



LAJOS KÁNYA

(Pankasz, Hungary, 1921 – unknown)



Pankasz Roma houses from 1962.
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Lajos Kánya was born in 1921. His father was a respected musician, while his mother washed laundry “for the peasants in the village”. He grew up with seven siblings, of whom only his brother survived. Kánya received some education in car engineering, but he did not continue his studies; instead, **he chose to join his father in playing music**. They lived in the village of Pankasz, alongside a considerable Roma population, where residents coexisted harmoniously. Kánya fondly remembered

his experiences acting in plays and performances – a sign of cultural vibrancy and ethnic harmony in the village before the war.

When word of the deportations and atrocities against Roma and Jews was spreading, Kánya’s reaction, given his peaceful and contented upbringing, was one of disbelief: **“We could not think of it, we did not hurt anybody,”** he said. The Gendarmes came to collect Kánya in the middle of one of his musical performances but were immediately confronted by locals, deeply disturbed at this sight. The guests who enjoyed Kánya’s music attempted to convince the Gendarmes that he was a good person who did not hurt anyone but to no avail.

Kánya was first taken to Körmend and kept in a hennery for two months, where soldiers guarded him. **His father was set free because of his reputation as a fine musician**, while Kánya was transported to Germany, where he worked in the woods, building trenches and tank traps. Kánya, similarly to countless of other survivors, vividly remembers the punishment – collective and individual – for attempts to escape. Yet, Kánya did not lose his humanity, which persisted in the face of alienation, and manifested in forms of empathy and help to others. Indeed, humane actions fall under resistance – challenging systematic attempts to dehumanising groups of people deemed as “inferior.”

Working together with different groups – Jews and Russians – Kánya felt *“so sorry for them.”* Not only did he empathise with them, but **he also aided them by sharing what the most precious resource at the time: food**. Kánya recalls:

“They got less food than we did. Sometimes when they gave us bread, which was as black as soot again, we shared it with them and shared as much as we could. Then there were those Russian women; they were suffering a lot. Oh, my God, we got so little bread, but we gave it to them because we were so sorry. And they kissed our hands for it.” (Bernáth 2000, 117-8).

Finally, when the Soviets were on the way, Kánya and others found the courage to escape. The story of escape is noteworthy for two reasons: the audacity it took to escape, given

their understanding of the consequences of defying orders, and the power of Pankasz Roma to stick together and attempt to escape together. Indeed, **all Roma from Pankasz ran away together**: “at one o’clock [at night] everything was silent. We ran away...we crawled in the forest because we were afraid to walk on the road. We were in the woods for two days.” (Bernáth 2000, 119) Kánya eventually made it home; he arrived back to his village on Christmas, to realise there was nothing left.

Sources and further information:

1. Bernáth, Gábor, ed. 2000. Porrajmos: Recollections of Roma Holocaust Survivors. Budapest: Roma Press Center Books.
2. Owner of copyright: Berzsényi Dániel Library (Szombathely), inventory number: 000622and 000622. Pankasz Roma houses from 1962. Digitally available at: <https://gallery.hungaricana.hu/en>
3. Kánya László, A pankaszi cigányzene története, Nemzeti Agrárszaktanácsadási, Képzési és Vidékfejlesztési Intézet Kiadás helye: Budapest Kiadás éve: 2014

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