

## **Opening Speech at the Annual Meeting and Conference of the Gypsy Lore Society**

by Elena Marushiakova, president of the Gypsy Lore Society

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Honorable Mister Ahmet Misbah DEMIRCAN, Mayor of Beyoğlu

Dear colleagues and friends,

The Gypsy Lore Society is an international scientific association with a long history and rich academic traditions. Throughout the years the Gypsy Lore Society has undergone various vicissitudes and critical moments, and it is now in a completely new, hitherto unknown situation. In its entire history of 120 years, there was no other such period of increased public interest in Roma issues. Moreover, during the last two decades public interest in Roma issues has not only increased, but we can say that the Roma issue now appears to be one of the most urgent issues on the agenda of the united Europe.

At first glance, such a situation might be viewed as extremely favorable for the development of Romani Studies as a distinct research field that brings together representatives of different scholarly disciplines, as well as for the strengthening of the academic and public positions of the Gypsy Lore Society. To a large extent this is the case. There is a growing number of international, European, national and private funds and programs in which the Roma issue is specifically underlined among the main priorities for funding (incl. under the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission); in ever more universities a separate study program in Romani Studies is being introduced, including master's programs, special courses, and more.; a growing number of young PhD students choose a Roma topic for their dissertation research; new publications on Roma are appearing in print, including monographs, edited volumes and even journals specializing in Romani studies. Of course, I and other colleagues often feel that this is insufficient and that much more can be done, but the progress in the development of Romani studies, viewed in comparison to the situation two or three decades ago, is beyond any doubt. One of the indications is this Gypsy Lore Society Annual Meeting and Conference: I have personally attended almost all of these meetings since 1991, and I can firmly state that never before have we had so much interest and so many participants (both presentations and participants without a paper).

However, we mustn't forget that development processes always have their reverse side. The actuality of the Roma issue also leads to negative consequences at two levels: in Roma communities, and with Romani studies.

Among the numerous problems that are facing Romani communities I would like to draw your attention to just one aspect: the proliferation of a new, hitherto unknown negative stereotype towards Roma, which has become entrenched in public consciousness (at least in Eastern Europe) and to my astonishment has remained unnoticed until now and is not even mentioned in academic studies, even in the most recent publications. This concerns a stereotype about Roma as a privileged part of the population, to whom privileges are attributed that are not deserved and which are allegedly not available to the majority. The stereotype of the 'privileged' Roma is not just an extension of existing anti-Gypsy public attitudes. It occupies a special, leading and formative position and allows for a reconsideration of century-old anti-Gypsy stereotypes in a new light and gives them new meanings and social dimensions. From the perspective of a quantification of anti-Gypsy public attitudes, this new attitude does not lead to an increase or decrease, but it does change their content and their overall public impact. In light of this stereotype Roma are increasingly perceived as a community that is not only parasitic on society's labor but is also given the official permission to act in a parasitic manner. The Gypsies are perceived as a community that makes a living mainly from social assistance and child allowances and who benefits from special programs and projects; as a community that enjoys huge funds that are expropriated by Roma 'bosses' (whatever that might mean) and whose members are widely engaged in criminal activities. The general public firmly believes that Gypsies are generally exempted from complying with state laws and observing public order and that they are not compelled to fulfill their civic obligations. Indeed, it is believed that they are allowed by the state to enjoy special privileges and to be parasites. Many of the activities of NGOs, which practically make a living on the background of Roma problems, also nurture the development of these popular anti-Gypsy attitudes in society.

In this situation inter-ethnic relations are constantly worsening. Roma are becoming more and more segregated and all strategies, state policies, programs and projects are doomed to failure in the absence of a genuine political will to implement them. But such a will cannot exist under the dominance of massive anti-Gypsy attitudes in society.

From the point of view of scholarship this also has several consequences. On the one hand all scholars working in the field of Romani studies are perceived by their colleagues as shallow and opportunistic academics who in the best case are perceived as activists and supporters of the communities they research and as their advocates, or in the worst (and most common) case as pseudo-scholars who are interested only in making money and not in real scholarship. All this undermines the credibility of Romani studies as a proper academic field and results in its marginalization within the general academic environment. It places specialists in Romani studies under the stigma of not being a part of a legitimate area of research.

Unfortunately, such accusations towards Romani studies are not always without reason. As interest in the Roma topic increases, many experts from different fields are turning to Romani Studies and entering this field without sufficient (and in some cases without having even minimal) knowledge of the community that they are studying. Applied and expert research therefore often gain the impression that proposals for policies and projects aimed at Roma are not usually based on actual knowledge of the community's problems. Even established scholars in the field of Romani studies who have joined this discourse often illustrate the problem: we are confronted with a situation in which the distinction between science and civic activism is lacking and where scholars behave and write as activists and civic activists behave and write as if they were scholars. A further trend is in the making, whereby scholars have begun to write together with Roma – either activists or informants – and such work is being represented as an equal co-authorship. In this way the boundaries between scholarship and civic activism, between fiction and the subject of research becomes loose. Moreover, because of the general situation of lack of funding for real academic research, many scholars are being pushed into applied projects and expertise roles, where the remuneration is much higher but genuine knowledge is neither appreciated nor requested, and hidden or open censorship exists. In this situation even the best scholars of Romani studies sometimes write as expected of them, or even neglect to maintain scientific rigor.

Finally, libraries and the internet are full of writings of extremely varied quality – from excellent academic works and high scholarly achievements in the field of Romani studies, to numerous ephemera researches and even manipulative and phantasmagorical publications. This makes it extremely difficult for students and for those interested in the topic but who lack proper academic guidance to select from the sea of available literature those parts that are reliable and to avoid creating and maintaining stereotypical and misguided images and interpretations of Roma communities, their history and culture.

All these circumstances make the work of the Gypsy Lore society even more crucial and its annual meetings and conferences more important as a place where real academic knowledge can be maintained and encouraged.

I would like to ensure that I am properly understood. By no means do I wish to urge researchers in the field of Romani Studies to cease to be engaged with civic issues of the community that they are studying, in our case the communities of Roma. Scientific knowledge has always been and will continue to have its social dimension and social impact and it is naive to think that it can be developed as pure knowledge, in the position of an island isolated from the problems of our time. It is however extremely important that researchers always remain aware about the impact of their research. The Oppenheimer - Sakharov syndrome is well known, but we must be aware that it is

valid for all fields of scientific knowledge, including Romani studies. It is imperative that we always remember the Hippocratic oath, the principles of which are valid not only for medicine but for science in general. In the field of Romani studies, the most important thing that should never be forgotten by all of us is that our research and its impact should not in any way harm the community that we are studying.

I would like to draw attention to another specific case that is important to the field of Romani studies – the impact of scholars and their work on the community. Consciously or not, scholars always have some influence on the Roma with whom they work – as an immediate effect of their contacts with them as well as through the results of their research - even when the scholars themselves do not realize this. Roma, of course, realize this; as an example I can mention an offer that we have received to write the history of the Roma community in order to form the basis for the creation of a new Romani identity.

Let us not forget that there is a real danger that this may lead to a situation in which scholars construct the reality which they then examine and analyze.

Of course, it is naive to expect that all problems can be solved within one conference, but I am certain that in the papers that will be presented and the discussions that will follow, proposals will emerge in one form or another. The formulation of problems and their discussion is the first step on the way toward resolve them.

In conclusion, I would like, once again after yesterday's official opening, on behalf of the Gypsy Lore Society, and also in my name, to express our gratitude to the Beyoglu municipality, for the generous support they have lent to the organization of our Annual Meeting and Conference. I hope that our cooperation will continue and we can be mutually beneficial on other occasions too.