

Spirit of Bosnia / Duh Bosne

An International, Interdisciplinary, Bilingual, Online Journal
Međunarodni, interdisciplinarni, dvojezični, online časopis

Being Roma: Impressions of the Book “Cenotaph for the Murdered Roma from Tešanj” by Amir Brka

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In April 2022, which today slips away from the being, but not the memory of the human individual, there were several dates of all three monotheistic faiths that rarely occur in exactly one month. Although in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it could be like that every month due to its religious interwinement that is forcibly unraveled by the butchers of Balkan nationalisms. One date is the eighth of April, which the United Nations declared Roma Day, who wander around the world, religions and languages, but also unconsciously preserving something of the civilization from their ancestral homeland of India.

Well . . . on the last Roma Day, the postman Salko brought me from Amir Brka his latest book, *Cenotaph for the Murdered Roma from Tešani*, as if intended for that day. I read it carefully, for two reasons. One reason is because of what has happened since 2018, when Brka published the study *Nisam Albahari, A Tragic Revolutionary*. I am surprised by how a born poet, who reached the poetic peak of the Bosnian language at the beginning of this century, as Abdulah Sidran did at the end of the last, and all the while engaged in so-called scientific work as if he were a member of at least one of the many academies of science in the Balkans, as many as half of which Europe does not have. With this book, along with the one from 2018 about the well-known Yugoslav Jew, Nisim Albahari, who participated in Tito's Partisans' uprising, he would not be ashamed if he were a professor at Cambridge or Harvard. Amir does not have an academic title, but in the meantime he has published dozens of poetry collections between many of these irreconcilable categories. In “Heavenly Nomad,” there are sonnets that I thought no one, after [Skender Kulenović](#), could hone as he has done. Now he has decided to dig up the historical and spiritual foundations of his Tešanj. He does not abandon it for metropolitan sinecures, but makes it a cultural center that, like Renaissance Italian cities, spiritually surpasses its size.

The second reason is because Amir Brka, to be ashamed of it, enlightened me on many things that I had only dimly learned about this wandering people since childhood, in particular about the suffering of the Roma of the former Yugoslavia and today's Bosnia and Herzegovina during the Second World War. In order to separate out the many things that belong to prejudices or their deliberate circumvention, he used and researched to the smallest detail the extermination of the Roma from Tešanje, to which half of the book refers, especially those who were taken to Jasenovac in 1942,

where at least 30,000 Roma were brutally liquidated. Brka quoted one of the rare survivors of Jasenovac detainees, the AVNOJ councilor Mladen Iveković, who remembered how “carloads of Gypsies were killed every day” and how “it was a terrible and gruesome concert,” where, singing “Gypsy Farewell,” prepared “to all of us and heaven in the nameless hope that the song and their music will save them from death.” Brka has managed, like no one else before him, to collect the names and surnames of 172 Roma who were taken to Jasenovac. And just as important, he refutes the efforts to rehabilitate the Ustasha head Ademaga Mešić (also a well-known Tešnjak) but at the level of a high position in Pavelić’s NDH. Mešić allegedly tried, but did not prevent the deaths of Gypsies from Tešanj like other anti-fascists. In his review of the book, the historian Husnija Kamberović wrote that Brka “showed how Roma victims were manipulated after the war, and then debunked the myth about their supposed rescue.”

Academic experts of Bosnia’s recent past will continue to say even more about the scientific value of Brka’s book. Following in the book the path that the Roma took from their ancestral homeland in India to Bosnia, it is clear that the world, “radically unsympathetic” to them, recognized them as a people only half a century ago. Since then, the name of the Roma, who have been called Gypsies for centuries, in a hundred variants and in a hundred languages, has been universally recognized and increasingly established. And in these regions of ours, they were called Gurbets, which Roma consider even more derogatory than Gypsies. The name Rom, by which they called themselves, means man in their language, which means they consider themselves to be members of the human species, that, as Brka says, “the doomed and evil fate of this people has been sublimated.” “Thus implied in this is a heavy historical accusation against humanity due to the inhumanity which in such an epically long period to be Roma was most often to Others a reason for rejection and disdain, and not so rarely a complete negation of human substantiality.”

On their way to Europe, Roma formed their Romani language, which linguists consider to be a mixture of Hindustani and Sanskrit. They enriched it, or impoverished it, as you like, but never forgot it. In the late 1960s, before traveling to India, I read a book by the poet Vesna Krmpotić, who spent four years there as the wife of a Yugoslav diplomat. In it, she wrote in detail about the Roma memory of their roots. When she returned to Belgrade, one day a gypsy woman knocked on her door and offered eggs and something else. When Vesna addressed her in Hindustani, she was surprised and asked. “How do you know my language?” I use this example when I want to say that language is more permanent in human memory than any national or religious affiliation.

Going further through Brka’s book, I involuntarily had associations with the fifties of the last century, when as students we went to Faletići above Sarajevo to watch the filming of the movie *Hanka* based on the story of Isak Samokovlija. At that time, no one even in the newspapers said otherwise than that the gypsy Hanka was played by Vera Gregorič, an actress of racial Gypsy beauty. Since then, a lot has changed in the legal and social position of the Roma. Although we have already entered the 21st century, few will say anything about them other than that they are Gypsies. Since 2017, their Roma term Samudaripen, which means complete destruction, has been used for the Nazi genocide or holocaust against the Roma. For the Jewish Holocaust, I

also prefer to refer to it by their language, the Shoah.

Iron picker

Although the issues are not neglected, as even the Roma cannot completely free themselves from the value system of life, alien to Western societies, in today's Western world, discrimination against their basic human rights is far from being eradicated. As neo-fascist movements and authoritarian systems of government strengthen in the heart of Europe, there are more and more appearances and manifestations of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Gypsyism. Brka has a lot of examples in his book, but the fate of [Nazif Mujić](#) from Danis Tanović's film "[An Episode in the Life of an Iron Picker](#)," who was declared the best European actor at the Berlin Festival, stands out for me. Nobody did anything to free himself from poverty in his own Bosnia when he returned to it. Rather, instead of going from festival to festival, he traveled from settlement to settlement and continued his role as an "iron picker." Broken by illness, he died in the 48th year of a difficult life.

Of course, there are other, happier, and more successful Roma destinies, like Dervo Sejdić, from the political duo with the head of the Bosnian Jewish community Jakob Finci. Not a day goes by that they are not mentioned since they have been fighting for a decade and a half because of the impossibility of running for parliament and the highest office in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a Roma or as a Jew. Once, ten years ago, at a conference in Hotel Evropa, I was standing with Finci and Daniel Serwer, an American expert on the Balkans and Bosnian conditions, when the latter remarked: "I wish I could see that Sejdić just once, but he is nowhere to be found, and the two are constantly being talked about Sejdić - Finci".

In his book, Amir Brka did not specifically deal with Roma culture, although he did mention the lines of their poet Gina Ranjić: "I don't know, God, myself/ Then how can others understand me!?" And I will quote the last verses of a Roma folk song translated by Romaologist, linguist and academician Rade Uhlik. A half century ago, before Amir Brka, I learned the most about the Roma of Bosnia and Herzegovina. That verse reads: "Wisdom to your head, God, when you create the world again!"

First published in [Oslobođenje](#).

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