire life to the realisation of this adolescent dream. A strong influence on him was probably the overall spiritual atmosphere of his hometown of Orel, which was known in the public space as the “city of writers”; a great deal of renowned Russian writers were born there, such as Ivan Turgenev, Nikolay Leskov, Leonid Andreev, Ivan Bunin, and many others, as well as the famous literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

It should also be borne in mind that, at that time, literature had an important place in public and political life as a whole, and for the Gypsies in the early USSR it was an extremely important pillar of their new, Soviet civic identity, which did not contradict their Roma ethnic identity. Gypsy culture in the USSR (including Roma literature as part of it) was perceived similarly to any other culture according to Stalin's famous postulate proclaimed at the Seventeenth Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in 1934, as “Socialist in content, national in form” (Сталин 1949: 367).

In this historical context, it is therefore quite natural that almost all Gypsy activists at the time (both men and women) were also writers (poets, prose writers, translators), who like many others during this epoch “wrote with a determination and persistence that justifies our calling them writers” and “they wrote less to create “art” than to speak aloud about the world” (Steinberg 2002: 1). Against this background the place and position of Alexander German takes on particular significance. All that has been said so far turned Alexander German, for his contemporaries, (both Roma and non-Roma) into the undisputed “classic and living doyen of Gypsy literature”, and this is the standard definition by which he is presented in the public realm, where this definition has acquired wide popularity.

Alexander German is also the progenitor of an important trend in contemporary academia, namely the concept of anti-Gypsyism (Holler 2014: 84-85). This concept was first presented by him in 1928 in his article “Gypsies” (Герман 1928: 11-13), and was popularised in the press in the article “What to do with Gypsies?” (in the separate section with the subtitle “Roots of anti-Gypsyism”) published in the mainstream newspaper *Комсомольская правда* (Komsomol Truth) the following year (Лебедев & Герман 1929: 4). Nowadays, the concept of anti-Gypsyism is not only one of the leading concepts in the field of Romani studies, but even defines the European policy towards the Roma, which is expressed in the European Parliament *Resolution on the need for a strengthened post-2020 Strategic EU Framework for National Roma Inclusion Strategies and stepping up the fight against anti-Gypsyism* (2019/2509).

### **The puzzle of Alexander Germano’s ethnicity and identity**

Alexander German’s biography has a discussion point that deserves special attention because it directly concerns the overall assessment of his place in the beginning and development of Roma literature in early USSR (and also globally). Undoubtedly the most intriguing question is the one regarding the ethnic origin and identity of Alexander German. Nowadays it is generally assumed that he was of mixed (Roma and non-Roma) origin, as his mother was a “Moravian Roma woman”, allowing for various speculative interpretations. According to Milena Hübschmannová:

Although Germano was not brought up like a Rom and was a Roma only on his mother’s side but his Roma identity was revived because of the prestige of the official task [...] (Hübschmannová 2002: 80)

Nevertheless, for Milena Hübschmannová, Germano was a Roma writer in spite of his mixed origin and the fact that he learned the Romani language in adult age (Hübschmannová 2002: 79-81). Milena Hübschmannová emphasises the fact that Alexander German did not learn Romani in his family and thus indicates that a national writer may also become a person for whom the relevant

national language is not his native one. It is not clear, however, why the question of the mixed origins of Alexander German (for Hübschmannová is certain and indisputable) is raised at all in this context since it is widely known that many Roma activists and writers (both in the past and nowadays) are of mixed origin (and some have doubts as to whether they are Roma at all). The very idea of questioning the affiliation of individuals with mixed backgrounds to Roma activism and/or Roma literature is irrelevant, because if this logic is accepted, then the whole Gypsy movement and the Roma literature in the early USSR could also be called into question, as both the President of the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, Andrey Taranov, and the Secretary of the Union Ivan Rom-Lebedev were Gypsies only on their fathers' sides (ANB, f. Nikolay Satkevich, d. Andrey Taranov; Ром-Лебедев 1990), and the most famous star of Theatre Romen, Nadezhda Kiseleva (with artistic stage name Lyalya Chyornaya) only had one Gypsy grandmother (Bessonov 2016: 146). The mixed origin of all these personalities, however, was never discussed.

According to Brigid O'Keeffe, who also accepts, without any doubt or hesitancy, the Roma origin of Alexander Germano's mother; for Germano was quite characteristic playing a game with his identities (Roma and non-Roma) depending on the social and political situation. She argues that in the early Soviet Union, when an active pro-Gypsy policy was being implemented, he emphasised his Roma origin and Roma identity, and when the leading paradigm of Soviet national politics changed, he demonstrated a Russian ethnic identity (O'Keeffe 2013: 239-254).

However, this interpretation is quite controversial because documentary evidence does not confirm the existence of such a game of identities. In several autobiographies written by Germano himself, the first one written in 1925, and the last in 1952, he consistently declared himself a "Gypsy writer", but not a "Gypsy", and the second does not follow automatically from the first. As for the passages written by Alexander German himself, which Brigid O'Keeffe accepts as evidence of his identity game, they are also unconvincing. In fact, he never wrote, anywhere (sic!), that he was of Gypsy origin or with a Gypsy identity. The only wording that could be interpreted as a hint of such an origin for his mother, was written in 1925, in Orel, when he wrote:

My mother didn't like to be in one place, she loved to travel, and because of her, my father changed jobs, sold all the home junk and travelled away without knowing what would happen. (OGMLT, f. 29, op. 1, d. 137, l. 2).

Firstly, if Alexander German wants to play with his origin, it is not clear why he should use such a complex metaphor instead of directly indicating his mother's Gypsy background. Secondly, much more important, there is no logical explanation for why this game was needed at all. This version of his autobiography was written in 1925, i.e. at that time when Alexander German did not think at all

that he would become a “Gypsy writer” (as stated above, he would leave for Moscow the following year). And something more, no one at the time even imagined that there would ever be an affirmative pro-Gypsy policy of the Soviet state and that a Gypsy literature would emerge, i.e. such an identity game with Gypsy origin and identity was not needed. Much more logical is the explanation that here again there is a romanticising metaphor about love for travel, without having ethnic dimensions.

In the next few variants of the autobiography of the 1920s and 1930s, i.e. just at the time when Alexander German established himself as a “Gypsy writer”, he never mentioned a single word about his mother’s Romani background. On May 16, 1928 in a letter to his friend, namely the writer Iosif Kalinnikov, he describes his first impressions of Gypsies:

When I arrived in Moscow, I took up work among Gypsies. Do not think about “stealing horses”. The Gypsies are not the same. Craving for culture, the desire to become settled, build Gypsy schools, clubs, organise Gypsy farms, etc. – this is what the current Gypsies are striving for. It’s even becoming strange that a half-tramp Gypsy reaches into the ranks of an organised population. ... In two years of studying the Gypsy people, I have gathered quite valuable material about Gypsies. (RGALI, f. 267, op. 2, d. 96, l. 1; Шаповал 2020: 332).

As can be seen from this quote here he is speaking as an outsider, a stranger, and not as a member of the community.

Let us give the floor to Germano himself on the question of his origin and his development into a leading Gypsy author:

I undertook a collection of nomadic folklore and a study of the Gypsy language orally (by means of voice). Having reincarnated in a kind of Aleko [the name of the main hero in Alexander Pushkin’s poem *Gypsies*, who was a non-Gypsy who lived in a Gypsy camp – authors’ note], I spent weeks in the *tabor* [Gypsy camp]. All this has led to the fact that I have freely mastered the language and began to write poetry and prose like a Gypsy, versatile and familiarised with the life and hopes of nomadic Gypsies and with the parasitism (*tsyganshchina*) of the Gypsy choirs in the capital city. I stopped at this explanation in order to avoid further questions: a non-Gypsy or a Gypsy? Who am I? I’ve learned the language (I know the Northern and Southern dialects) and the soul of the Gypsies because otherwise I would not be able to conduct political and educational work among nomads by pictorial artistic means. Have I achieved this goal? – it is not my task to assess my own published works. (OGMLT, f. 29, op. 1, d. 156, l. 6-7).

There was no need for an identity game in 1952 either, when he wrote in the here cited version of his autobiography, which unambiguously answers the question of Alexander German’s ethnic origin and identity. It is unclear what might press an author, who was widely known in the public sphere as the most prominent “Gypsy writer”, to resort to such “identity games”, i.e. to pretend to be an ethnic Russian without being one. And to do so in documents that are not public, but for official use only (his autobiography was prepared for his personal dossier in the Union of Soviet Writers). The natural question here is what would have happened to Alexander German if he had written that he was a

Gypsy, as did, for example, Ivan Rom-Lebedev (RGALI, f. 2928 op. 2, d. 246), which in no way disrupted his professional and public career (for several decades he was the permanent artistic director of the Theatre Romeni). Moreover, he formally added to his family name Lebedev a first part (Rom), with which he wanted to publicly emphasise his ethnic origin and his identity.

Therefore, it is much simpler (and more logical) to assume that Alexander German expressed his real ethnic origin and identity, which, as it turns out, was no obstacle to him being “the Gypsy writer”, as he became publicly known throughout the USSR, on which his entire career is built. To put it briefly, there was nothing which could push him to play such complex games of identity within the Union of Soviet Writers, especially in this case when the dossier was prepared only for internal administrative documentation.

Discrepancies between actual real-life internalised ethnic identity of certain individuals or communities, on the one hand, and the public ethnic label that is attached to them by the others, on the other hand, has repeatedly been reflected in numerous studies on Roma. In the case of Alexander Germano we do not see any reasons for an over-interpretation and for connecting the issue of his ethnic identity with the Soviet national policy. In fact, there is no (and generally cannot be any) contradiction between the two dimensions of identity (Gypsies and Soviet citizens), and therefore their artificial opposition, as well as any other over-interpretations in this direction, are doomed to failure. This is not some unique Soviet phenomenon, but a concrete demonstration of the common model in the modern era, when Roma existence is manifested in two main dimensions: “community” (as an ethnic formation), and “society” (as ethnically based integral parts of the respective nation-states of which they are citizens); these two dimensions may, in short, be called “ethnicity” and “civic nationality” (Marushiakova and Popov 2016b: 15).

In fact, Alexander German’s entire literary career is built on this very foundation. The fact that he got a job at the All-Russian Union of Gypsies should not be taken as something unusual. With the same success, he could turn to another nationality that was in dire need of well-trained staff to support the construction and development of their national identity and culture, which was the main trend of nationalities policy in the early USSR. During this period, it was a common practice in the USSR to hire the so-called professionals who were not only of different ethnicities, but even experts with “foreign” class origin were accepted (including even in the Red Army command staff). Based on the same principle, many “specialists” of other ethnic backgrounds were hired by the All-Russian Union of Gypsies, including Evgeniy P. Ivanov, who headed the Ethnographic and Scientific Section for the Study of the Gypsy Language (Вся Москва 1927: 233; Вся Москва 1928: 211; Друз & Гесслер 1990: 294-295).

The origin of Alexander Germano was not a secret to any of his contemporaries, including Gypsy activists and writers, but we have never found any evidence in the archives of this circumstance ever being problematised, except one personal remark, which has not been shared publicly. When Germano presented his book *Цыгане вчера и сегодня* [Gypsies yesterday and today] to Nikolay Pankov, he wrote a dedication: “To dear Nikolay Alexandrovich Pankov. My first experience concerning Gypsies is at your trial.” Under the dedication, Pankov wrote in pencil: “We need only marvel at our [i.e. of the Gypsies – authors’ note] good will, which allowed such disgrace without any rebuke” (ANB, f. Nikolay Pankov).

The first time the alleged “Gypsy origin” of Alexander Germano (in particular the determination of his mother as a “Moravian Gypsy Woman”) appeared was 1960, five years after his death, in the new edition of a collection of his novelettes and stories, published by his second wife, Margarita Vardashko, in the Afterword written by Boris Turganov (Германо 1960: 237); the same statement is repeated in the second edition of this book, in the Preface, written by Z. Sidelnikova (Германо 1962: 3). There appears also for the first time the patronymic surname of the mother of Alexander Germano, Vasilievna, which is quite strange (it is not clear to what Czech name could be given this Russified form). In 1964, the statement about her “Gypsy origin” was made official in the entry on Alexander Germano, written by Edvard Sholok, in *Краткая литературная энциклопедия* [Concise Literary Encyclopedia] (Шолок 1964: 138), and since then, it has become dominant to this day. Given that Alexander Germano professed his origin himself, there is no need to discuss it any further.

The emergence of allegations of the Gypsy origin of Alexander Germano’s mother can be explained by the efforts of his widow, Margarita Vardashko, to promote his work after his death (her archive is also included in the OGMLT’s Alexander German Fund). For many years following Alexander German’s death, she attempted to persuade the Soviet institutions and publishing houses to publish his multi-volume collected works. In her letters to the Union of Soviet Writers and to various publishers, as well as in her articles and press interviews, she makes statements in the public sphere that seek to present Alexander German’s image in a favourable light, e.g. he was declared by her to be the creator of the Gypsy alphabet (though in fact, he was only involved in it), he is presented as an active participant, and almost a Civil War hero, who “fought on almost all fronts” (cf. above about the actual nature of his service in the Red Army), etc. An important part of this marketing strategy (to put it in contemporary language), is the emphasis on Germano’s Gypsy origin. This has been a widespread practice since the times of the Russian Empire, where re-discovery of “Gypsy origin” (quotes are not accidental as there is usually no real basis for such claims) among the artistic elite was often found because of the Gypsies’ exotic and romanticised public image. Apropos, this phenomenon is also

known in contemporary Russia, where many stars of contemporary show business, cinema, and literature often publicly claim to have Gypsy roots (most often it turns out to be some mythical Gypsy grandmother about whose ethnicity there is no real evidence).

## **Conclusion**

Summarising what has been said until now about Alexander Germano's place in the birth and development of Romani literature, we can say that there is a relatively rare case of divergence between the ethnic origin and identity, on the one hand, and the national dimensions of someone's literary work, on the other. However, it is not without analogies in the history of world literature. It is enough to recall the case of Sandor Petöfi, the renowned Hungarian national poet, who was of Slavic origin (his father was Serbian, his mother Slovak). The case of Alexander Germano clearly shows that the emergence of national literatures does not necessarily need to always be co-related with the ethnic origin and identity of the particular author. The significance of an individual author for the development of a national literature must always be judged based on their literary work, and especially in relation to its public dimensions, and public impact. So there is every reason to accept that the place of Alexander Germano in the history of Roma literature is indisputable, and he is *de facto* one of its main progenitors and its most prominent representative.

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RGALI. Российский государственный архив литературы и искусства [Russian State Archive of Literature and Art].

RGASPI. Росийский государственный архив социально-политической истории [The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History].