

# Delia Grigore

## Literature in Romania<sup>1</sup>

The history of Roma in Romania is defined by institutionalized anti-Romani racism or state-sponsored antigypsyism. Over a period of almost 500 years, the majority of the Romani population in Romania were slaves – from their first mention in official documents in 1385 until the last law abolishing slavery was adopted in the Romanian territories in 1856.

The enslavement of Roma meant exactly what that term suggests: Roma were not regarded as human beings but as movable goods or working and breeding domestic animals, constantly ready to be weighed, physically evaluated to determine their capacity for work, sold and bought or bequeathed as inheritance, and passed on or given as a gift to a new owner.

*The abolition of the slavery of Roma in Romania was a legal act only.*

The abolition of the slavery of Roma in Romania was a legal act only: it had no economic impact on the former slaves, nor did it signal any change for the better in their mental well-being. Roma continued to live in their old underground huts on their former masters' land and remained totally economically dependent on their former masters, working hard in inhuman conditions for minimum shelter and a piece of sour bread. The only Roma who could more or less sustain themselves were the nomadic Roma, who were the property of the king and enjoyed relative freedom of movement, which was why they were able to reorganise themselves and to continue to pursue their traditional crafts as a means of survival.

Neither was there any public policy of integration of the freed Roma after the abolition of slavery, despite Roma having endowed the Romanian territories with intellectuals, artists and politicians as well as heroes in the Independence War (1877) and in the First and Second World Wars. For most former Romani slaves, the only way to integrate themselves into Romanian society was through cultural assimilation, which paved the way to attend school, get a job and marry – in a word, becoming Romanian and erasing their own ethnic roots.

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Moreover, the memories of slavery, which floated around in the dark ocean of the subconscious, were compounded by the widespread negative image of Roma in Romanian society and the collective memory and by the fact that the only positive role model was considered to be that of the Romanians. This led to a deep and almost generalised negative ethnic self-perception that developed into ethnic self-stigmatisation or even into ethnic self-hate.

With regard to the field of Romani literature, the period from the abolition of slavery in 1855/56 until the end of the First World War was characterised by a paternalistic interest in the oral literary tradition of Roma. Non-Romani scholars collected stories, folk tales and other oral works, in several cases without even recording or mentioning the source or provenance of the text let alone the name of the narrator or even the group to which he or she belonged (Rommel 2007, 17–22; Eder-Jordan 2011, 147f.). Franz Rommel, a journalist and ethnologist from Hunedoara (Romania) who published in the field of Romani literature and culture, mentions several collectors of Romani stories, folk tales, poems, proverbs and other oral works, such as Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, Barbu Constantinescu, Martin Samuel Möckesch, Hugo von Meltzl, Heinrich von Wlislöcki, Moritz Rosenfeld and Anton Herrmann. This period of literary production was described by him as the ‘period of paternalism’ (Rommel 2007, 17–53).

Since then the luminaries of *Zigeunerforschung* (‘Gypsy’ research) have fallen from their pedestals: the extensive work of the famous researcher Heinrich von Wlislöcki (1856–1907) has proved highly problematic, to name but one example. Equally damning has been the uncritical reception and creation of myths around Wlislöcki in the history of science (Ruch 1986, 196–284). The at times destructive criticism of Martin Ruchs concerns Wlislöcki's empirical method of working, his erroneous research results, the incorrect handling of sources and his statements about Roma, which fluctuate between ‘romantic attraction and arrogant defence’ (Ruch 1986, 197). Contrary to the popular perception of Heinrich von Wlislöcki, he was by no means a specialist in Romani folklore, the Romani language or Romani literature. Furthermore, his books are full of negative stereotypes, prejudiced thinking and racist views about Roma.

In the history of Roma in Romania, there was only one short period in which the situation of Roma improved: namely, between the two World Wars, when the Romani movement began by readily and willingly supporting the Great Union of the Romanian territories (1918). During that period, the first Romani organisations were established, the first Romani journals were published and a Romani literature began to emerge. Rommel calls this period of Romani literary production the ‘ethnic awakening’ (Rommel 2007, 54–74). The works written at this time dealt with various issues, ranging from political topics such as monarchy and liberalism (in the works of Nicolae Lenghescu Cley and Marin I. Simion), the worldwide dispersal of Roma and their *joie de vivre* (G. A. Galaz) to the challenges and plight of itinerant Roma in Romania (G. Mateescu-Wally and Barbu Stanciu-Dolj, among others). One of the most prominent figures of the period was Professor C. S. Nicolaescu Ploșor, a historian and archaeologist who collected and published Romani stories and folk tales and wrote literary texts himself.

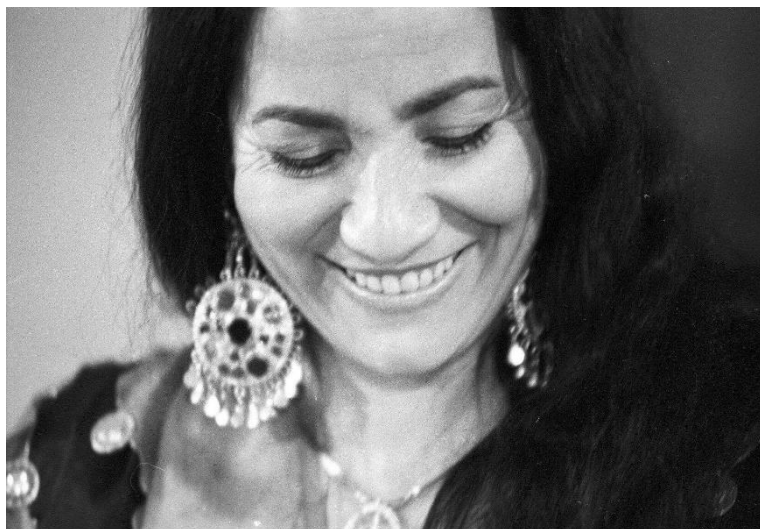
He also published the literary journal *Biblioteca O Rom*, which included songs and fables in Romani and Romanian (Remmel 2007, 13, 63–72; Eder-Jordan 2011, 148). Unfortunately, however, this period favouring the emergence of an openly promoted Romani literature and culture lasted no more than twenty years. Immediately thereafter, the entire Romani world collapsed and during the Second World War was crushed by the National Socialist regime in Romania. Initially, the Nazis supported the Romanian state's own policy of expulsion, comprising a range of anti-Romani and anti-Semitic policies; then in 1942, the Holocaust of Roma in Romania began and had a terrifying name – deportation to Transnistria. At least 25,000 Roma died there either through hunger, hypothermia or typhus or by execution.

See: the Holocaust of Roma in Romania

After such a tragic period of their history, it was perfectly normal for Roma to accept and even embrace the first integration policies – that is, the so-called integration policies of the Communist regime – after 1945. For the first time in Romania, Roma were offered inclusion within the social majority and the unique opportunity of being seen as equal to *gadje*, with free access to schools, housing, jobs and health services. It was almost impossible for a group that had once been subject to slavery and, more recently, a victim of the Holocaust not to happily embrace such policies, even if they failed to take into account that the price to be paid was cultural assimilation. The few that did not willingly accept these integration policies were the traditional itinerant Roma, who were dispossessed of their inherited gold, their only asset, and forced to settle and culturally assimilate with the social majority.

### ***‘From censorship to taboo.’***

Of course, Roma were not recognised as a national minority, and acculturation was the only way to survive in a nationalist, ethnocentric socialist society that differed entirely from other socialist dictatorships such as that of the former Yugoslavia. In Romania, the nationalist, ethnocentric socialist society crushed Romani ethnic identity under the assimilation policy, whereas in Yugoslavia there was a cosmopolitan internationalist Communist society that at least recognised national minorities, including Roma, as an ethnic group and Romani literature was both supported and promoted. Franz Remmel describes this almost fifty-year period of silence regarding Romani literature and culture in Romania as one that went ‘from censorship to taboo’ (Remmel 2007, 75–83). There was no question of Romani language being taught in schools and/or being used in the mass media – print or audio-visual – or anywhere else in society. There was no question of Romani literature being supported and promoted during the 45 years of the Communist regime in Romania. Even non-Romani authors such as Georgiana Viorica Rogoz (pseudonym of Viorica Huber), who published a collection of Romani stories and thus publicly acknowledged the group's existence as well as its plight, were punished and banned from publishing any other works (Remmel 2007, 77–79). That is why the Romani language did not develop openly before 1990, remaining within the walls of Romani houses. Thus, it can be said that Romani literature did not experience a public ‘rebirth’ until after 1989/90.



**Mehmet Emir | Luminița Mihai Cioabă while reading in the Austrian National Library, 26 April 1994 | photograph | Austria | April 26, 1994 |**

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The best-known Romani writer in Romania is Luminița Cioabă, a native speaker of the Romani language who comes from a family of coppersmiths. She became the only Romani member of the Writers' Union and the only nationally recognised Romani writer to write in Romani and translate her own works into Romanian. Nevertheless, even Luminița Cioabă sometimes writes in Romanian and then translates her works into Romani.

***'The period of the creation of an ethnic consciousness.'***

Franz Rimmel describes the years of literary production that started in December 1989 as 'the period of the creation of an ethnic consciousness'. He emphasises that Roma who began writing at this point were not only contemporary witnesses of the downfall of the dictatorship but also active protagonists in the Romanian revolution. This is especially true for the Timișoara group of writers: Mihai Schein, Constantin Bot and Cornel Rezmives, all of whom worked in the 'Azur' paint and varnish factory. They wrote what Rimmel called revolutionary-patriotic poetry that reflected the contemporary era ('eine zeitbezogene revolutionär-patriotische Dichtung' – Rimmel 2007, 16), expressed the hope of a better future for Roma within the new social order and called for Romani unity and a proud commitment to Romani ethnicity (Eder-Jordan 2011, 155; Rimmel 2007, 84–157). With regard to the period from 1989 onwards, Rimmel writes about the literary production of writers such as Luminița Cioabă, Constantin Gheorghe Angheluță, Dumitru Bidia, Adriana Poienar, Petre Burtea, Petru Jurca, Ștefan Fuli, Ioan Stoica, Dumitru Drăgoi, Mihai Boroș, Alexandru Doru Șerban, Mihai Avasilcăi (called 'Fanfan') Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu and Violeta Cioabă (Rimmel 2007, 84–157; Eder-Jordan 2011, 155–63). Since 1990 around 300 Romani organisations have been founded. For their part, Romanian magazines and newspapers often devote space to Romani literature.

As a consequence of cultural assimilation under the Communist regime in Romania, most Romani writers write in the majority language, Romanian, regardless of whether they can speak Romani. Gelu Măgureanu (1967–2009), poet, sociologist, activist and journalist who did not speak Romani, published two books of poetry – *Insinuări* [Insinuations] (1999) and *Fereastra de dincolo* [The window beyond] (2004) – and won 15 national and international literary awards.

Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu, novelist and poet, does not speak Romani either. Valerică Stănescu, novelist and poet, is a native speaker of Romani from a family of coppersmiths; Marian Ghiță is a poet who speaks Romani as well; Sorin Aurel Sandu, actor and poet, is a native speaker of Romani from a family of bear tamers; Alina Șerban, actress and playwright, does not speak Romani. Nevertheless, these writers deal with topics linked to the history and culture of Roma, such as slavery and its abolition (Alina Șerban), the traditional Romani itinerant life (Valerică Stănescu), the Holocaust of Roma in Romania (Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu, Valerică Stănescu) and the value of and dilemmas posed by ethnic identity (Marian Ghiță, Sorin Aurel Sandu).

The criteria for selecting the three writers discussed below (Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu, Valerică Stănescu and Marian Ghiță) were the number of books they have published and the level of public recognition they have received.

In his novel *Arzoaica a stat la masă cu dracu* [The loving woman sat at the table with the devil'], Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu deals with the subject of the Holocaust of Roma; he admits that he wanted to cure his people of the trauma of the deportation to Transnistria. In the novel *Bulibașa și artista* [The Bulibash and the artist] the author notes that he tried to counter racism by promoting love between people from different ethnic backgrounds. The novel *Ger blând de femarte* [Gentle frost in Fe-March] deals with the abolition of slavery in a dialogue with God. It depicts the shortest month in the year, February – shortened to 'Fe-March' and regarded as the Romani month because at that time nomadic Roma waited for the spring to come so that they could leave again on their never-ending journey – as a mix of frost, nettles and snowdrops.

The book *Kai jeas, Rromale? Iubiri triste, cu parfum de șatră* [Where to, Roma? Sad love stories with the perfume of Romani camps] includes two short stories. 'Atunci i-am condamnat pe toți la...viață' [Then I condemned all of them to... life] reflects on the Roma's status in Romanian society and on the deportation of Roma to Transdnistria. 'Șatră cu parfum de iubire' [Romani camp with love perfume] offers a satirical description of Romanian society and the Romani community under the Communist regime. In all of his books, Gheorghe Păun Ialomițeanu cites examples of magic practices and myths, 'the names of spirits that, according to the folk belief, cast magic upon people and change their appearance' (Djurić 2002, 63) in order to 'reveal the bad habits of the society' and to put both Roma and the manipulating society of Romania itself under the magnifying glass of satire (Djurić 2002, 63).

***All three Romani writers can be seen as representing aspects of the Romani soul (Romani soul).***

Valerică Stănescu's first novel, *Legile Șatrei* [Law of the Romani Camp], was written in the 1980s but not published until 2004 because it had been forbidden under the Communist regime. It analyses the universe of a nomadic community of Romani coppersmiths with all its rules of honour and purity as well as its old family customs.

In the novel *Cu moartea în ochi* [With death before my eyes], the author remembers his own tragic childhood in Transdnistria – the Holocaust of Roma in Romania. *Phure vorbe rromane – proverbe, poezii rrome* [Romani old sayings, proverbs and poems] in contrast, is a marvellous Romani folklore collection: the old sayings, proverbs and poems are processed and refined by the author's literary talent. The novel *Fata cu ochii ca mura* [The girl with the blackberry eyes] is a subjective and highly emotional chronicle of the traditional life of the Romani coppersmiths in Romania especially after the Second World War. In his book *Piatra din piatră* [The stone of stone], the author reflects on mankind in general and the destiny of Roma in particular. The book's preface describes Valerică Stănescu as the complete embodiment of Roma spirituality and in the preface to the novel *Fata cu ochii ca mura* (2017, 8), we read of the testament the writer wants to leave behind: 'The book is an endless life.' Marian Ghiță's first book of poetry, *Șoaptele mâinii drepte* [The whispers of the right hand], is the author's first immersion into the agitated and unsettling universe of the philosophy of literature. His second book, *Durematica*, is best introduced by the author himself:

*'I am not going to talk to you about this book in words but in colours, in colours spoken by a mute painter, by a blind painter, by a painter who has never seen colour and who has never known what the letter is but is aware of the inside experience of the light's sound, of the colours and of the birth of the words. Durematica is a game of the unseen, of the not-yet-begun life inside myself, inside you, inside each person born from a new wound broken in words or scratched in colours, there, where the place is more fragile, more bursting into bud, more green, more hidden. Durematica is neither word nor poetry. Durematica is just the idea that crushes your thoughts or a stranger in the night who sneaks into your heart's bedclothes, it is your first step towards death or towards life, as a man or as a woman, as a thought or as destiny, as a smile or as flight, it is the first step for you to become your own creator in a story that is exclusively yours, painted with the eyes wide closed, with the finger in the mouth, with or without you yourself.'*

*Marian Ghiță*

For the original text [in Romanian], see [Permalink](#).

The book *Matematica sufletului* [The mathematics of the soul] is a superb demonstration of mathematical poetry in which the feelings are reduced to the absurd, the soul reacts in metaphorical equations and the abstract becomes material through geometrical forms of thought. The poetical ego asks itself what life is, and the answer is as surprising as all the answers stemming from the philosophical reflection about the sense of mankind's existence: namely, that life is hanging somewhere between God's creation and the curse of individuals. Two preferred topics – raised to the level of obsession and esoteric knowledge – are the creation of mankind and giving birth, both of which are seen as the privilege, the secret duty and the absolute secret of Woman in her guise as 'the queen of life and death'.

Regardless of whether they write in Romani, all the above-mentioned Romani writers can be seen as representing aspects of the *Romano gi* (Romani soul) and are representative of Romani writing because of the chosen topics, the hidden meanings and the links to the collective memory of Romani identity. That is why they form part of the history of Romani literature in Romania and the universal history of literature.

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