ENGLISH TEXT

I FIND THEE WITH GOD, MY BROTHER!

GYPSY STORIES

Néprajzi Múzeum
Museum of Ethnography

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A CAMP, AT LAST

In the late summer of 1959, Erdős was commissioned by the State Folk Ensemble to spend ten days in the central and eastern regions of Nógrád County collecting dance material from the *Oláh* Romany. As was his custom, while travelling, he kept an eye out for anything else of interest he might see. It was in this way that he happened upon Joka and his family, a group of wandering *Másár* who lived year-round in tents. By the end of the 1950s, this had become a rare sight. He was lucky: though he had heard there were still itinerant craftsmen in Nógrád County, he'd never been able to track any of them down, given that they were, as he had written to his wife, 'always on the road'. It is likely that he spotted the camp from the train or bus and, as at other times in his career, immediately amended his itinerary to spend a few hours with them.

ARE ALL GYPSIES THE SAME?

Although beginning around end of the 19th century, several attempts had already been made at identifying the various groups of Romany, in each case, classification was limited to a mere handful of considerations. Labels such as 'itinerants,' 'horse-traders,' 'musicians,' and 'tinkers,' could not adequately describe the complex system in which Hungary's Romany actually lived. The first more detailed description came in 1958 with Erdős's evaluation of linguistic, cultural, and ethnic criteria. It was a ground-breaking scientific achievement that coincided with a need still expressed by Romany individuals and communities today: 'Don't paint us all with the same brush!'

A SURPRISE

When his research arrived at the topic of *Oláh* blacksmiths, Erdős decided to pay a visit to an acquaintance of his, a former fellow patient named József Farkas. Farkas and his family lived in what today is the Romany neighbourhood of Dankó Street in Elek, where they were—curiously—the only *Oláh* family, the others all being speakers of Romanian. Also unusual was that the locals were nearly all field labourers, who between the wars had taken on work from the Swabish farmers, then later relocated to the state farms.

Erdős must have been surprised when there, contrary to expectations, he found himself in an urbanising Romany community that enjoyed good relations with their German, Romanian, and Hungarian neighbours. Though he lived in a

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separate street, he was an integral and accepted part of the community there. The inhabitants of Elek were themselves surprised when, sixty years later, they had the opportunity of revisiting their neighbours and relatives in his photographs.

CITY AND CITIZEN

Balassagyarmat was an important station in Erdős's fieldwork, one where he made a stop nearly every summer. There, he visited his *Kárpáti* and *Oláh* Romany friends, gathering information on the widest array of topics and documenting songs on his tape recorder. He also took numerous photographs of the Baranyi, Góman, and Lakatos families, images that he sent on by post or delivered in person to a consistently warm reception. When his scientific papers mention the customs, beliefs, and characteristics of the *Kárpáti* Romany, it can be assumed that this knowledge came from his friends in Balassagyarmat.

DANCERS

For a time, at the urging of ethnomusicologists and dance groups, Erdős extended his list of research targets to include information on the topic of folk dance. A result of his research was the identification of two previously unstudied genres: the 'Romany dance' and the '*botoló*' or 'stick dance'. The first was performed by men, either individually or in pairs; the second, too, was danced by individual or pairs of men, but never by women, who were not permitted to dance with props. The term 'stick' here may refer to any of a variety of prop items: staves, spades, pitchforks, brooms, sunflower stems, knives, or—in the case of trough carvers—adzes or axes, which were used to act out various elements of everyday life. As one of Erdős's friends put it: 'A dancer would first kneel, then, to the beat of the music, use his hands and fingers to shave, drill, plaster walls, build a forge, or bathe.'

DON'T PAINT US ALL WITH THE SAME BRUSH!

Today, some of Hungary's Romany groups call themselves Roma (*Oláh* or Romanian Gypsies), others merely Gypsies (*Romungro* or *Boyash*). For various reasons, opinions differ as to which name is acceptable.

Within these major groups are numerous smaller ones, whose members claim as many as several centuries of cultural and

linguistic differences. Some of these differences—such as the ones that define the languages and cultures of the *Lovár, Colár*, and other groups of *Oláh* Romany—Erdős ascertained with great precision. At other times, his information proved incomplete: subgroups such as the Boyash *Árgyelán* and *Ticsán*, for example, were missing from his classification.

What was more important than the scientific endeavour, however, was how individuals defined themselves and their communities—and it is in this spirit that here, the exhibition gives you the opportunity of adding to the map Erdős began seventy years ago.

ETHNOGRAPHER, SPY, OR ROMANY NOBLEMAN?

Although posterity remembers Kamill Erdős as an 'amateur ethnographer,' a better approach might be to describe him as a curious, but empathetic character, a terminally ill 'actor,' who enjoyed playing the part of the 'blonde Gypsy'. In summer, he grew a moustache, donned a green-ribboned hat, and—inventing for himself a fictive 'clan'—gave himself out as a Polish Romany nobleman or Upper Hungarian half-blood. Sometimes he was taken for a horse-dealer (for the hat), a trough-maker (for his familiarity with the trade), a pickpocket (for his waistcoat buttons), or an English paratrooper-spy (for his silver-handled walking stick). He was a frequent visitor to Romany neighbourhoods; knew how to greet people, to sing, to drink brandy—even how to cook hedgehog and goose stew.

From a professional standpoint, Erdős's methods were questionable: no matter how you slice it, to call yourself a Gypsy is to deceive your 'informants'. In fact, the likely reason he waited so many years in publishing his first work is that it meant revealing himself to his Békés County 'brothers'. At the same time, his lack of academic credentials proved an enormous advantage: he was unfettered by the ethnographic categories used to describe peasant society, which would certainly have been inadequate in understanding Romany culture. In fact, it was precisely for his 'unscientific' thinking and methodology that he was entrusted with an entire series of 'scientific' projects. He delivered information, songs, and objects to museums and research institutions and at the same time, very gradually, left the role of 'scientist' behind. As one of his ethnographic mentors put it: 'To [Erdős], the ethnographic study was secondary, something he viewed as a mere tool toward the elevation of the Romany community.'

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FIRST TIME 'SLUMMING'

The purpose of Erdős's first visit to Végegyháza in 1953 was to call on an acquaintance he had made in hospital. His first day there created quite a stir, as his pub audience took his walking stick for an umbrella that would at open the press of a button and fly him away. Instead of taking to air, however, Erdős returned again and again to the two streets at the end of the village, where the impoverished *Oláh* Romany made their living largely from horse dealing. While there, he transcribed numerous archaic pieces of oral folklore and photographed women in their traditional costumes of wide skirts and headscarves.

FLÓRICA

When we visited Elek in 2022, we found multiple people who identified Erdős's photo of 'Flórica' as a woman named Flóra Kovács. We were told that of her three daughters, one, Ibolya, now lived in Magyarcsanád. We looked her up, hoping to discover what had happened to Flóra since the photo was taken. We were surprised when Ibolya opened our Elek folder and, after a long look at the first photograph, said: 'This is my father.'

FRIENDS AND LANGUAGE TEACHERS

When Erdős returned from the P.O.W. camp, sick with tuberculosis and without home or job, it was Budapest's Mátyás and Teleki Square Romany that offered him help and sustenance. What he received from them was sincere human kindness and care, and—thanks to a series of happenstances—he was later able to return the favour.

Dezső Baranyi | The first twist of fate came during his stay at the Korányi Tuberculosis Sanatorium in 1947, where he found himself rooming with a man named Dezső Baranyi, who taught him the *Kárpáti* dialect of the Romany language. The two men became lifelong friends, exchanging frequent letters, in which Baranyi offered considerable information regarding Romany customs and beliefs. Photographs and folklore recordings testify to the number of acquaintances Erdős would eventually make in Balassagyarmat, presumably through this single, fortunate acquaintance. In his journeyings through Nógrád County, however, he was obliged to lodge elsewhere, because, as he wrote to his wife in 1956: 'My friend Dezső, whom I went to see, lives in such poverty, he could offer me nowhere to sleep.'

János Kolompár, Mujkó | In 1952, Erdős found himself in Gyula, a town he had never visited before, as a patient at the local hospital. There at the same time was a man named János Kolompár, nicknamed Mujkó, who one afternoon overheard him conversing with another patient in Romany. By the next day, the two were chatting together as they strolled about the hospital grounds, an opportunity they would return to every afternoon thereafter, sometimes talking on into the evening. It was owing primarily to Kolompár that Erdős learned to speak the language of the Oláh Romany. The two men's friendship did not end when they left hospital: in fact, they continued to meet regularly right up until the time of Erdős's death.

GYPSIES, PLAY ME A SONG OF MOURNING!

At the end of the summer of 1960, Erdős packed up the tape deck he had received from the Institute for Folk Culture and set out for Nógrád County. His quest: to record songs of mourning. It was no simple undertaking: the songs in question were sung exclusively at funerals. To elicit examples from his informants would require that he create a psychological setting that evoked feelings of death and loss. In the end, however, he judged the enterprise successful, having collected a total of nineteen ostensible mourning songs, several of them—unusually—sung by men. Despite his optimism, the material never made it out of manuscript form, as experts, noting the songs' rigid structure, regarded the majority of them as dirges instead. As a result, Erdős found himself embroiled in a bitter debate—so much so that he may never have grasped the service he had done both to the European culture of remembrance, and to his informants: as a result of his efforts, they had at last been given the opportunity of mourning the loved ones they had lost in the holocaust.

HORSEPOWER

In 1959, Erdős published the article *Gypsy Horse-dealers in Hungary* in the periodical *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*. His photos on the topic testify to time spent at the horse market in Gyula and among horse owners in Kétegyháza, Végegyháza, and, later, Poroszló. Generally, the people in these images—old or young, man or woman—are marked by an air of pride as they hold their animals' leads or sit atop their hitched carts. Indeed, as we ourselves retraced the researcher's footsteps in Kétegyháza and Végegyháza, it became clear that today, still, horse dealing among Romany

speakers is a pursuit that confers not only a means to making a living, but also—and not leastwise—a sense of human dignity.

IN THE FIELD

Throughout spring and summer, as health and weather permitted, Erdős was invariably on the road. Though his fieldwork was always planned in advance, he frequently altered course depending on what he heard, where he heard it, and whom he encountered along the way. Autumn and winter, on the other hand, he spent convalescing in hospital, where he maintained contact with both the institutions that supported him, and other researchers at home and abroad. He also spent time systematising his collections, writing, and making acquaintances among his fellow patients.

Thus, for Erdős, 'the field' was many places: the tavern, the horse market, the train, the street, the hospital bed—even his own room—and for each situation, he donned a specific, practised character. It was from this plasticity of role and setting that his work took on such a striking and unusual dynamic.

KATÓ

When this photograph was taken, its subject, Katalin Duka, or Kató, was eleven years old. She was an able singer and dancer and might therefore have received support toward studying in Budapest, but her father would not permit her to be separated from the protection of the family. As an adult, Kató worked for the farm cooperative, eventually marrying and moving to Mezőtárkány, where she gave birth to four children. 'She had a good life,' her brother Gyula said when asked of her.

Kató passed away at the age of 58. After her death, ties between the Duka families loosened, and they saw much less of each other.

MELITTA

In a 1957 article entitled *Pregnancy, Childbirth, Childbed, and Breastfeeding Among the Hungarian Romany*, Erdős examined the contemporary belief systems of three different Hungarian Romany groups. Melitta Lakatos—a frequently ailing Romany woman who, though reserved by nature, spoke openly with him on the topic—was likely an acquaintance from his time under

treatment in Gyula: *'For instance, when I gave birth in hospital and was permitted to go home after ten days, I was taken by taxi so that the other men couldn't see, because the hospital is rather far from my home.'* During the six weeks following childbirth, Romany women were considered 'unclean' and thus not permitted to be seen by men other than their husbands.

By the time the two met again in Békés in the summer of 1960, they were old acquaintances. It was then, when Melitta was 32 years old, that the photograph seen here was taken.

MILI

In 1954, shortly after their wedding and the decline in Erdős's health, Erdős and his wife, Mária Müller, were forced to make a decision. If full recovery was not possible, how should they spend the few years they had left? 'Mili,' who worked as respiratory lab director at the Gyula Hospital, put it this way: 'You love [the Romany], speak their language, and at hospital, whenever you could, sought out their company. How would it be if you occupied yourself with them not just casually, spontaneously, but methodically, as a profession?'

For eight years, Mili served as Erdős's wife, mainstay, nurse, and secretary. Her letters, filled with loving concern, accompanied him—sometimes even arrived ahead of him—as he journeyed several days at a time, conducting the research that was so perilous to his health.

PARALLEL REALITIES

Kamill Erdős was not the only one to photograph Gypsies during the 1950s and '60s.

In fact, the end of the decade witnessed a rise in socially targeted photographic work among the Romany, most of it in relation to the Hungarian Romany Cultural Alliance, whose aim was to paint Romany groups as impoverished, broken, and disenfranchised in the hope of obtaining long-needed state intervention.

Running in parallel to this was an effort of an altogether different nature, one whose output was self-congratulatingly optimistic government propaganda photos intended to demonstrate positive developments in the group's overall circumstances.

A third and distinct type consisted in ethnographic images used to document traditional Romany handicrafts.

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Though a careful search among Erdős's own 514 photographs reveals examples of each of these, the majority in fact show something else entirely: Hungarian citizens, gazing into the camera with the sort of casualness that comes from a feeling of acceptance—people, like anyone else.

PHARRAJIMOS

Of the Békés County Romany, Erdős wrote in 1958: '[Among the Romany], new songs are generated continuously, because Gypsies "sing" every significant thing that happens to them.' One such event was the 'Roma holocaust,' the ethnic cleansing that in 1944 and 1945 claimed the lives of several thousand Hungarian Romany. Committed by Hungarian gendarmes and German soldiers, the incident was largely unknown to the public in the 1950s, and for a long time went uninvestigated. While neither the victims, nor their loved ones spoke of the suffering they had endured, it was remembered nonetheless in ballads and laments. In Hungary, Kamill Erdős was the first person to collect songs belonging to the folklore category *pharrajimos* (the 'destruction' or 'absorption') during his fieldwork in Kétegyháza and Kiskunfélegyháza.

ROMANY MUSEUM

From 1954 to 1962, Erdős spent his obligatory winter breaks at his home in Gyula, generally in bed. The walls of his room were plastered with an ever-growing number of the photographs and objects he had collected in the course of his work. It was here, among these mementoes, that the idea for a Romany museum began to take shape. It was to be a pioneering project, an enterprise of international scale that would unite the valuable material lying dormant in various Hungarian museums, permitting interpretation of the objects and photographs as a whole and effectively underpinning emergent research into the culture. His efforts to sell the idea to the ministry, however, fell on deaf ears, so that the plan for the museum remains unrealised to this day.

SECRET KNOWLEDGE

The topics of divination and magic were among those Erdős believed best reflected the mental universe of the *Oláh* Romany, and he gathered up copious information on them, in particular from older women. His three most important informants were Biri,

Elza, and Pelus, from whom he learned that Romany women did not actually believe in the magic or fortune-telling they performed for others using such things as sea snails, thread, money, whole hams, eggs, beans, and earth. They made good money at the trade, but laughed at the gullibility of their peasant clientele (*lé dilé gázse*) who sought to solve their problems in this way—at least until 'democracy taught them better'. Their relationship to the services they rendered for their own communities, however—such as charms to ward off evil or bring good luck or health—was another matter entirely. In those they believed without reservation.

SILVER BUTTONS

In 1961, Erdős conducted fieldwork in Cserepes, an enclave of Kiskunhalas inhabited by several hundred self-proclaimed *gurvár* and *fodozó* Romany. It was here that the photograph of the 'Romany arbiter' in a coat with large silver buttons was taken. Years earlier, the subject of the photo, Miklós Kolompár, who had been responsible for intermediating between his community and various authorities, had been forced by illness to step down from his 'office' and sell his buttons to the local museum. Erdős, however, viewed this means of conveying rank and preserving wealth so important that, for the sake of the photo, he enlisted the aid of the museum director in re-outfitting the arbiter in his showpiece buttons. Indeed, it was Erdős himself who, with the guidance of the buttons' former owner, sewed them back onto the arbiter's coat.

SMITHING FOR ALL

Once, in Kishunkalas, Erdős visited a man named Benő Paprika, a Hungarian smith who had inherited his trade and a good part of his clientele from his father. Among his customers were numerous trough-carving Romany. The *kapocska* or *kapicska* (a type of adze) was one of their most important tools and something they took great pride in: indeed, few craftsmen could satisfy their expectations in its making. Customers often came to Paprika from faraway places to submit their orders personally, then waited until the desired tool was completed.

STORIES FROM THE COLLECTION OF KAMILL ERDŐS

It was in the 1950s that Kamill Erdős first became interested in Romany culture, a passion that began with groups living in

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Békés County, then expanded until it encompassed Hungarian Romany as a whole. Erdős, who died young, published a total of just three papers in Hungarian, though a somewhat greater number in English and French, and left behind a significant legacy of photographs, audio recordings, and manuscripts, now housed at the Ferenc Erkel Museum in Gyula. Despite the legends surrounding Erdős's person and character, the body of work he produced has remained unpublished. The museum has nonetheless worked to keep his memory alive through exhibitions, conferences, and scientific publications, while Erdős's own papers and articles are still greatly valued by his modern-day Hungarian peers. Because Erdős was fluent in several variants of the Romany language and understood the culture and its internal dictates, he was able to gather authentic ethnographic material in an age when, following centuries of marginalisation, Romany communities were resistant to intrusion from the outside world, suspicious of outsiders, and fearful of photographers.

This exhibition attempts to bring Erdős's legacy to life in several ways. First, it examines his cursorily documented photographs against the backdrop of his scientific writings, manuscripts, and audio recordings. Second, it reconstructs the methods he applied to his research, an endeavour that helps explain the peculiar fraternity he felt with people on the margins of society. Thirdly, it 'dusts off' the Erdős collection for the benefit of not only Hungarian ethnographic scholarship, but also—and perhaps more importantly—the communities the ethnographer visited and photographed with such conspicuous empathy.

TERKA

Most of the people in Erdős's photos are no longer with us. Teréz Kanalas was one of the few we were able to contact for the purposes of this exhibition. Kanalas was born in Battonya in 1937. Though for reason of marriage, she lived for a time in Végegyháza, most of her years have been spent in Mezőkovácsháza, where she worked from a young age: *'I raised my brothers, sisters, and children, yet was still a child myself.'*

'Kanalas' was her mother's name, as the custom of the time dictated that her parents forego marriage. Her nickname was Terka. In Roma communities, each person typically had an alternate, Romany name, but Terka was an exception, something she still notes with pride today: *'I never had one of those Gypsy names.'*

THE JAKABS

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'How good it would have been to live then,' said László Jakab when shown photographs Erdős had taken of what turned out to be his grandfather. 'Everyone had work then, and there were fewer scoundrels about.' Interestingly, the pictures were from Cserepes, the squalid Romany neighbourhood of Kiskunhalas his grandfather had managed to escape not long after the time of the photos. The eldest Jakab had worked for the Hungarian Railway and was thus granted a place to sleep in the Majsai Street railway guardhouse. Like him, his son and grandson would pick up the smithing trade, a tradition in the Jakab family. In fact, László Jakab still makes and repairs the iron hardware for horse-drawn carts today.

THE OTHER CAMP

Kamill Erdős, an able speaker of French, English, and German, was as at home on the international scene as he was in his own research community, possessing membership in various foreign scientific associations in addition to his place in the Hungarian Ethnographic Society. The Gypsy Lore Society, an organisation founded in 1888, published a total of five of his articles, electing him member in 1958. The case was similar with the Parisian L'Association Des Ètudes Tsiganes, which published several of his papers before granting him membership in 1959. For a 1960 proposal entitled *A Plan for Conducting Research Among the Romany*, Erdős submitted recommendations on topics ranging from linguistics to material culture, associating a potential researcher with each one. In this installation, the players in this imagined, but never realised plan are indicated in blue.

THE RAKLO AND THE ROMNYI

The terms *raklo* and *romnyi* here refer to a young non-Romany (Hungarian) man and his Romany bride. In 1956, when Erdős was in Balassagyarmat, he took a series of photographs of a wedding, showing a young couple in fancy clothing. The bride is wearing a floor-length white dress of the type fashionable among urban girls of the period and her bridesmaids festive white outfits. Without Erdős's captions, the girls could not even have been identified as Romany. Yet despite their happy, urbanite look, the Hungarian groom, for having married a Romany girl, was disowned by his parents. In his notes, Erdős names the groom by his family name (Mogyorósi) and the bride by her Romany name (Náni).

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TOWHEADS

In Erdős's field notes are sporadic references to towheads: Romany with light skin and hair. The explanations to his photos, too, include frequent remarks regarding blonde hair or related nicknames. 'Even two very black Gypsies can have a blonde child,' he writes in one instance, highlighting the unexpected, even shocking nature of the phenomenon. To be a blonde among the Gypsies conferred prestige, as residents of Tótkomlós explained: 'We consider the blonde child beautiful; the adult, too.' Indeed, with his horse-dealer hat atop his own blonde, light-skinned head, this was precisely the picture he painted: the envy of his Romany brothers and sisters from Végegyháza to Balassagyarmat. To them, he was the '*lungo parno rom,*' the tall, yellow-haired Gypsy who was as at ease among the Romany as he was in the world of 'white folks'.

WATER AND OIL

When in September of 1958 Erdős visited the village of Poroszló, it was with the aim of gathering material on local Romany folk dances. His field report noted three groups living there: Hungarian Romany, who made their living from music and odd jobs; *Oláh*, who were horse traders; and trough-carvers belonging to the *Füstös* group. For the most part, the Hungarians and *Oláh* lived in the separate district of Gödör on the outskirts of the village, while the trough-carvers lived partly in the village itself, and partly along the banks of the River Tisza. Though the three groups were sharply divided by customs and language, they shared a common fate: assimilation, including compulsory abandonment of their traditional occupations, the assumption of state agricultural work, and the disintegration of their extensive family networks. Despite this, the Poroszló Romany remain distinct communities to this day, for as the saying goes: 'Water and oil don't mix'.

WHO ARE WE?

According to his field journal, Erdős first visited Kétegyháza on the 14th of October, 1955, having been invited to lunch by one of his fellow hospital patients. The following year, he visited again, this time in the company of ethnomusicologist András Hajdú. After that, he returned several more times, in 1957, '58, and '60, with the aim of studying the hierarchy among various Oláh tribes, though he also paid keen attention to the village's horse owners and dealers. It was in Kétegyháza that he took the most photographs, while also collecting songs and taking note of various customs and beliefs.

When the museum curators who had displayed Erdős's pictures in a 1993 exhibition, included them in a museum photobook, and even filmed in the village in the time since 1992 spotted some of the photographs in his estate, they were struck by what they saw: 'But here are Gizi, Nándi, and Lajos!'. There were many, however, that neither they, nor the residents of Kétegyháza could identify. Still, their acquaintance with the locals gave them reason to return to the village with the photos, now more than sixty years old, to see who could recognise whom and what stories they might have to tell.

WHO AREN'T WE?

Not long after Hungarian Radio had broadcast its first Romany-themed programme, Erdős received four letters from Tótkomlós. Four parties—his friend Sanyi, the members of the farming collective, the railway inn musicians, and eighth-grader István Horváth, writing on behalf of thirty-six of his classmates, all demanded that he retract what he had said about them on air. The vehemence with which the Tótkomlós *Khérár* Romany, a clan that had been settled for nearly a century, objected to being lumped together with the *Másár* and *Cérhár* bands of Kétegyháza and Végegyháza, who had given up wandering only recently, was startling.

WHY AND HOW?

The heading 'Brothers' derives from a traditional Romany greeting, a variant of which Erdős used when corresponding with Romany friends or approaching unfamiliar communities for the first time. That the greeting appears here in the masculine form attests to its exclusive use by men in the communities of the time. If Erdős were alive today, he would greet his 'siblings' in two different ways: '*Devlesa arakhavtu, phrala*!' for men and '*Devlesa arakhavtu phenye*!' for women.

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Thank you!